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Snug and the Parrot Who Taught Him Three Languages

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Part One: The Turtles and the Hungry Parrot

Snug wasn't looking for mischief one morning when he walked over to the turtle pond. He wanted a pleasant stroll and a quiet talk with any turtles who'd crawled out early to enjoy the sunshine.

Ever since his accident on the river and his rough treatment inside the barrel, when the rowdy monkeys called him a "big turtle" and pelted him, Snug had changed his mind about the fun of bothering harmless turtles. He liked to think that all the gentle creatures, the birds in the hedges and even the frogs and turtles in the ponds, were friendly. He wondered how he could ever have been so thoughtless as to scare them for his own amusement.

He was glad to see half a dozen turtles, old and young, sunning themselves on the driftwood.

"Good morning, turtles," said Snug in his pleasantest voice. "Don't be frightened. I only want a quiet talk. No throwing this time, I promise."

"Kerchug! Kerchug! Splash!" was the only answer, as the turtles woke up and tumbled into the water the moment they heard his voice.

Snug felt half ashamed and half cross that they didn't believe him. Then he thought about the rowdy monkeys, and how carefully he'd avoided *them* since they played turtle with him, and he understood.

A moment later two or three little turtle noses poked up through the brushwood, peeping at him with blinking eyes. Snug tried again.

"Please wait a minute and listen," he said quietly. "I'm sorry I treated you badly. I don't blame you for hiding. But honestly, you can trust me now. Come out and sit in the sun, and let's talk."

One of the boldest turtles waddled out and flopped onto a floating board.

"I'm afraid you'll need watching," he said. "I'd enjoy our chat more if you held your hands high above your head where I can see them, in case you change your mind."

"That's a fine way to treat a friend," said Snug. "But I'll do it to please you." Up went both hands, which made him look as if he'd been stopped by a highwayman.

"What made you change your mind?" asked the turtle.

"I got to play turtle myself for a while," said Snug. "Just long enough to learn where the fun *doesn't* come in for the turtle."

"That's funny. Tell me about it."

"It's too long a story, and I'm not sure it would amuse you. But the rowdy monkeys had a great time with me. They didn't care about my bruises or my feelings, as long as they could make things lively by throwing stones and rolling me down a hill, until I didn't know if I was a turtle, a football, a wooden statue, or a monkey."

"Ha! Great lark, wasn't it?" laughed the turtle. "Tell me more! When are you playing turtle again? I'd like to watch."

"I tell you, it wasn't fun. It was *cruel*," Snug snapped.

"Hurt much?" asked the turtle, hiding a snicker.

"Look, my arms are getting tired and I'm trying to be friendly. Put yourself in my place and see how *you'd* like it."

"Oh, I've been in your place, several times," said the turtle slyly. "Perhaps you remember one or two of those occasions."

"There you go, needling me, when I came all this way to apologise!" said Snug sulkily. "I'm going home."

"Wait a minute," said the turtle. "My turn. I'm sorry I hurt your feelings. But oh, it *is* funny what a difference it makes when a monkey ends up on the turtle end of the game. Let's call it quits and be friends. Someday I'll show you the birthday rings I wear on my back. My breakfast is waiting. Good morning, come again soon."

"Kerchunk!" and the turtle was gone under the water. Snug said "By-by" to the ripples and left, glad he'd made up with the turtles, and a little surprised at how clearly they understood what it's like when the other fellow is the one throwing stones.

He had gone only a few steps when he heard a voice overhead.

"Pretty little monkey-boy, please stop a minute. Polly wants a cracker. Do you happen to have one in your pocket?"

Snug looked up and saw a handsome grey-and-gold parrot perched in an

evergreen tree.



"Hello, Poll. Where did you come from?"

"Skipped away from the sailors who kept me at school in a wire cage, on the ship that came into the harbour last week. It's hard to talk on an empty stomach. Polly wants a cracker."

"I haven't got a cracker, but here's a piece of gingerbread I was saving for lunch. Come and get it if you're hungry."

