



The Gleaming Shell

One day a brother and sister were following a stream through a forest. Though still children, they had traveled far, leaving behind a cruel father and a house that was no home. All at once the girl heard a squeal beneath her foot. Lifting her worn heel, she saw something leap past her and land on a nearby branch. Curious, the boy tried to sneak up on it to catch it, but as he reached out, it disappeared among the leaves – well, almost. The children could still see the tip of its tail, which it couldn't quite conceal. That's what she'd stepped on, the girl realized.

Eager to get a better look at the creature, the brother gently pulled it out of its hiding place by the tail. All the two saw, however, was a gleaming shell. It appeared to be a tiny turtle...or at least it would have looked like a turtle if its tail hadn't been as long as, well, their father's arm. Besides, no turtle could have streaked through the air as fast as this one had.

They heard it squeak several times before they realized it was speaking to

them.

“We can hardly hear you,” said the brother.

“Please release my tail,” it pleaded more loudly.

So the boy let it go. When he did, he saw that gleaming scales like glitter had come off in his hand. A moment later, one by one, the creature poked out its legs – its back legs as strong as a grasshopper’s – though it didn’t reveal its face to them.

“I’m so sorry! I didn’t mean to step on your tail,” the girl apologized, hoping to tease it out of its shell. “Really, you have nothing to fear from us.”

But it still wouldn’t stick its head out, as if it had some other reason not to.

“Okay. We’ll make you a deal,” said the boy, reaching into his pocket for a few crumbs of bread. “If you come out, we’ll give you a treat.”

When it finally poked its head out and they leaned closer, they saw clearly that it *did* look something like a turtle, except that it had floppy ears, a beak like a bird’s...and, stranger still, a tiny golden crown on its head.

For a moment the two children were too astonished to speak, both wondering if they were dreaming. “Wh...why are you wearing a crown?” stammered the brother when he found his voice.

“To remind myself that I was once a king,” the creature replied, “before a beautiful witch cast a spell on me. I wouldn’t marry her, and this is how she took her revenge. Thank you for not trying to steal my crown. Most people do.”

“I’m so sorry!” repeated the girl, tears starting in her eyes.

“How long have you been like this?” the boy asked pityingly.

“Too many years to count,” squeaked the strange little beast. “But the witch did allow me one grace. I may grant a wish to whoever is kind to me. So, think carefully before you speak. Between the two of you, I have only one wish to grant.”

“Why, we would wish for you to be a king again,” said the girl without a second thought, her brother nodding.

Now it was the creature’s turn to be surprised. “I see by your tattered clothes that you’re poor, by your rough hands that you work hard, and by your bruises that you’ve been cruelly mistreated. Why would you want to waste a wish on me?”

“We can’t wish anything for ourselves when we see your misfortune,” the brother said simply.

“Very well,” the creature said doubtfully. “I’ll do my best to grant your wish.”

The very next moment a tall, regal man stood before them, all the scales of the gleaming shell turned to gold coins that were heaped around his feet, while the glitter in the boy’s hand had become a fistful of gold.

“Why, it worked! You’ve released me from the spell!” breathed the king as the children stared up at him in wonder. Abruptly he leaned against a tree for support, his chest heaving with emotion, he was so overcome.

Then he insisted they tell him their story.

“I’ve no desire to rule again,” he said quietly when they were finished. “So take my crown and all the gold – I have no use for any of it – or if you’d prefer to lead a simple life, I will raise you as my own children.”

So that is what they chose – and no children ever had a kinder father, nor was any father more dearly loved.