

Tale of a Tortoise and of a Mischievous Monkey

by Andrew Lang

from *The Brown Fairy Book*

Once upon a time there was a country where the rivers were larger, and the forests deeper, than anywhere else. Hardly any men came there, and the wild creatures had it all to themselves, and used to play all sorts of strange games with each other. The great trees, chained one to the other by thick flowering plants with bright scarlet or yellow blossoms, were famous hiding-places for the monkeys, who could wait unseen, till a puma or an elephant passed by, and then jump on their backs and go for a ride, swinging themselves up by the creepers when they had had enough. Near the rivers huge tortoises were to be found, and though to our eyes a tortoise seems a dull, slow thing, it is wonderful to think how clever they were, and how often they outwitted many of their livelier friends.

There was one tortoise in particular that always managed to get the better of everybody, and many were the tales told in the forest of his great deeds. They began when he was quite young, and tired of staying at home with his father and mother. He left them one day, and walked off in search of adventures. In a wide open space surrounded by trees he met with an elephant, who was having his supper before taking his evening bath in the river which ran close by. 'Let us see which of us two is strongest,' said the young tortoise, marching up to the elephant. 'Very well,' replied the elephant, much amused at the impertinence of the little creature; 'when would you like the trial to be?'

'In an hour's time; I have some business to do first,' answered the tortoise. And he hastened away as fast as his short legs would carry him.

In a pool of the river a whale was resting, blowing water into the air and making a lovely fountain. The tortoise, however, was too young and too busy to admire such things, and he called to the whale to stop, as he wanted to speak to him. 'Would you like to try which of us is the stronger?' said he. The whale looked at him, sent up another fountain, and answered: 'Oh, yes; certainly. When do you wish to begin? I am quite ready.'

'Then give me one of your longest bones, and I will fasten it to my leg. When I give the signal, you must pull, and we will see which can pull the hardest.'

'Very good,' replied the whale; and he took out one of his bones and passed it to the tortoise.

The tortoise picked up the end of the bone in his mouth and went back to the elephant. 'I will fasten this to your leg,' said he, 'in the same way as it is fastened to mine, and we must both pull as hard as we can. We shall soon see which is the stronger.' So he wound it carefully round the elephant's leg, and tied it in a firm knot. 'Now!' cried he, plunging into a thick bush behind him.

The whale tugged at one end, and the elephant tugged at the other, and neither had any idea that he had not the tortoise for his foe. When the whale pulled hardest the elephant was dragged into the water; and when the elephant pulled the hardest the whale was hauled on to the land. They were very evenly matched, and the battle was a hard one.

At last they were quite tired, and the tortoise, who was watching, saw that they could play no more. So he crept from his hiding-place, and dipping himself in the river, he went to the elephant and said: 'I see that you really are stronger than I thought. Suppose we give it up for to-day?' Then he dried himself on some moss and went to the whale and said: 'I see that you really are stronger than I thought. Suppose we give it up for to-day?'

The two adversaries were only too glad to be allowed to rest, and believed to the end of their days that, after all, the tortoise was stronger than either of them.

A day or two later the young tortoise was taking a stroll, when he met a fox, and stopped to speak to him. 'Let us try,' said he in a careless manner, 'which of us can lie buried in the ground during seven years.'

'I shall be delighted,' answered the fox, 'only I would rather that you began.'

'It is all the same to me,' replied the tortoise; 'if you come round this way to-morrow you will see that I have fulfilled my part of the bargain.'

So he looked about for a suitable place, and found a convenient hole at the foot of an orange tree. He crept into it, and the next morning the fox heaped up the earth round him, and promised to feed him every day with fresh fruit. The fox so far kept his word that each morning when the sun rose he appeared to ask how the tortoise was getting on. 'Oh, very well; but I wish you would give me some fruit,' replied he.

