

# *The Little Red Tortoise*

Brothers Grimm

South African

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*Intermediate*

*11 min read*

“No Jakhals story to-night, please, Outa,” said little Jan, as they gathered round the fire. “We all think Jakhals was a cruel horrid creature, eating the poor little Doves and cracking the good Heron’s neck.”

“Yes,” chimed in Pietie, “he was always playing wicked tricks, so no more Jakhals for us. What will you tell us to-night, Outa?”

“Something really nice,” suggested Willem, “and not unkind.”

Outa’s beady black eyes twinkled from one to another of his little masters, while an affectionate smile spread over his yellow face, accentuating the wrinkles which criss-crossed it in every direction.

“Ach! the soft young hearts! Outa’s heart was like that once, too, but”—he shook his head—“if the heart doesn’t get a little taai like a biltong, it is of no use to a person in this old hard world.” He deposited his shapeless hat on the floor, tapped his red kopdoek with a clawlike forefinger, and waited for an inspiration. It came from an unexpected quarter, for suddenly there was a commotion at the end of his old coat, the tails of which hung down nearly to the floor, and, diving into his pocket, the old man triumphantly produced a squirming tortoise.

“See what Outa caught for the baasjes near the Klip Kop this afternoon—a nice little berg schilpad (Mountain tortoise). Now Baas Willem can put it in his kraal with the others and let it lay eggs. It is still young, but it will grow—yes, so big.” A cart-wheel might have been comfortably contained in the circle described by Outa’s arms.

It was a knobbly, darkly-marked tortoise, quite unlike those the little boys generally found in the veld near the house, and they took possession of it with delight and suggestions as to a name. After discussion, honours were equally in favour of “Piet Retief” and “Mrs. Van Riebeeck,” and it was decided that the casting vote should be left to Cousin Minnie, the children’s governess.

For a long time they had kept tortoises of all sorts and sizes in their schilpad-kraal, and so tame and intelligent had some of these creatures grown that they would come when called, and big old “Woltemade” roamed about at will, often disappearing for a time, and returning to his companions after a few days in the veld.

Outa turned the new acquisition on its back on the jackalskin rug, where it lay wriggling and going through the strangest contortions. “Ach! the wise little man. Is it there its mother sprinkled it with buchu (aromatic herb), there, just under its arm?” He touched the skinny under-side of one of its forelegs. “Here, Baas Willem, put it in the soap-boxie till to-morrow. Ach! if only it had been a red tortoise, how glad Outa would have been!”

“A red tortoise!” echoed Pietie and little Jan, while Willem hurried back from the passage to hear all about it.

“And have the baasjes then never heard of a red tortoise? Yes, certainly, sometimes a red one is born, but not often—only once in a thousand years; and when this happens the news is sent round, because it is such a wonderful thing; and the whole nation of Schilpads—those frogs with bony shields and hard beaks—are glad because they know the little red one has come to help them against their enemies.

“Once a long, long time ago a mother Schilpad laid an egg in a shallow hole in the sand, just where the sun could warm it all the day, and she scraped a little sand over it, so that no one could see it. See baasjes, she was afraid of thieves. It was white and round, and so large that she felt very proud of it, and she often went to see how it was getting on. One day, as she got near the place she heard a little voice: ‘Peep! Peep! Mam-ma, mam-ma, come and find me.’

“So she called out, ‘Kindje, kindje, here’s your mam-ma.’ My! but she walked fast! Her short legs just went so”—Outa’s arms worked vigorously—“and when she got to the karroo-bush where she had put the egg the shell was broken and a little Red Tortoise was sitting alongside of it!

“His shell was soft, and you could see everything inside of him, and how the blood went this way and that way: but never mind, it is maar so with little tortoises. He was fine and healthy, and everything about him was quite red. Alle wereld! old Mam-ma was proud! She went and told all her friends, and they came from all sides to see the little Red Tortoise. There were berg tortoises, and vlakke tortoises, and zand-kruipers, and even water tortoises, young and old, and they all sat round and praised him and gave him good advice and nice things to eat.

“He listened to everything and ate all the nice things, and grew bigger and redder and harder, but he didn’t talk much, and the Old Ones nodded to each other and said, ‘Ach, but he is sensible!’ But the Young Ones said, ‘Ach, but he is stuck-up!’ and they went away and crawled in the red clay to make themselves red. But it was no good. In a little while it all rubbed off.

