Ririro
READ ANYWHERE, ANYTIME

The Fate of the Turtle

Andrew Lang

In a very hot country far to the east was a beautiful little lake where two wild ducks made their home. They spent their days swimming and playing in its clear water. They had it all to themselves except for a turtle, who was many years older than they were and had lived there first. When you have only one other creature to talk to, you often dislike him, but luckily the ducks didn't. They became great friends and spent most of every day together.

All went smoothly and happily until one summer when the rains failed. The sun beat down 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 hung their heads, and the ducks' favourite swimming spot, where they could dive deepest, grew shallower and shallower. At last there came a morning when the ducks looked at each other uneasily, and by evening they were whispering that if rain hadn't come in two days, they would have to fly away and find a new home. If they stayed in the place they loved so much, they would die of thirst.

They watched the sky anxiously for hours before they tucked their heads under their wings and fell asleep from weariness. But not the smallest cloud covered the stars, which shone so big and bright and hung so low that you felt you could touch them. So when morning came, they decided they must tell the turtle their plans and say goodbye.

They found him comfortably curled up on a heap of dead rushes, more than half asleep, because he was old and couldn't go out in the heat as he once had.

"Ah, there you are," he said. "I was beginning to wonder if I'd ever see you again. The lake has shrunk, but somehow I've shrunk more, and it's lonely spending all day and night by myself!"

"Oh, my friend," said the older duck, "if you've suffered, so have we. And I have something to tell you that I fear will hurt you more. If we don't want to die of thirst, we must leave this place at once and find another where the sun doesn't burn so hard. It breaks my heart to say it, because nothing else in the world would have made us part from you."

The turtle was so astonished and distressed that for a moment he couldn't speak. When he had forced back his tears, he said in a shaky voice:

"How can you think I could live without you, when you've been my only friends for so long? If you leave me, death will soon end my grief."

"Our sorrow is as great as yours," said the other duck. "But what can we do? And remember, if we're not here to drink the water, there'll be more for you. If it weren't for this terrible misfortune, nothing would have parted us from someone we love so much."

"My friends," said the turtle, "water is as necessary to me as it is to you, and if death looks you in the face, it looks at me too. But in the name of all the years we've spent together, please don't leave me to die here alone! Wherever you go, take me with you!"

There was a pause. The ducks felt wretched at the thought of abandoning their old companion, but how could they grant his wish? It seemed impossible. At last one of them said:

"How can I find the words to refuse? But how can we do what you ask? Think! Our bodies are heavy like yours, and our feet are small. How could we walk with you over mountains and deserts until we found a land where the sun doesn't scorch? Before the day was out, all three of us would be dead of weariness and hunger! No. Our only hope is our wings, and alas, you can't fly."

"No, I can't fly," said the turtle, sighing. "But you're so clever and have seen so much of the world. Surely you can think of a plan?" And he fixed his eyes eagerly on them.

When the ducks saw how badly the turtle wanted to go with them, their hearts were touched. They signalled to him that they wished to be alone, and swam out into the lake to talk it over. The turtle couldn't hear what they said, but he could watch, and the half hour of their conversation felt like a hundred years. At last he saw them coming back side by side. He was so anxious to know his fate that he almost fainted before they reached him.

"We think we've found a plan that may work for you," said the bigger duck gravely, "but we have to warn you, it's dangerous, especially if you don't follow our directions."

"How could I not follow your directions when my life and happiness depend on them?" said the turtle joyfully. "Tell me, and I promise to obey."

"Well, then," said the duck. "While we carry you through the air, in the way we've worked out, you must stay as still as if you were dead. However high above the earth you find yourself, don't be afraid, don't move your feet, don't open your mouth. No matter what you see or hear, you must keep perfectly still, or I can't answer for what happens."

"I'll be completely obedient," said the turtle, "not just this time but for the rest of my life. I promise again not to move head or foot, to fear nothing, and never to say a word for the whole journey."



With this settled, the ducks swam about until they found a good stout stick floating in the lake. They tied it to their necks with tough water-lily roots and went back as quickly as they could to the turtle.

"Now," said the older duck, pushing the stick gently toward his friend, "take this stick firmly in your mouth, and don't let go until we've put you down on the ground again."

The turtle did as he was told. The ducks took the stick by its two ends, spread their wings, and rose swiftly into the air, with 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. Still, the turtle trusted his friends and held tight to the stick.

At last they saw a small village in the distance, and soon they were passing over the roofs of the houses. The people were so amazed by the strange sight that they all, men, women and children, ran out to see, calling to each other:

"Look! Look! A miracle! Two ducks carrying a turtle! Has anyone ever seen the like?" The surprise was so great that men left their ploughing and women their weaving to add their voices to the crowd.

The ducks flew steadily on and paid no attention to the commotion below. But the turtle did. At first he stayed silent, as he'd been told. But at last the clamour below was too much for him, and he began to think that everyone must be envying him for being able to travel through the air. In an unlucky moment, he forgot the promises he'd made so solemnly, and opened his mouth to reply. Before he could say a word, he was tumbling through the air, and the ducks watched, helpless, as he fell far below. They let the stick drop after him, since it was no use to anyone now. Sadly they looked at each other and shook their heads.

"We were afraid it would end like this," they said.

Stories help us explore cultures, learn moral lessons, connect with nature — or simply have fun. That's why ririro.com offers 3,000+ free stories — fairy tales, fables, bedtime stories, myths and more — for every age, in 13 languages, with free printable PDFs and often audio. Reading should be a right, not a privilege. Share ririro.com and spread the joy of reading.