'Alas! the fruit is not ripe enough yet for you to eat,' answered the fox, who hoped that the tortoise would die of hunger long before the seven years were over.

'Oh dear, oh dear! I am so hungry!' cried the tortoise.

'I am sure you must be; but it will be all right to-morrow,' said the fox, trotting off, not knowing that the oranges dropped down the hollow trunk, straight into the tortoise's hole, and that he had as many as he could possibly eat.

So the seven years went by; and when the tortoise came out of his hole he was as fat as ever.

Now it was the fox's turn, and he chose his hole, and the tortoise heaped the earth round, promising to return every day or two with a nice young bird for his dinner. 'Well, how are you getting on?' he would ask cheerfully when he paid his visits.

'Oh, all right; only I wish you had brought a bird with you,' answered the fox.

'I have been so unlucky, I have never been able to catch one,' replied the tortoise. 'However, I shall be more fortunate to-morrow, I am sure.'

But not many to-morrows after, when the tortoise arrived with his usual question: 'Well, how are you getting on?' he received no answer, for the fox was lying in his hole quite still, dead of hunger.

By this time the tortoise was grown up, and was looked up to throughout the forest as a person to be feared for his strength and wisdom. But he was not considered a very swift runner, until an adventure with a deer added to his fame.

One day, when he was basking in the sun, a stag passed by, and stopped for a little conversation. 'Would you care to see which of us can run fastest?' asked the tortoise, after some talk. The stag thought the question so silly that he only shrugged his shoulders. 'Of course, the victor would have the right to kill the other,' went on the tortoise. 'Oh, on that condition I agree,' answered the deer; 'but I am afraid you are a dead man.'

'It is no use trying to frighten me,' replied the tortoise. 'But I should like three days for training; then I shall be ready to start when the sun strikes on the big tree at the edge of the great clearing.'

The first thing the tortoise did was to call his brothers and his cousins together, and he posted them carefully under ferns all along the line of the great clearing, making a sort of ladder which stretched for many miles. This done to his satisfaction, he went back to the starting place.

The stag was quite punctual, and as soon as the sun's rays struck the trunk of the tree the stag started off, and was soon far out of the sight of the tortoise. Every now and then he would turn his head as he ran, and call out: 'How are you getting on?' and the tortoise who happened to be nearest at that moment would answer: 'All right, I am close up to you.'

Full of astonishment, the stag would redouble his efforts, but it was no use. Each time he asked: 'Are you there?' the answer would come: 'Yes, of course, where else should I be?' And the stag ran, and ran, and ran, till he could run no more, and dropped down dead on the grass.

And the tortoise, when he thinks about it, laughs still.

But the tortoise was not the only creature of whose tricks stories were told in the forest. There was a famous monkey who was just as clever and more mischievous, because he was so much quicker on his feet and with his hands. It was quite impossible to catch him and give him the thrashing he so often deserved, for he just swung himself up into a tree and laughed at the angry victim who was sitting below.

Sometimes, however, the inhabitants of the forest were so foolish as to provoke him, and then they got the worst of it. This was what happened to the barber, whom the monkey visited one morning, saying that he wished to be shaved. The barber bowed politely to his customer, and begging him to be seated, tied a large cloth round his neck, and rubbed his chin with soap; but instead of cutting off his beard, the barber made a snip at the end of his tail. It was only a very little bit and the monkey started up more in rage than in pain. 'Give

me back the end of my tail,' he roared, 'or I will take one of your razors.' The barber refused to give back the missing piece, so the monkey caught up a razor from the table and ran away with it, and no one in the forest could be shaved for days, as there was not another to be got for miles and miles.

As he was making his way to his own particular palm-tree, where the cocoanuts grew, which were so useful for pelting passers-by, he met a woman who was scaling a fish with a bit of wood, for in this side of the forest a few people lived in huts near the river.