The parrot flew down to Snug's shoulder, mumbled a quick "Thank you," and nibbled away at the gingerbread.

"You'd better come home with me," said Snug.

"Not while I have wings that work," said Poll. "I've been clipped and caged and educated until I hardly know myself. I'm free now, and I mean to stay that way."

"Free to starve in the woods, I'd say."

"Well, I *am* hungry this morning. But I can look after myself once I get my bearings and my wings back. I always could, before I was caught and clipped."

"What does 'clipped' mean?"

"Having the feathers on one side of my wings cut off. You'd call it being lamed if one of your legs was made shorter and useless."

"Couldn't you fly at all?"

"I thought I could. One dark night I unhooked my cage door and flew off toward shore, only half a mile away. But it was a merry-go-round journey."

"Didn't you get away?"

"I got away, but I couldn't *stay* away. I flew all night and thought I'd left the ship miles behind. When daylight came, there I was, flying round and round the same ship. One wing was shorter than the other, and it kept turning me toward the weak side. I was glad to drop into the water and let the sailors fish me out and put me back in my cage."

"You had better luck this time."

"Luck, or pluck, or a bit of both. After that they clipped *both* wings, and both grew back even. So when they tried to clip me again the other day, I bit the sailor's finger until he dropped me on the deck. I didn't wait to say good-bye. Oh, that sailor was a singer, all right! You could have heard his wow! wow! wow! all

the way over here."

"You mentioned school. Are you an educated parrot?"

"Educated? I can sing the 'Star-Spangled Banner' backwards and speak three languages in a minute."

"Three languages in a minute! You must be a scholar. I wish I could stay and hear you, but I'll be late for school."

"Come back after school, bring me a cracker or more of that sweet stuff, and I'll teach you how," said Poll. "But come alone, and keep my secret. I'm in trouble until that ship leaves port."

"All right. I'll bring you supper before dark, and we'll have some private lessons."

The parrot flew back to his tree and Snug went to school. But his head was so full of turtle and parrot talk that he got a bad mark in every class and wore the dunce cap for half the afternoon, just because he'd tried to be friendly to the turtles and kind to a hungry parrot.

Part Two: The Wicked Parrot

The Monkey-town school was light and airy in good weather, because it was all outdoors, up in a treetop. The seats and desks were just right for monkeys, because the branches grew that way. Nobody got in trouble for gazing out the window, because there were no walls or windows nearer than the sky and the mountains.

When showers weren't too wet, the class waited in a waterproof grove until they passed. When the storm was heavy, school was dismissed, and some of the idle young monkeys wished for a thunderstorm that would last a whole week, because they were only idle monkeys and didn't know any better.

Another reason was that they were tired of seeing their numbers on the blackboard like this:

Monkey Number Three will stay after school for an hour to finish his spelling.

Monkey Number Five will sit on the dunce block while the others play, for popping his pea-gun during class.

Monkey Number Seven will clean the blackboards for eating nuts and throwing the shells at the good little monkeys on the front seats.

Monkey Number Nine will wear the large leather medal home tonight for doing monkey-shines instead of his arithmetic, and his father will do the rest, or I will in the morning.

You can probably guess what Snug's number was by the time you finish reading

the stories he helped make.

Snug hadn't forgotten his promise to the parrot, who had offered to teach him three languages in a minute in exchange for a good breakfast. About eight o'clock the next morning he reached the big tree near the turtle pond and found Poll on the same branch.

"Good morning, Poll!" said Snug cheerily. "Why don't you brace up and look cheerful?"

"Morning. Glad you've finally come," grumbled Poll. "You'd find it easy to be cheerful too, after a single piece of gingerbread since yesterday morning."

"Sorry I'm late," said Snug, pulling a couple of crackers from his pocket.

"Better late than never. I'm hungry enough to eat a shingle with gravel sauce," said Poll. He fluttered onto Snug's shoulder and began munching.

"Did anything happen during the night?"

