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IMAGINATION OVER KNOWLEDGE

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The Giant Tortoise

Once upon a time, there was a man who lived in Buenos Aires. He was very happy because he was healthy and hardworking. But one day, he fell ill, and the doctors told him that only by going to the countryside could he be cured. He didn't want to go because he had younger brothers whom he fed, and he grew sicker each day. Until one day, a friend of his, who was the director of the Zoo, said to him:

"You are my friend, and you are a good and hardworking man. That's why I want you to go live in the forest, to get plenty of outdoor exercise to heal yourself. And since you're a great shot with a rifle, hunt forest animals to bring me their skins, and I'll give you money in advance so your little brothers can eat well." The sick man agreed and went to live in the forest, far away, even farther than Misiones. It was very hot there, and that did him good.

He lived alone in the woods and cooked for himself. He ate birds and forest creatures that he hunted with his rifle, and he also ate fruits. He slept under the trees, and when the weather was bad, he would build a shelter in five minutes with palm leaves. There he would sit and smoke, very happy in the midst of the forest that roared with wind and rain.

He had made a bundle with the skins of the animals and carried it on his shoulder. He had also caught many

venomous snakes alive and carried them inside a large mate gourd, because there they have gourds as big as kerosene cans.

The man regained his healthy color, was strong again, and had an appetite. One day, when he was very hungry because he hadn't hunted anything for two days, he saw on the edge of a large lagoon a huge jaguar that wanted to eat a tortoise. The jaguar was setting the tortoise upright on its edge to insert a paw and extract the meat with its claws. Upon seeing the man, the jaguar let out a terrible roar and leaped at him. But the hunter, who was a great shot, aimed between its two eyes and shattered its head. Then he skinned it; its hide was so large that it alone could serve as a rug for a room.

"Now," the man said to himself, "I'm going to eat tortoise meat, which is very tasty."

But when he approached the tortoise, he saw that it was already wounded, and its head was almost severed from its neck, hanging by just two or three threads of flesh.

Despite the hunger he felt, the man felt sorry for the poor tortoise and dragged it with a rope to his shelter. He bandaged its head with strips of cloth torn from his shirt because he had only one shirt and no rags. He had dragged it because the tortoise was immense, as tall as a chair, and weighed as much as a man.

The tortoise stayed propped in a corner and spent days and days there without moving.

The man tended to its wounds every day and then gave it gentle pats on its shell.

The tortoise finally healed. But then it was the man who became ill. He had a fever, and his whole body ached.

Soon, he could no longer get up. The fever kept increasing, and his throat burned with thirst. The man realized then that he was gravely ill and spoke aloud, even though he was alone, because he had a high fever. "I'm going to die," said the man. "I'm alone, I can't get up anymore, and there's no one to even give me water. I'm going to die here of hunger and thirst."

And shortly after, the fever rose even more, and he lost consciousness.

But the tortoise had heard him and understood what the hunter was saying. And she thought:

"The man didn't eat me before, even though he was very hungry, and he healed me. I will heal him now."

She then went to the lagoon, found a small tortoise shell, and after cleaning it well with sand and ash, she filled it with water and gave the man a drink as he lay on his blanket, dying of thirst. She immediately began searching for tasty roots and tender herbs, which she brought to the man to eat. The man ate without realizing who was giving him the food because he was delirious with fever and didn't recognize anyone.

Every morning, the tortoise roamed the forest looking for increasingly delicious roots to give to the man, and she wished she could climb trees to bring him fruits.

The hunter ate like this for days and days without knowing who was feeding him, and one day he regained consciousness. He looked around and saw that he was

alone, for there was only him and the tortoise, which was an animal. And he said again aloud:

"I'm alone in the forest; the fever will return again, and I'm going to die here because only in Buenos Aires are there medicines to cure me. But I'll never be able to go, and I'm going to die here."

And as he had said, the fever returned that afternoon, stronger than before, and he lost consciousness again. But once more, the tortoise had heard him and said to herself:

"If he stays here in the forest, he will die because there are no medicines, and I have to take him to Buenos Aires."

Saying this, she cut thin and strong vines, which are like ropes, carefully laid the man on her back, and tied him securely with the vines so he wouldn't fall off. She made many attempts to properly arrange the rifle, the skins, and the gourd with snakes, and finally achieved what she wanted without disturbing the hunter, and then began the journey.

The tortoise, thus loaded, walked and walked, day and night. She crossed forests and fields, swam across rivers a league wide, and traversed swamps where she was almost buried, always with the dying man on her back. After eight or ten hours of walking, she would stop, undo the knots, and



gently lay the man down in a place where there was very dry grass.

She would then go to find water and tender roots and gave them to the sick man. She ate too, although she was so tired that she preferred to sleep.

Sometimes she had to walk under the scorching sun; and since it was summer, the hunter had such a high fever that he was delirious and dying of thirst. He would shout, "Water! Water!" every so often, and each time the tortoise had to give him a drink.

So she went on for days and days, week after week.

They were getting closer to Buenos Aires each time, but also each day the tortoise was weakening, each day she had less strength, although she didn't complain.

Sometimes she would lie down, completely exhausted, and the man would partially regain consciousness and say aloud:

"I'm going to die; I'm getting sicker each time, and only in Buenos Aires could I be cured. But I'm going to die here, alone in the forest."

He thought he was still in his shelter because he wasn't aware of anything. The tortoise would then get up and resume the journey.

But one day, at sunset, the poor tortoise couldn't go any further. She had reached the limit of her strength and couldn't continue. She hadn't eaten for a week to arrive sooner. She had no strength left.

When night fully fell, she saw a distant light on the horizon, a glow that illuminated the sky, and she didn't know what it was. She felt weaker and weaker and then closed her eyes to die along with the hunter,

thinking sadly that she hadn't been able to save the man who had been good to her.

And yet, she was already in Buenos Aires, and she didn't know it. That light she saw in the sky was the glow of the city, and she was about to die when she was already at the end of her heroic journey.

But a city mouse—possibly Little Mouse Pérez—found the two dying travelers.

"What a tortoise!" said the mouse. "I've never seen such a big tortoise. And what's that you're carrying on your back? Is it firewood?"

"No," the tortoise replied sadly. "It's a man."

"And where are you going with that man?" added the curious mouse.

"I'm going... I'm going... I wanted to go to Buenos Aires," replied the poor tortoise in a voice so low it was barely audible. "But we're going to die here because I'll never make it..."

"Ah, silly, silly!" said the little mouse, laughing. "I've never seen a sillier tortoise! You've already arrived in Buenos Aires! That light you see over there is Buenos Aires."

Upon hearing this, the tortoise felt an immense surge of strength because she still had time to save the hunter, and set off again.

And when it was still dawn, the director of the Zoo saw a muddy and extremely thin tortoise arriving, who was carrying a man lying on her back and tied with vines so he wouldn't fall. The director recognized his friend, and he himself ran to fetch medicines, with which the hunter was cured immediately.

When the hunter learned how the tortoise had saved him, how she had made a journey of three hundred leagues so he could get medicine, he didn't want to be separated from her anymore. And since he couldn't keep her at his house, which was very small, the director of the Zoo agreed to keep her in the garden and take care of her as if she were his own daughter.

And so it was. The tortoise, happy and content with the affection she receives, strolls throughout the garden and is the same great tortoise we see every day eating grass around the monkeys' cages.

The hunter goes to see her every afternoon, and she recognizes her friend from afar by his footsteps. They spend a couple of hours together, and she never wants him to leave without giving her a loving pat on the shell first.