

Tortoise and the Lizard

Tortoise had used up all his salt, and he found his meals so tasteless without it that he decided to call on his brother and ask him if he had any to spare. His brother had plenty.

"How will you get it back to your home?" he asked Tortoise.

"If you will wrap the salt in a piece of bark cloth, and tie it up with string, then I can put the string over my shoulder and drag the parcel along the ground behind me," said Tortoise.

"A splendid idea!" exclaimed his brother, and between them they made a tidy package of the salt. Then Tortoise set off for his long, slow journey home, with the bundle going bump, bump, bump, along the ground behind him.

Suddenly he was pulled up short, and turning round, he saw that a large lizard had jumped on to the parcel of salt and was sitting there, staring at him.

"Get off my salt!" exclaimed Tortoise. "How do you expect me to drag it home with you on top of it?"

"It's not your salt!" replied the lizard. "I was just walking along the path when I found this bundle lying there, so I took possession of it and now it belongs to me."

"What rubbish you talk!" said Tortoise. "You know well it is mine, for I am holding the string that ties it."

But the lizard still insisted that he had found the parcel lying in the road, and he refused to get off unless Tortoise went with him to the elders, to have their case tried in court. Poor Tortoise had to agree and together they went before the old men at the court.

First Tortoise put his case, explaining that as his arms and legs were so short he always had to carry bundles by dragging them along behind him.

Then the lizard put his side of the matter, saying that he had found the bundle lying in the road.

"Surely anything that is picked up on the road belongs to the one who picks it up?" cried the lizard.

The old men discussed the matter seriously for some time; but many of them were related to the lizard and thought that they might perhaps get a share of the salt, so eventually they decreed that the bundle should be cut into two, each animal taking half.

Tortoise was disappointed, because he knew it really was his salt, but he sighed with resignation and let them divide the parcel.

The lizard immediately seized the half that was covered with the biggest piece of cloth, leaving poor Tortoise with most of his salt escaping from his half of the parcel, and spilling out on to the ground. In vain did Tortoise try to gather his salt together. His hands were too small and there was too little cloth to wrap round it properly. Finally he departed for home, with only a fraction of his share, wrapped up in leaves and what remained of the bark cloth, while the elders scraped up all that had been spilled, dirty though it was, and took it back to their wives.

Tortoise's wife was very disappointed when she saw how little salt he had brought with him, and when he told her the whole story she was most indignant at the way he had been treated. The long, slow journey had tired him, and he had to rest for several days. But although Tortoise was so slow, he was very cunning and eventually thought up a plan to get even with the lizard.

So, saying good-bye to his wife, he plodded along the road towards the lizard's home with a gleam in his eye, and after some time he caught sight of the lizard, who was enjoying a solitary meal of flying ants. Slowly and silently Tortoise came upon him from behind and put his hands on the middle of the lizard's body.

"See what I've found!" called Tortoise loudly.

"What are you doing?" asked the perplexed lizard.

"I was just walking along the path when I found something lying there," explained Tortoise.

"So I picked it up and now it belongs to me, just as you picked up my salt the other day."

When the lizard continued to wriggle and demanded that Tortoise set him free, Tortoise insisted that they go to the court and get the elders to judge.

The old men listened attentively to both sides of the story, and then one said:

"If we are to be perfectly fair, we must give the same judgment that we gave concerning the salt."

"Yes," said the others, nodding their white heads, "and we had the bag of salt cut in two. Therefore we must cut the lizard in two, and Tortoise shall have half."

"That is fair," replied Tortoise, and before the lizard could escape, he seized a knife from an elder's belt and sliced him in half, and that was the end of the greedy lizard.