"Happen? I didn't get a wink of sleep. That grove is full of owls hooting 'Who, who, who are you?' all night. When I told them I was a tired stranger who wanted a nap, they just kept hooting the same question over and over."

"Why not hold an evening school and teach them to talk like you, in three languages?"

"Teach an owl!" muttered Poll. "Might as well teach a crow to sing. An owl thinks he's wise because he *looks* wise, and because he can ask a question and then stare at you like a statue when you answer."

"Did the owls come to see you?"

"Oh yes. They thought they'd found a long-lost cousin. They seemed to think a respectable grey-and-gold parrot was a painted owl, because our faces look a bit alike, especially the curved beaks. But I'm tired of owls. Did you bring any more crackers?"

"One more, which you'd better save for lunch. But I found these dry sunflower seeds in the attic."

"Oh, thank you! How kind and thoughtful! I dote on sunflower seeds. Please excuse my manners earlier. I was feeling very peckish," said the now-smiling Poll.

"Peck away. And if you can do two things at once, please start teaching me, or I'll be late for the school bell."

"Certainly, with pleasure. Glad you reminded me of my side of the bargain. Ready? Let's begin."

For the next fifteen minutes Snug listened and repeated the strangest words and short sentences he'd ever heard. He didn't understand a bit of it, but he thought it must be very clever, because the parrot chuckled in a silly way every time Snug got one right.

When the warning bell rang, Snug said good-bye. Poll told him they might not meet again, and it was probably lucky for Poll that they never did.

At recess Snug was so eager to show off that he gathered his friends and began reciting the parrot-talk to the astonished group.

The schoolmaster happened to be nearby and overheard Snug's glib chatter. He was so shocked he could hardly believe his ears. Before Snug had finished half his show, the schoolmaster seized him by the collar.

"That's enough of that vulgar talk here, you wicked little rascal!"

He didn't wait for Snug to explain that he was only repeating what the parrot had taught him. He marched Snug to the brook and called the whole school to watch. A pupil was sent for a sponge. Snug had his mouth scrubbed out so many times and so thoroughly that he thought his teeth were loose.

Then the schoolmaster hung the big leather medal around Snug's neck and sent him home with a note for his father, describing what a horrid, vulgar, wicked young monkey his only son had become.

Snug's good mother read the note and didn't believe a word of it. She had never heard anything like that from her Snuggie. Snug was so glad to have someone who would listen and believe he meant no harm that he told her the whole story, and repeated a little of the parrot-talk. She stopped him quickly and explained what the parrot's "three languages" really were.

Snug turned red. He'd been taking lessons in words used only by monkey-pirates, rowdy hoodlums, and silly parrots.

When his father came home and heard the full truth, he felt sorry for Snug and so angry at the parrot that he swore he'd clip that bird's tongue as well as his wings if he ever caught him in the neighbourhood.

The next morning he went with Snug to explain the parrot's shabby trick to the schoolmaster and the class. That cleared Snug's good name and made the future look a little brighter. But the babbling brook never seemed quite the same to Snug after that wash-out of the parrot's three languages.

A few days later, a large printed notice like a circus poster appeared on a tree in Monkey-town:

CAUTION

A villainous tame parrot, escaped from my ship a few days ago, is loose somewhere in this neighbourhood.

All monkey-parents are warned to keep a sharp lookout for this runaway and to tell their sons to avoid this deceitful and vulgar creature.

This parrot often leads young monkeys astray by pretending to be a teacher of languages.

Though he can sometimes talk decently for a few minutes, he has spent so much time in the company of pirates, hoodlums, and other vicious parrots that swearing and slang have become natural to him, to the shock of all well-bred folk.

If found at large, the finder may keep the parrot as a frightful example. The owner has no use for that sort of bird on his ship.

— Captain Sailorman

When the monkeys read the notice, they all agreed that Snug wasn't such a bad boy after all. The same thing might have happened to any of them, if Snug hadn't been the first and only monkey in all of Monkey-town to go to school to a parrot.

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