'That must be hard work,' said the monkey, stopping to look; 'try my knife--you will get on quicker.' And he handed her the razor as he spoke. A few days later he came back and rapped at the door of the hut. 'I have called for my razor,' he said, when the woman appeared.

'I have lost it,' answered she.

'If you don't give it to me at once I will take your sardine,' replied the monkey, who did not believe her. The woman protested she had not got the knife, so he took the sardine and ran off.

A little further along he saw a baker who was standing at the door, eating one of his loaves. 'That must be rather dry,' said the monkey, 'try my fish'; and the man did not need twice telling. A few days later the monkey stopped again at the baker's hut. 'I've called for that fish,' he said.

'That fish? But I have eaten it!' exclaimed the baker in dismay.

'If you have eaten it I shall take this barrel of meal in exchange,' replied the monkey; and he walked off with the barrel under his arm.

As he went he saw a woman with a group of little girls round her, teaching them how to dress hair. 'Here is something to make cakes for

the children,' he said, putting down his barrel, which by this time he found rather heavy. The children were delighted, and ran directly to find some flat stones to bake their cakes on, and when they had made and eaten them, they thought they had never tasted anything so nice. Indeed, when they saw the monkey approaching not long after, they rushed to meet him, hoping that he was bringing them some more presents. But he took no notice of their questions, he only said to their mother: 'I've called for my barrel of meal.'

'Why, you gave it to me to make cakes of!' cried the mother.

'If I can't get my barrel of meal, I shall take one of your children,' answered the monkey. 'I am in want of somebody who can bake my bread when I am tired of fruit, and who knows how to make cocoanut cakes.'

'Oh, leave me my child, and I will find you another barrel of meal,' wept the mother.

'I don't WANT another barrel, I want THAT one,' answered the monkey sternly. And as the woman stood wringing her hands, he caught up the little girl that he thought the prettiest and took her to his home in the palm tree.

She never went back to the hut, but on the whole she was not much to be pitied, for monkeys are nearly as good as children to play with, and they taught her how to swing, and to climb, and to fly from tree to tree, and everything else they knew, which was a great deal.

Now the monkey's tiresome tricks had made him many enemies in the forest, but no one hated him so much as the puma. The cause of their quarrel was known only to themselves, but everybody was aware of the fact, and took care to be out of the way when there was any chance of these two meeting. Often and often the puma had laid traps for the monkey, which he felt sure his foe could not escape; and the monkey

would pretend that he saw nothing, and rejoice the hidden puma's heart by seeming to walk straight into the snare, when, lo! a loud laugh would be heard, and the monkey's grinning face would peer out of a mass of creepers and disappear before his foe could reach him.

This state of things had gone on for quite a long while, when at last there came a season such as the oldest parrot in the forest could never remember. Instead of two or three hundred inches of rain falling, which they were all accustomed to, month after month passed without a cloud, and the rivers and springs dried up, till there was only one small pool left for everyone to drink from. There was not an animal for miles round that did not grieve over this shocking condition of affairs, not one at least except the puma. His only thought for years had been how to get the monkey into his power, and this time he imagined his chance had really arrived. He would hide himself in a thicket, and when the monkey came down to drink--and come he must--the puma would spring out and seize him. Yes, on this occasion there could be no escape!

And no more there would have been if the puma had had greater patience; but in his excitement he moved a little too soon. The monkey, who was stooping to drink, heard a rustling, and turning caught the gleam of two yellow, murderous eyes. With a mighty spring he grasped a creeper which was hanging above him, and landed himself on the branch of a tree; feeling the breath of the puma on his feet as the animal bounded from his cover. Never had the monkey been so near death, and it was some time before he recovered enough courage to venture on the ground again.

Up there in the shelter of the trees, he began to turn over in his head plans for escaping the snares of the puma. And at length chance helped him. Peeping down to the earth, he saw a man coming along the path carrying on his head a large gourd filled with honey.

