



The Heart of a Monkey

Andrew Lang'S Fairy Books

African

Easy

17 min read

A long time ago a little town made up of a collection of low huts stood in a tiny green valley at the foot of a cliff. Of course the people had taken great care to build their houses out of reach of the highest tide which might be driven on shore by a west wind, but on the very edge of the town there had sprung up a tree so large that half its boughs hung over the huts and the other half over the deep sea right under the cliff, where sharks loved to come and splash in the clear water. The branches of the tree itself were laden with fruit, and every day at sunrise a big grey monkey might have been seen sitting in the topmost branches having his breakfast, and chattering to himself with delight.

After he had eaten all the fruit on the town side of the tree the monkey swung himself along the branches to the part which hung over the water. While he was looking out for a nice shady place where he might perch comfortably he noticed a shark watching him from below with greedy eyes.

‘Can I do anything for you, my friend?’ asked the monkey politely.

‘Oh! if you only would throw me down some of those delicious things, I should be so grateful,’ answered the shark. ‘After you have lived on fish for fifty years you begin to feel you would like a change. And I am so very, very tired of the taste of salt.’

‘Well, I don’t like salt myself,’ said the monkey; ‘so if you will open your mouth I will throw this beautiful juicy kuyu into it,’ and, as he spoke, he pulled one off the branch just over his head. But it was not so easy to hit the shark’s mouth as he supposed, even when the creature had turned on his back, and the first kuyu only struck one of his teeth and rolled into the water. However, the second time the monkey had better luck, and the fruit fell right in.

‘Ah, how good!’ cried the shark. ‘Send me another, please.’ And the monkey grew tired of picking the kuyu long before the shark was tired of eating them.

‘It is getting late, and I must be going home to my children,’ he said, at length, ‘but if you are here at the same time to-morrow I will give you another treat.’

‘Thank you, thank you,’ said the shark, showing all his great ugly teeth as he grinned with delight; ‘you can’t guess how happy you have made me,’ and he swam away into the shadow, hoping to sleep away the time till the monkey came again.

For weeks the monkey and the shark breakfasted together, and it was a wonder that the tree had any fruit left for them. They became fast friends, and told each other about their homes and their children, and how to teach them all they ought to know. By and bye the monkey became rather discontented with his green house in a grove of palms beyond the town, and longed to see the strange things under the sea which he had heard of from the shark. The shark perceived this very clearly, and described greater marvels, and the monkey as he listened grew more and more gloomy.

Matters were in this state when one day the shark said: ‘I really hardly know how to thank you for all your kindness to me during these weeks. Here I have nothing of my own to offer you, but if you would only consent to come home with me, how gladly would I give you anything that might happen to take your fancy.’

‘I should like nothing better,’ cried the monkey, his teeth chattering, as they always did when he was pleased. ‘But how could I get there? Not by water. Ugh! It makes me ill to think of it!’

‘Oh! don’t let that trouble you,’ replied the shark, ‘you have only to sit on my back and I will undertake that not a drop of water shall touch you.’

So it was arranged, and directly after breakfast next morning the shark swam close up under the tree and the monkey dropped neatly on his back, without even a splash. After a few minutes—for at first he felt a little frightened at his strange position—the monkey began to enjoy himself vastly, and asked the shark a thousand questions about the fish and the sea-weeds and the oddly-shaped things that floated past them, and as the shark always gave him some sort of answer, the monkey never guessed that many of the objects they saw were as new to his guide as to himself.

The sun had risen and set six times when the shark suddenly said, ‘My friend, we have now performed half our journey, and it is time that I should tell you something.’

‘What is it?’ asked the monkey. ‘Nothing unpleasant, I hope, for you sound rather grave?’

‘Oh, no! Nothing at all. It is only that shortly before we left I heard that the sultan of my country is very ill, and that the only thing to cure him is a monkey’s heart.’

‘Poor man, I am very sorry for him,’ replied the monkey; ‘but you were unwise not to tell me till we had started.’

‘What do you mean?’ asked the shark; but the monkey, who now understood the whole plot, did not answer at once, for he was considering what he should say.

‘Why are you so silent?’ inquired the shark again.

‘I was thinking what a pity it was you did not tell me while I was still on land, and then I would have brought my heart with me.’

‘Your heart! Why isn’t your heart here?’ said the shark, with a puzzled expression.

'Oh, no! Of course not. Is it possible you don't know that when we leave home we always hang up our hearts on trees, to prevent their being troublesome? However, perhaps you won't believe that, and will just think I have invented it because I am afraid, so let us go on to your country as fast as we can, and when we arrive you can look for my heart, and if you find it you can kill me.'

