

The Undecided Rattlesnake

by Clara Dillingham Pierson

It is not often that one of the Forest People has any trouble about making up his mind, but there was one large Rattlesnake who had great difficulty in doing so. She lived in the southern edge of the forest, where the sunshine was clear and warm, and there were delightful crevices among the rocks in which she and all her friends and relatives could hide.

It seemed very strange that so old a Snake should be so undecided as she was. It must be that she had a careless mother who did not bring her up in the right way. If that were so, one should indeed be sorry for her. Still even that would be no real excuse, for was she not old enough now to train herself? She had seven joints in the rattle on her tail and an eighth one growing, so you can see that she was no longer young, although, being healthy, she had grown her new joints and changed her skin oftener than some of her friends. In fact, she had grown children of her own, and if it had not been that they took after their father, they would have been a most helpless family. Fortunately for them, their father was a very decided Snake.

Yes, it was exceedingly lucky for them. It may not have been so good a thing for him. His wife was always glad to have things settled for her, and when he said, "We will do this," she answered, "Yes, dear." When he said, "We will not do that," she murmured, "No, dear." And when he said, "What shall we do?" she would reply, "Oh, I don't know. What do you think we might better do?" He did not very often ask her opinion, and there were people in the forest who said he would never have talked matters over with her if he had not known that she would leave the decision to him.

Now this is a bad way in which to have things go in any family, and it happened here as it would anywhere. He grew more and more selfish from having his own way all of the time, and his wife became less and less able to take care of herself. Most people thought him a very devoted husband. Perhaps he was. It is easy to be a devoted husband if you always have your own way.

One night Mr. Rattlesnake did not return to their home. Nobody ever knew what had become of him. The Red Squirrel said that Mrs. Goldfinch said that the biggest little Rabbit had told her that the Ground Hog had overheard Mr. Crow say that he thought he saw somebody that looked like Mr. Rattlesnake chasing a Field Mouse over toward the farm, but that he might have been mistaken. This was all so uncertain that Mrs. Rattlesnake knew no more than she had known before. It was very trying.

"If I only knew positively," she said to her friend, Mrs. Striped Snake, "I could do something, although I am sure I don't know what it would be."

Mrs. Striped Snake tried to help her. "Why not have one of your children come home to live with you?" she said pleasantly, for this year's children were now old enough to shift for themselves.

"I've thought of that," answered Mrs. Rattlesnake, "but I like a quiet life, and you know how it is. Young Snakes will be young Snakes. Besides, I don't think they would want to come back."

"Well, why not be alone, then?"

"Oh, it is so lonely," replied Mrs. Rattlesnake, with a sigh. "Everything reminds me so of my

husband, and that makes me sad. If I lived somewhere else it would be different."

"Then why not move?" said Mrs. Striped Snake, briskly. "I would do that. Find a nice crack in the rock just big enough for one, or make a cosy little hole in the ground somewhere near here. Then if he comes back he can find you easily. I would do that. I certainly would."

She spoke so firmly that Mrs. Rattlesnake said she would, she would to-morrow. And her friend went home thinking it was all settled. That shows how little she really knew Mrs. Rattlesnake.

The more Mrs. Rattlesnake thought it over that night, the more she dreaded moving. "If he does not come back," she sighed, "I may marry again in the spring, and then I might have to move once more. I believe I will ask somebody else what I ought to do."

So in the morning she began to consult her friends. They all told her to move, and she decided to do it. Then she could not make up her mind whether to take a rock-crevice or make a hole in the ground. It took another day of visiting to settle that it should be a hole in the ground. A fourth day was spent in finding just the right place for her home, and on the fifth day she began work.

By the time the sun was over the tree-tops, she wished she had chosen some other place, and thought best to stop and talk to some of her friends about it. When she returned she found herself obliged to cast her skin, which had been growing tight and dry for some time. This was hard work, and she was too tired to go on with her home-making, so she lay in the sunshine and admired her beautiful, long, and shining body of reddish brown spotted with black. Her rattle had eight joints now, for when a Rattlesnake casts the old skin a new joint is always uncovered at the end of the tail. She waved it quickly to see how an eight-jointed rattle would sound. "Lovely!" she said. "Lovely! Like the seeds of the wild cucumber shaking around in their dry and prickly case."

One could not tell all the things that happened that fall, or how very, very, very tired her friends became of having her ask their advice. She changed her mind more times than there are seeds in a milkweed pod, and the only thing of which she was always sure was eating. When there was food in sight she did not stop for anybody's advice. She ate it as fast as she could, and if she had any doubts about the wisdom of doing so, she kept them to herself.

When winter came she had just got her new home ready, and after all she went when invited to spend the winter with a cave party of other Snakes. They coiled themselves together in a great mass and slept there until spring. As the weather grew warmer, they began to stir, wriggling and twisting themselves free.

Two bachelor Snakes asked her to marry. One was a fine old fellow with a twelve-jointed rattle. The other was just her own age.

"To be sure I will," she cried, and the pits between her nostrils and her ears looked more like dimples than ever. "Only you must wait until I can make up my mind which one to marry."

"Oh, no," they answered, "don't go to all that trouble. We will fight and decide it for you."

It was a long fight, and the older of the two Snakes had a couple of joints broken off from his rattle before it was over. Still he beat the other one and drove him away. When he came back for his bride he found her crying. "What is the matter?" said he, quite sternly.

"Oh, that p-poor other b-bachelor!" she sobbed. "I b-believe I will g-go after him. I think p-perhaps I l-love him the b-better."

"No, you don't, Mrs. Rattlesnake," said the fine old fellow who had just won the fight. "You will do no such thing. You will marry me and never speak to him again. When I have lost two joints of my rattle in fighting for you, I intend to have you myself, and *I* say that you love me very dearly. Do you hear?"

"Yes, darling," she answered, as she wiped her eyes on the grass, "very dearly." And they lived most happily together.

"He reminds me so much of the first Mr. Rattlesnake," she said to her friends. "So strong, so firm, so quick to decide!"

And the friends said to each other, "Well, let us be thankful he is. We have been bothered enough by her coming to us for advice which she never followed."

Source:

Pierson, Clara Dillingham. "The Undecided Rattlesnake." *Among the Forest People*. New York: E.P. Dutton & Company, 1900. 153 – 162. Electronic.