He waited till the man was just underneath the tree, then he hung from a bough, and caught the gourd while the man looked up wondering, for he was no tree-climber. Then the monkey rubbed the honey all over him, and a quantity of leaves from a creeper that was hanging close by; he stuck them all close together into the honey, so that he looked like a walking bush. This finished, he ran to the pool to see the result, and, quite pleased with himself, set out in search of adventures.

Soon the report went through the forest that a new animal had appeared from no one knew where, and that when somebody had asked his name, the strange creature had answered that it was Jack-in-the-Green. Thanks to this, the monkey was allowed to drink at the pool as often as he liked, for neither beast nor bird had the faintest notion who he was. And if they made any inquiries the only answer they got was that the water of which he had drunk deeply had turned his hair into leaves, so that they all knew what would happen in case they became too greedy.

By-and-by the great rains began again. The rivers and streams filled up, and there was no need for him to go back to the pool, near the home of his enemy, the puma, as there was a large number of places for him to choose from. So one night, when everything was still and silent, and even the chattering parrots were asleep on one leg, the monkey stole down softly from his perch, and washed off the honey and the leaves, and came out from his bath in his own proper skin. On his way to breakfast he met a rabbit, and stopped for a little talk.

‘I am feeling rather dull,’ he remarked; ‘I think it would do me good to hunt a while. What do you say?’

‘Oh, I am quite willing,’ answered the rabbit, proud of being spoken to by such a large creature. ‘But the question is, what shall we hunt?’

‘There is no credit in going after an elephant or a tiger,’ replied the monkey stroking his chin, ‘they are so big they could not possibly get

out of your way. It shows much more skill to be able to catch a small thing that can hide itself in a moment behind a leaf. I'll tell you what! Suppose I hunt butterflies, and you, serpents.'

The rabbit, who was young and without experience, was delighted with this idea, and they both set out on their various ways.

The monkey quietly climbed up the nearest tree, and ate fruit most of the day, but the rabbit tired himself to death poking his nose into every heap of dried leaves he saw, hoping to find a serpent among them. Luckily for himself the serpents were all away for the afternoon, at a meeting of their own, for there is nothing a serpent likes so well for dinner as a nice plump rabbit. But, as it was, the dried leaves were all empty, and the rabbit at last fell asleep where he was. Then the monkey, who had been watching him, fell down and pulled his ears, to the rage of the rabbit, who vowed vengeance.

It was not easy to catch the monkey off his guard, and the rabbit waited long before an opportunity arrived. But one day Jack-in-the-Green was sitting on a stone, wondering what he should do next, when the rabbit crept softly behind him, and gave his tail a sharp pull. The monkey gave a shriek of pain, and darted up into a tree, but when he saw that it was only the rabbit who had dared to insult him so, he chattered so fast in his anger, and looked so fierce, that the rabbit fled into the nearest hole, and stayed there for several days, trembling with fright.

Soon after this adventure the monkey went away into another part of the country, right on the outskirts of the forest, where there was a beautiful garden full of oranges hanging ripe from the trees. This garden was a favourite place for birds of all kinds, each hoping to secure an orange for dinner, and in order to frighten the birds away and keep a little fruit for himself, the master had fastened a waxen figure on one of the boughs.

Now the monkey was as fond of oranges as any of the birds, and when he saw a man standing in the tree where the largest and sweetest oranges grew, he spoke to him at once. 'You man,' he said rudely, 'throw me down that big orange up there, or I will throw a stone at you.' The wax figure took no notice of this request, so the monkey, who was easily made angry, picked up a stone, and flung it with all his force. But instead of falling to the ground again, the stone stuck to the soft wax.