The monkey spoke in such a calm, indifferent way that the shark was quite deceived, and began to wish he had not been in such a hurry.

'But there is no use going on if your heart is not with you,' he said at last. 'We had better turn back to the town, and then you can fetch it.'

Of course, this was just what the monkey wanted, but he was careful not to seem too pleased.

'Well, I don't know,' he remarked carelessly, 'it is such a long way; but you may be right.'

'I am sure I am,' answered the shark, 'and I will swim as quickly as I can,' and so he did, and in three days they caught sight of the kuyu tree hanging over the water.

With a sigh of relief the monkey caught hold of the nearest branch and swung himself up.

'Wait for me here,' he called out to the shark. 'I am so hungry I must have a little breakfast, and then I will go and look for my heart,' and he went further and further into the branches so that the shark could not see him. Then he curled himself up and went to sleep.

'Are you there?' cried the shark, who was soon tired of swimming about under the cliff, and was in haste to be gone.

The monkey awoke with a start, but did not answer.

'Are you there?' called the shark again, louder than before, and in a very cross voice.

'Oh, yes. I am here,' replied the monkey; 'but I wish you had not wakened me up. I was having such a nice nap.'

'Have you got it?' asked the shark. 'It is time we were going.'

'Going where?' inquired the monkey.

'Why, to my country, of course, with your heart. You CAN'T have forgotten!'

'My dear friend,' answered the monkey, with a chuckle, 'I think you must be going a little mad. Do you take me for a washerman's donkey?'

'Don't talk nonsense,' exclaimed the shark, who did not like being laughed at. 'What do you mean about a washerman's donkey? And I wish you would be quick, or we may be too late to save the sultan.'

'Did you really never hear of the washerman's donkey?' asked the monkey, who was enjoying himself immensely. 'Why, he is the beast who has no heart. And as I am not feeling very well, and am afraid to start while the sun is so high lest I should get a sunstroke, if you like, I will come a little nearer and tell you his story.'

'Very well,' said the shark sulkily, 'if you won't come, I suppose I may as well listen to that as do nothing.'

So the monkey began.

'A washerman once lived in the great forest on the other side of the town, and he had a donkey to keep him company and to carry him wherever he wanted to go. For a time they got on very well, but by and by the donkey grew lazy and ungrateful for her master's kindness, and ran away several miles into the heart of the forest, where she did nothing but eat and eat and eat, till she grew so fat she could hardly move.

'One day as she was tasting quite a new kind of grass and wondering if it was as good as what she had had for dinner the day before, a hare happened to pass by.

"Well, that is a fat creature," thought she, and turned out of her path to tell the news to a lion who was a friend of hers. Now the lion had been very ill, and was not strong enough to go hunting for himself, and when the hare came and told him that a very fat donkey was to be found only a few hundred yards off, tears of disappointment and weakness filled his eyes.

"What is the good of telling me that?" he asked, in a weepy voice; "you know I cannot even walk as far as that palm."

“Never mind,” answered the hare briskly. “If you can’t go to your dinner your dinner shall come to you,” and nodding a farewell to the lion she went back to the donkey.

“Good morning,” said she, bowing politely to the donkey, who lifted her head in surprise. “Excuse my interrupting you, but I have come on very important business.”

“Indeed,” answered the donkey, “it is most kind of you to take the trouble. May I inquire what the business is?”

“Certainly,” replied the hare. “It is my friend the lion who has heard so much of your charms and good qualities that he has sent me to beg that you will give him your paw in marriage. He regrets deeply that he is unable to make the request in person, but he has been ill and is too weak to move.”

“Poor fellow! How sad!” said the donkey. “But you must tell him that I feel honoured by his proposal, and will gladly consent to be Queen of the Beasts.”

“Will you not come and tell him so yourself?” asked the hare.

‘Side by side they went down the road which led to the lion’s house. It took a long while, for the donkey was so fat with eating she could only walk very slowly, and the hare, who could have run the distance in about five minutes, was obliged to creep along till she almost dropped with fatigue at not being able to go at her own pace. When at last they arrived the lion was sitting up at the entrance, looking very pale and thin. The donkey suddenly grew shy and hung her head, but the lion put on his best manners and invited both his visitors to come in and make themselves comfortable.

‘Very soon the hare got up and said, “Well, as I have another engagement I will leave you to make acquaintance with your future husband,” and winking at the lion she bounded away.

