

The Story of Androcles and the Lion

Edited by Andrew Lang

Many hundred years ago, there lived in the north of Africa a poor Roman slave called Androcles. His master held great power and authority in the country, but he was a hard, cruel man, and his slaves led a very unhappy life. They had little to eat, had to work hard, and were often punished and tortured if they failed to satisfy their master's caprices. For long Androcles had borne with the hardships of his life, but at last he could bear it no longer, and he made up his mind to run away. He knew that it was a great risk, for he had no friends in that foreign country with whom he could seek safety and protection; and he was aware that if he was overtaken and caught he would be put to a cruel death. But even death, he thought, would not be so hard as the life he now led, and it was possible that he might escape to the sea-coast, and somehow some day get back to Rome and find a kinder master.

So he waited till the old moon had waned to a tiny gold thread in the skies, and then, one dark night, he slipped out of his master's house, and, creeping through the deserted forum and along the silent town, he passed out of the city into the vineyards and corn-fields lying outside the walls. In the cool night air he walked rapidly. From time to time he was startled by the sudden barking of a dog, or the sound of voices coming from some late revellers in the villas which stood beside the road along which he hurried. But as he got further into the country these sounds ceased, and there was silence and darkness all round him. When the sun rose he had already gone many miles away from the town in which he had been so miserable. But now a new terror oppressed him—the terror of great loneliness. He had got into a wild, barren country, where there was no sign of human habitation. A thick growth of low trees and thorny mimosa bushes spread out before him, and as he tried to thread his way through them he was severely scratched, and his scant garments torn by the long thorns. Besides the sun was very hot, and the trees were not high enough to afford him any shade. He was worn out with hunger and fatigue, and he longed to lie down and rest. But to lie down in that fierce sun would have meant death, and he struggled on, hoping to find some wild berries to eat, and some water to quench his thirst. But when he came out of the scrub-wood, he found he was as badly off as before. A long, low line of rocky cliffs rose before him, but there were no houses, and he saw no hope of finding food. He was so tired that he could not wander further, and seeing a cave which looked cool and dark in the side of the cliffs, he crept into it, and, stretching his tired limbs on the sandy floor, fell fast asleep.

Suddenly he was awakened by a noise that made his blood run cold. The roar of a wild beast sounded in his ears, and as he started trembling and in terror to his feet, he beheld a huge, tawny lion, with great glistening white teeth, standing in the entrance of the cave. It was impossible to fly, for the lion barred the way. Immovable with fear, Androcles stood rooted to the spot, waiting for the lion to spring on him and tear him limb from limb.

But the lion did not move. Making a low moan as if in great pain, it stood licking its huge paw, from which Androcles now saw that blood was flowing freely. Seeing the poor animal in such pain, and noticing how gentle it seemed, Androcles forgot his own terror, and slowly approached the lion, who held up its paw as if asking the man to help it. Then Androcles saw that a monster thorn had entered the paw, making a deep cut, and causing great pain and swelling. Swiftly but firmly he drew the thorn out, and pressed the swelling to try to stop the flowing of the blood. Relieved of the pain, the lion quietly lay down at Androcles' feet, slowly moving his great bushy tail from side to side as a dog does when it feels happy and comfortable.

From that moment Androcles and the lion became devoted friends. After lying for a little while at his feet, licking the poor wounded paw, the lion got up and limped out of the cave. A few minutes later it returned with a little dead rabbit in its mouth, which it put down on the floor of the cave beside Androcles. The poor man, who was starving with hunger, cooked the rabbit somehow, and ate it. In the evening, led by the lion, he found a place where there was a spring, at which he quenched his dreadful thirst.

And so for three years Androcles and the lion lived together in the cave; wandering about the woods together by day, sleeping together at night. For in summer the cave was cooler than the woods, and in winter it was warmer.

At last the longing in Androcles' heart to live once more with his fellow-men became so great that he felt he could remain in the woods no longer, but that he must return to a town, and take his chance of being caught and killed as a runaway slave. And so one morning he left the cave, and wandered away in the direction where he thought the sea and the large towns lay. But in a few days he was captured by a band of soldiers who were patrolling the country in search of fugitive slaves, and he was put in chains and sent as a prisoner to Rome.

Here he was cast into prison and tried for the crime of having run away from his master. He was condemned as a punishment to be torn to pieces by wild beasts on the first public holiday, in the great circus at Rome.

When the day arrived Androcles was brought out of his prison, dressed in a simple, short tunic, and with a scarf round his right arm. He was given a lance with which to defend himself—a forlorn hope, as he knew that he had to fight with a powerful lion which had been kept without food for some days to make it more savage and bloodthirsty. As he stepped into the arena of the huge circus, above the sound of the voices of thousands on thousands of spectators he could hear the savage roar of the wild beasts from their cages below the floor on which he stood.

Of a sudden the silence of expectation fell on the spectators, for a signal had been given, and the cage containing the lion with which Androcles had to fight had been shot up into the arena from the floor below. A moment later, with a fierce spring and a savage roar, the great animal had sprung out of its cage into the arena, and with a bound had rushed at the spot where Androcles stood trembling. But suddenly, as he saw Androcles, the lion stood still, wondering. Then quickly but quietly it approached him, and gently moved its tail and licked the man's hands, and fawned upon him like a great dog. And Androcles patted the lion's head, and gave a sob of recognition, for he knew that it was his own lion, with whom he had lived and lodged all those months and years.

And, seeing this strange and wonderful meeting between the man and the wild beast, all the people marvelled, and the emperor, from his high seat above the arena, sent for Androcles, and bade him tell his story and explain this mystery. And the emperor was so delighted with the story that he said Androcles was to be released and to be made a free man from that hour. And he rewarded him with money, and ordered that the lion was to belong to him, and to accompany him wherever he went.

And when the people in Rome met Androcles walking, followed by his faithful lion, they used to point at them and say, 'That is the lion, the guest of the man, and that is the man, the doctor of the lion.'

Source:

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