At this moment a breeze shook the tree, and the orange on which the monkey had set his heart dropped from the bough. He picked it up and ate it every bit, including the rind, and it was so good he thought he should like another. So he called again to the wax figure to throw him an orange, and as the figure did not move, he hurled another stone, which stuck to the wax as the first had done. Seeing that the man was quite indifferent to stones, the monkey grew more angry still, and climbing the tree hastily, gave the figure a violent kick. But like the two stones his leg remained stuck to the wax, and he was held fast. 'Let me go at once, or I will give you another kick,' he cried, suiting the action to the word, and this time also his foot remained in the grasp of the man. Not knowing what he did, the monkey hit out, first with one hand and then with the other, and when he found that he was literally bound hand and foot, he became so mad with anger and terror that in his struggles he fell to the ground, dragging the figure after him. This freed his hands and feet, but besides the shock of the fall, they had tumbled into a bed of thorns, and he limped away broken and bruised, and groaning loudly; for when monkeys ARE hurt, they take pains that everybody shall know it.

It was a long time before Jack was well enough to go about again; but when he did, he had an encounter with his old enemy the puma. And this was how it came about.

One day the puma invited his friend the stag to go with him and see a comrade, who was famous for the good milk he got from his cows.

The stag loved milk, and gladly accepted the invitation, and when the sun began to get a little low the two started on their walk. On the way they arrived on the banks of a river, and as there were no bridges in those days it was necessary to swim across it. The stag was not fond of swimming, and began to say that he was tired, and thought that after all it was not worth going so far to get milk, and that he would return home. But the puma easily saw through these excuses, and laughed at him.

‘The river is not deep at all,’ he said; ‘why, you will never be off your feet. Come, pluck up your courage and follow me.’

The stag was afraid of the river; still, he was much more afraid of being laughed at, and he plunged in after the puma; but in an instant the current had swept him away, and if it had not borne him by accident to a shallow place on the opposite side, where he managed to scramble up the bank, he would certainly have been drowned. As it was, he scrambled out, shaking with terror, and found the puma waiting for him. ‘You had a narrow escape that time,’ said the puma.

After resting for a few minutes, to let the stag recover from his fright, they went on their way till they came to a grove of bananas.

‘They look very good,’ observed the puma with a longing glance, ‘and I am sure you must be hungry, friend stag? Suppose you were to climb the tree and get some. You shall eat the green ones, they are the best and sweetest; and you can throw the yellow ones down to me. I dare say they will do quite well!’ The stag did as he was bid, though, not being used to climbing, it gave him a deal of trouble and sore knees, and besides, his horns were continually getting entangled in the creepers. What was worse, when once he had tasted the bananas, he found them not at all to his liking, so he threw them all down, green and yellow alike, and let the puma take his choice. And what a dinner he made! When he had QUITE done, they set forth once more.

The path lay through a field of maize, where several men were working. As they came up to them, the puma whispered: ‘Go on in front, friend stag, and just say “Bad luck to all workers!”’ The stag obeyed, but the men were hot and tired, and did not think this a good joke. So they set their dogs at him, and he was obliged to run away as fast as he could.

‘I hope your industry will be rewarded as it deserves,’ said the puma as he passed along; and the men were pleased, and offered him some of their maize to eat.

By-and-by the puma saw a small snake with a beautiful shining skin, lying coiled up at the foot of a tree. ‘What a lovely bracelet that would make for your daughter, friend stag! said he. The stag stooped and picked up the snake, which bit him, and he turned angrily to the puma. ‘Why did you not tell me it would bite?’ he asked.

‘Is it my fault if you are an idiot?’ replied the puma.

At last they reached their journey’s end, but by this time it was late, and the puma’s comrade was ready for bed, so they slung their hammocks in convenient places, and went to sleep. But in the middle of the night the puma rose softly and stole out of the door to the sheep-fold, where he killed and ate the fattest sheep he could find, and taking a bowl full of its blood, he sprinkled the sleeping stag with it. This done, he returned to bed.

