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READ ANYWHERE, ANYTIME

A Fish Story

Andrew Lang

Perhaps you think that fishes were always fishes, and never lived anywhere except in the water, but if you went to Australia and talked to the people in the sandy desert in the centre of the country you would learn something quite different. They would tell you that long, long ago you would have met fishes on the land, wandering from place to place, and hunting all sorts of animals, and if you consider how fishes are made, you will understand how difficult this must have been and how clever they were to do it. Indeed, so clever were they that they might have been hunting still if a terrible thing had not happened.

One day the whole fish tribe came back very tired from a hunting expedition, and looked about for a nice cool spot in which to pitch their camp. It was very hot, and they thought that they could not find a more comfortable place than under the branches of a large tree which grew by the bank of a river. So they made their fire to cook some food, right on the edge of a steep bank, which had a deep pool of water lying beneath it at the bottom. While the food was cooking they all stretched themselves lazily out under the tree, and were just dropping off to sleep when a big black cloud which they had never noticed spread over the sun, and heavy drops of rain began to fall, so that the fire was almost put out, and that, you know, is a very serious thing in savage countries where they have no matches, for it is very hard to light it again. To make matters worse, an icy wind began to blow, and the poor fishes were chilled right through their bodies.

'This will never do,' said Thuggai, the oldest of all the fish tribe. 'We shall die of cold unless we can light the fire again,' and he bade his sons rub two sticks together in the hope of kindling a flame, but though they rubbed till they were tired, not a spark could they produce.

'Let me try,' cried Biernuga, the bony fish, but he had no better luck, and no more had Kumbal, the bream, nor any of the rest.



'It is no use,' exclaimed Thuggai, at last. 'The wood is too wet. We must just sit and wait till the sun comes out again and dries it.' Then a very little fish indeed, not more than four inches long and the youngest of the tribe, bowed himself before Thuggai, saying, 'Ask my father, Guddhu the cod, to light the fire. He is skilled in magic more than most fishes.' So Thuggai asked him, and Guddhu stripped some pieces of bark off a tree, and placed them on top of the smouldering ashes. Then he knelt by the side of the fire and blew at it for a long while, till slowly the feeble red glow became a little stronger and the edges of the bark showed signs of curling up. When the rest of the tribe saw this they pressed close, keeping their backs towards the piercing wind, but Guddhu told them they must go to the other side, as he wanted the wind to fan his fire. By and bye the spark grew into a flame, and a merry crackling was heard.

'More wood,' cried Guddhu, and they all ran and gathered wood and heaped it on the flames, which leaped and roared and sputtered.

'We shall soon be warm now,' said the people one to another. 'Truly Guddhu is great'; and they crowded round again, closer and closer. Suddenly, with a shriek, a blast of wind swept down from the hills and blew the fire out towards them. They sprang back hurriedly, quite forgetting where they stood, and all fell down the bank, each tumbling over the other, till they rolled into the pool that lay below. Oh, how cold it was in that dark water on which the sun never shone! Then in an instant they felt warm again, for the fire, driven by the strong wind, had followed them right down to the bottom of the pool, where it burned as brightly as ever. And the fishes gathered round it as they had done on the top of the cliff, and found the flames as hot as before, and that fire never went out, like those upon land, but kept burning for ever. So now you know why, if you dive deep down below the cold surface of the water on a frosty day, you will find it comfortable and pleasant underneath, and be quite sorry that you cannot stay there.

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