“At last all the visitor Schilpads went home again. But the little Red Tortoise stayed with his Mam-ma, and went on growing bigger and redder and harder, and his Mam-ma was toch so proud of him!

“When he walked in the veld and the other young tortoises said to him, ‘Come, we’ll show you the way to do things; you must do so, and you must do so,’ he said, ‘You can do so if you like, but I’ll do things my own way!’ And they said ‘Stuck-up Red Thing! Wait, Oubaas Giraffe will get you!’ But they left him alone, and although they all wished they were red, they did not crawl in the clay any more: they knew it was no good. It was only from outside, so it soon rubbed off, but the little Red One’s redness was from inside; and baasjes know, for a thing to be any good it must be on the inside.” He glanced involuntarily at the wall-cupboard where his soopje was safely locked up: it would certainly not be any good, in his opinion, till it was on the inside of him.

“But when the Old Tortoises gave him advice, the little Red Tortoise listened and thanked them. He was a wise little man. He knew when to speak and when to hold his tongue.

“At that time, my baasjes, the whole Tortoise nation was having a hard time with Oubaas Giraffe—that old horse with the long neck and the unequal legs, who is all white and black like a burnt thornbush with crows sitting on it. He gives blue ashes when he is burnt, therefore is he called the Blue One.

“He had taken to eating tortoises. They didn’t know what to do. They tried to make a plan, but no! they could find no remedy. Whenever Oubaas Giraffe saw a nice young tortoise that he could easily swallow, he picked it up in his mouth, and from fright it pulled its head and all its feet into its shell, and—goops!—one swallow and it had sailed down the Blue One’s long throat, just like baasjes sail down the plank at the side of the skeer-kraal.

“The little Red Tortoise listened to the plans that were made, and at last he thought of a plan. He was not sure how it would go, but he was a brave little one, and he thought by himself, ‘If it goes wrong, there will be no more little Red Tortoise: but if it goes right, then the whole Tortoise nation will be able to live again.’

“So what did he do, my baasjes? He crawled out far in the veld and sat in the path where the Old Blue One liked to walk. Soon he heard goof, goof, goof, coming nearer and nearer. Then the noise stopped. The little Red One peeped from under his shell. Yes, there was the great Blue One, standing over him and looking very fierce.

“Do you know, little Red Tortoise, in one moment I could trample you to death?”

“The little Red One was very frightened, for this was not his plan, but he said nothing.

“Do you know, little Red Tortoise, in one moment I could swallow you?”

“Ach! how glad was the little Red Tortoise! But he only said in a small little voice, ‘Yes, noble Blue One, I belong to the nation whom it is the custom to swallow. Please swallow me!’

“Oubaas Giraffe picked him up and gave a little gulp, and the little Red Tortoise slipped half-way down his long throat. But ojé! here a strange thing happened. The little Red One would go no further. Instead of drawing in his head and legs and slipping down like a stone, like all the other tortoises had done, he wanted to see where he was going, so he stuck out his head, and fastened his sharp little nails into Oubaas Giraffe’s gullet, and there he hung like a bat on a wall.

“Go down, go down, little Tortoise! You choke me!” The Old Blue One could hardly speak; his throat was so full of tortoise.

“Peep! peep!” said the little Red One, and held on more tightly than ever.

“Come up, come up, little Tortoise! You kill me!” The Old Blue One was stamping and gurgling now.

“Peep! peep!” said the little Red One, and hung on with his hard bent beak as well. He thought, ‘No! too many of my nation have sailed down this red slot. I won’t let go.’

“I tell you, baasjes, Oubaas Giraffe danced and pranced over the veld; he screamed and bellowed; he gurgled and swallowed; he tried to get the little Red Tortoise down, and he tried to get him up; but it was no use. The little Red One clung fast to him till he was quite choked, and sank down in the sand and died.

“Then the little Red Tortoise crawled out, and went home to tell his Mam-ma that he had killed Oubaas Giraffe and that his nation could have peace again. Ach! but she was proud of him!

“It’s not for nothing you were born red,’ she said. ‘Come here, my little Crab, that I may put buchu under your arm. Come, my crooked-legged little one, let your mother sprinkle you with buchu!’

“When she had sprinkled him with buchu, they went and told their friends, and all the Tortoise nation rejoiced and went and had a great feast off Oubaas Giraffe as he lay dead in the veld.

“And they thought more of the little Red Tortoise than ever. Even the Young Ones, who had been angry with him, said, ‘He is wiser than we are. We will listen to what he says. P’r’aps, after all, there is something in being born a certain colour.’”

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