In the morning the shepherd went as usual to let the sheep out of the fold, and found one of them missing. He thought directly of the puma, and ran to accuse him of having eaten the sheep. ‘I, my good man? What had put it into your head to think of such a thing? Have I got any blood about me? If anyone has eaten a sheep it must be my friend the stag.’ Then the shepherd went to examine the sleeping stag, and of course he saw the blood. ‘Ah! I will teach you how to steal!’ cried he, and he hit the stag such a blow on his skull that he died in a moment.

The noise awakened the comrade above, and he came downstairs. The puma greeted him with joy, and begged he might have some of the famous milk as soon as possible, for he was very thirsty. A large bucket was set before the puma directly. He drank it to the last drop, and then took leave.

On his way home he met the monkey. 'Are you fond of milk?' asked he. 'I know a place where you get it very nice. I will show you it if you like.' The monkey knew that the puma was not so good-natured for nothing, but he felt quite able to take care of himself, so he said he should have much pleasure in accompanying his friend.

They soon reached the same river, and, as before, the puma remarked: 'Friend monkey, you will find it very shallow; there is no cause for fear. Jump in and I will follow.'

'Do you think you have the stag to deal with?' asked the monkey, laughing. 'I should prefer to follow; if not I shall go no further. The puma understood that it was useless trying to make the monkey do as he wished, so he chose a shallow place and began to swim across. The monkey waited till the puma had got to the middle, then he gave a great spring and jumped on his back, knowing quite well that the puma would be afraid to shake him off, lest he should be swept away into deep water. So in this manner they reached the bank.

The banana grove was not far distant, and here the puma thought he would pay the monkey out for forcing him to carry him over the river. 'Friend monkey, look what fine bananas,' cried he. 'You are fond of climbing; suppose you run up and throw me down a few. You can eat the green ones, which are the nicest, and I will be content with the yellow.'

'Very well,' answered the monkey, swinging himself up; but he ate all the yellow ones himself, and only threw down the green ones that were left. The puma was furious and cried out: 'I will punch your

head for that.’ But the monkey only answered: ‘If you are going to talk such nonsense I won’t walk with you.’ And the puma was silent.

In a few minutes more they arrived at the field where the men were reaping the maize, and the puma remarked as he had done before: ‘Friend monkey, if you wish to please these men, just say as you go by: “Bad luck to all workers.”’

‘Very well,’ replied the monkey; but, instead, he nodded and smiled, and said: ‘I hope your industry may be rewarded as it deserves.’ The men thanked him heartily, let him pass on, and the puma followed behind him.

Further along the path they saw the shining snake lying on the moss. ‘What a lovely necklace for your daughter,’ exclaimed the puma. ‘Pick it up and take it with you.’

‘You are very kind, but I will leave it for you,’ answered the monkey, and nothing more was said about the snake.

Not long after this they reached the comrade’s house, and found him just ready to go to bed. So, without stopping to talk, the guests slung their hammocks, the monkey taking care to place his so high that no one could get at him. Besides, he thought it would be more prudent not to fall asleep, so he only lay still and snored loudly. When it was quite dark and no sound was to be heard, the puma crept out to the sheep-fold, killed the sheep, and carried back a bowl full of its blood with which to sprinkle the monkey. But the monkey, who had been watching out of the corner of his eye, waited until the puma drew near, and with a violent kick upset the bowl all over the puma himself.

When the puma saw what had happened, he turned in a great hurry to leave the house, but before he could do so, he saw the shepherd coming, and hastily lay down again.

‘This is the second time I have lost a sheep,’ the man said to the monkey; ‘it will be the worse for the thief when I catch him, I can tell you.’ The monkey did not answer, but silently pointed to the puma who was pretending to be asleep. The shepherd stooped and saw the blood, and cried out: ‘Ah! so it is you, is it? then take that!’ and with his stick he gave the puma such a blow on the head that he died then and there.

Then the monkey got up and went to the dairy, and drank all the milk he could find. Afterwards he returned home and married, and that is the last we heard of him.

[Adapted from Folk-lore Bresilien.]