



The Fate of the Turtle

Andrew Lang's Fairy Books

Indian

Intermediate
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In a very hot country, far away to the east, was a beautiful little lake where two wild ducks made their home, and passed their days swimming and playing in its clear waters. They had it all to themselves, except for a turtle, who was many years older than they were, and had come there before them, and, luckily, instead of taking a dislike to the turtle, as so often happens when you have only one person to speak to, they became great friends, and spent most of the day in each other's company.

All went on smoothly and happily till one summer, 'when the rains failed and the sun shone so fiercely that every morning there was a little less water in the lake and a little more mud on the bank. The water-lilies around the edge began to droop, and the palms to hang their heads, and the ducks' favourite swimming place, where they could dive the deepest, to grow shallower and shallower. At length there came a morning when the ducks looked at each other uneasily, and before nightfall they had whispered that if at the end of two days rain had not come, they must fly away and seek a new home, for if they stayed in their old one, which they loved so much, they would certainly die of thirst.

Earnestly they watched the sky for many hours before they tucked their heads under their wings and fell asleep from sheer weariness, but not the tiniest cloud was to be seen covering the stars that shone so big and brilliant, and hung so low in the heavens that you felt as if you could touch them. So, when the morning broke, they made up their minds that they must go and tell the turtle of their plans, and bid him farewell.

They found him comfortably curled up on a pile of dead rushes, more than half asleep, for he was old, and could not venture out in the heat as he once used.

‘Ah ! here you are,’ he cried; ‘I began to wonder if I was ever going to see you again, for, somehow, though the lake has grown smaller, I seem to have grown weaker, and it is lonely spending all day and night by oneself!’

‘Oh ! my friend,’ answered the elder of the two ducks, ‘if you have suffered we have suffered also. Besides, I have something to tell you, that I fear will cause you greater pain still. If we do not wish to die of thirst we must leave this place at once, and seek another where the sun’s rays do not come. My heart bleeds to say this, for there is nothing — nothing else in the world — which would have induced us to separate from you.’

The turtle was so astonished as well as so distressed at the duck’s speech that for a moment he could find no words to reply. But when he had forced back his tears, he said in a shaky voice:

‘How can you think that I am able to live without you, when for so long you have been my only friends ? If you leave me, death will speedily put an end to my grief.’

‘Our sorrow is as great as yours,’ answered the other duck, ‘but what can we do ? And remember that if we are not here to drink the water, there will be the more for you ! If it had not been for this terrible misfortune, be sure that nothing would have parted us from one whom we love so dearly.’

‘My friends,’ replied the turtle, ‘water is as necessary to me as to you, and if death stares in your faces, it stares in mine also. But in the name of all the years we have passed together, do not, I beseech you, leave me to perish here alone ! Wherever you may go take me with you !’

There was a pause. The ducks felt wretched at the thought of abandoning their old comrade, yet, at the same time, how could they grant his prayer ? It seemed quite impossible, and at length one of them spoke:

‘Oh, how can I find words to refuse ?’ cried he, ‘yet how can we do what you ask ? Consider that, like yours, our bodies are heavy and our feet small. Therefore, how could we walk with you over mountains and deserts, till we reached a land where the sun’s rays no longer burn ? Why, before the day was out we should all three be dead of fatigue and hunger ! No, our only hope lies in our wings — and, alas ! you cannot fly !’

‘No, I cannot fly, of course,’ answered the turtle, with a sigh. ‘But you are so clever, and have seen so much of the world — surely you can think of some plan ?’ And he fixed his eyes eagerly on them. Now, when the ducks

saw how ardently the turtle wished to accompany them their hearts were touched, and making a sign to their friend that they wished to be alone they swam out into the lake to consult together. Though he could not hear what they said, the turtle could watch, and the half-hour that their talk lasted felt to him like a hundred years. At length he beheld them returning side by side, and so great was his anxiety to know his fate he almost died from excitement before they reached him.

‘We hope we have found a plan that may do for you,’ said the big duck gravely, ‘but we must warn you that it is not without great danger, especially if you are not careful to follow our directions.’

‘How is it possible that I should not follow your directions when my life and happiness are at stake?’ asked the turtle joyfully. ‘Tell me what they are, and I will promise to obey them gratefully.’

‘Well, then,’ answered the duck, ‘whilst we are carrying you through the air, in the manner that we have fixed upon, you must remain as quiet as if you were dead. However high above the earth you may find yourself, you must not feel afraid, nor move your feet nor open your mouth. No matter what you see or hear, it is absolutely needful for you to be perfectly still, or I cannot answer for the consequences.’

‘I will be absolutely obedient,’ answered the turtle, ‘not only on this occasion but during all my life; and once more I promise faithfully not to move head or foot, to fear nothing, and never to speak a word during the whole journey.’

This being settled, the ducks swam about till they found, floating in the lake, a good stout stick. This they tied to their necks with some of the tough water-lily roots, and returned as quickly as they could to the turtle.

‘Now,’ said the elder duck, pushing the stick gently towards his friend, ‘take this stick firmly in your mouth, and do not let it go till we have set you down on earth again.’

The turtle did as he was told, and the ducks in their turn seized the stick by the two ends, spread their wings and mounted swiftly into the air, the turtle hanging between them.

For a while all went well. They swept across valleys, over great mountains, above ruined cities, but no lake was to be seen anywhere. Still, the turtle had faith in his friends, and bravely hung on to the stick.

At length they saw in the distance a small village, and very soon they were passing over the roofs of the houses. The people were so astonished at the strange sight, that they all — men, women and children — ran out to see

it, and cried to each other:

‘Look ! look ! behold a miracle ! Two ducks supporting a turtle ! Was ever such a thing known before !’ Indeed, so great was the surprise that men left their ploughing and women their weaving in order to add their voices to their friends’.

The ducks flew steadily on, heeding nothing of the commotion below; but not so the turtle. At first he kept silence, as he had been bidden to do, but at length the clamour below proved too much for him, and he began to think that everyone was envying him the power of travelling through the air. In an evil moment he forgot the promises he had made so solemnly, and opened his mouth to reply, but, before he could utter a word, he was rushing so swiftly through the air that he quickly became unconscious, and in this state was dashed to pieces against the side of a house. Then the ducks let fall after him the stick that had held up their friend, and which was of no further use. Sadly they looked at each other and shook their heads.

‘We feared it would end so,’ said they, ‘yet, perhaps, he was right after all. Certainly this death was better than the one which awaited him.’

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