‘The donkey expected that as soon as they were left alone the lion would begin to speak of their marriage, and where they should live, but as he said nothing she looked up. To her surprise and terror she saw him crouching in the corner, his eyes glaring with a red light, and with a loud roar he sprang towards her. But in that moment the donkey had had time to prepare herself, and jumping on one side dealt the lion such a hard kick that he shrieked with the pain. Again and again he struck at her with his claws, but the donkey could bite too, as well as the lion, who was very weak after his illness, and at last a well- planted kick knocked him right over, and he

rolled on the floor, groaning with pain. The donkey did not wait for him to get up, but ran away as fast as she could and was lost in the forest.

‘Now the hare, who knew quite well what would happen, had not gone to do her business, but hid herself in some bushes behind the cave, where she could hear quite clearly the sounds of the battle. When all was quiet again she crept gently out, and stole round the corner.

“Well, lion, have you killed her?” asked she, running swiftly up the path.

“Killed her, indeed!” answered the lion sulkily, “it is she who has nearly killed me. I never knew a donkey could kick like that, though I took care she should carry away the marks of my claws.”

“Dear me! Fancy such a great fat creature being able to fight!” cried the hare. “But don’t vex yourself. Just lie still, and your wounds will soon heal,” and she bade her friend, good bye, and returned to her family.

‘Two or three weeks passed, and only bare places on the donkey’s back showed where the lion’s claws had been, while, on his side, the lion had recovered from his illness and was now as strong as ever. He was beginning to think that it was almost time for him to begin hunting again, when one morning a rustle was heard in the creepers outside, and the hare’s head peeped through.

“Ah! there is no need to ask how you are,” she said. “Still you mustn’t overtire yourself, you know. Shall I go and bring you your dinner?”

“If you will bring me that donkey I will tear it in two,” cried the lion savagely, and the hare laughed and nodded and went on her errand.

‘This time the donkey was much further than before, and it took longer to find her. At last the hare caught sight of four hoofs in the air, and ran towards them. The donkey was lying on a soft cool bed of moss near a stream, rolling herself backwards and forwards from pleasure.

“Good morning,” said the hare politely, and the donkey got slowly on to her legs, and looked to see who her visitor could be.

“Oh, it is you, is it?” she exclaimed. “Come and have a chat. What news have you got?”

“I mustn’t stay,” answered the hare; “but I promised the lion to beg you to pay him a visit, as he is not well enough to call on you.”

“Well, I don’t know,” replied the donkey gloomily, “the last time we went he scratched me very badly, and really I was quite afraid.”

“He was only trying to kiss you,” said the hare, “and you bit him, and of course that made him cross.”

“If I were sure of that,” hesitated the donkey.

“Oh, you may be quite sure,” laughed the hare. “I have a large acquaintance among lions. But let us be quick,” and rather unwillingly the donkey set out.

The lion saw them coming and hid himself behind a large tree. As the donkey went past, followed by the hare, he sprang out, and with one blow of his paw stretched the poor foolish creature dead before him.

“Take this meat and skin it and roast it,” he said to the hare; “but my appetite is not so good as it was, and the only part I want for myself is the heart. The rest you can either eat yourself or give away to your friends.”

“Thank you,” replied the hare, balancing the donkey on her back as well as she was able, and though the legs trailed along the ground she managed to drag it to an open space some distance off, where she made a fire and roasted it. As soon as it was cooked the hare took out the heart and had just finished eating it when the lion, who was tired of waiting, came up.

“I am hungry,” said he. “Bring me the creature’s heart; it is just what I want for supper.”

“But there is no heart,” answered the hare, looking up at the lion with a puzzled face.

“What nonsense!” said the lion. “As if every beast had not got a heart. What do you mean?”

“This is a washerman’s donkey,” replied the hare gravely.

“Well, and suppose it is?”

“Oh, fie!” exclaimed the hare. “You, a lion and a grown-up person, and ask questions like that. If the donkey had had a heart would she be here now? The first time she came she knew you were trying to kill her, and ran away. Yet she came back a second time. Well, if she had had a heart would she have come back a second time? Now would she?”

‘And the lion answered slowly, “No, she would not.”

‘So you think I am a washerman’s donkey?’ said the monkey to the shark, when the story was ended. ‘You are wrong; I am not. And as the sun is getting low in the sky, it is time for you to begin your homeward journey. You will have a nice cool voyage, and I hope you will find the sultan better. Farewell!’ And the monkey disappeared among the green branches, and was gone.

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