

THE MONKEY AND THE CROCODILE

Once upon a time there was a huge forest covered with many kinds of fruit trees - mango trees, banana trees, custard apple trees, guava trees, framboise trees, and many more. Into this lush forest a family of monkeys moved to make its home.

Now near this forest where the monkeys lived ran a river where lived a crocodile couple. And not far from the crocodile's home and in the shadow of the monkeys' tree dwelt a *hermit, sage of the forest folks.

The husband crocodile was in the habit of snatching fresh fruit that was sometimes dropped on the river bank by hunters and foresters. One day the Chief of the Monkeys saw the husband crocodile eating scraps of some spoiled, discarded fruit, so he decided to pick the best ripe mango he could find and tossed it to the crocodile. This was the beginning of a friendship.

One day the husband crocodile took a juicy mango to his wife who tasted it and found it delicious. "Where did you find such delectable fruit?" she inquired.

"My good friend, Chief Monkey, gave it to me. He lives on many fruits - all beautiful and fresh and delicious."

Mrs. Crocodile was a crafty wife who reasoned and was not above feigning illness when overcome by desire. So with her crocodilian mind she reasoned that the monkey who lived on the choicest fruits must indeed have a healthy, crimson, delicious heart beating in his monkey breast.

"Oh, how I should enjoy eating Chief Monkey's heart!" she exclaimed.

* * "Tai leo!" gasped the husband. He was distressed beyond belief at his wife's cruel thought and tried to divert her thinking, but she refused to eat any food and became thin, pale, sick and sicker.

"Why do you sulk so and refuse to eat, my good wife?" asked the worried husband.

"Alas, I am awaiting our first babies and while I attend their warm eggs my body craves the monkey's heart. If I cannot have it, I fear our babies will not live to swim in our waters."

(OVERHEARING THIS, THE HERMIT LISTENED CLOSELY FOR THE HUSBAND'S REPLY.)

"But I cannot reach the monkey in the tree, and besides, we have become such good friends."

Feeling anguish for himself and pity for his wife, the frantic crocodile agreed, "If the monkey's heart will really cure you, then I'll try my hardest to grant your wish."

So the decision was made and the crocodile set out to see his friend.

"Hi, friend?" he called when he spied him swinging in his tree. "How is it that since we became friends you have never visited my wife and me? I always come to see you, but"

"How am I going to visit you?" chattered the monkey. "You live in the water and I live in a tree."

"That is no problem, friend. Just hop on my back and we can visit as I swim. I'll take you to my home and wherever else you want to go."

The monkey liked the idea and immediately hopped on his friend's back to enjoy his first crocodile cruise. When they came near the crocodile's domicile the bewildered kidnapper blurted out, "Oh! dear friend, I must confess something dreadful. I asked you to come here because my wife is ill and will not get well unless.....unless she has the heart of a monkey."

Hearing this, the monkey paled, shivered from his eyeballs to his tail, then replied quite calmly, "You have acted like a loving husband, but my dear, new-found friend, I left my heart in my tree. Take me back and then you shall surely find my heart in the tree. Your wife may come along if you don't trust me."

(AT THIS THE HERMIT MERELY SHOOK HIS SILVERY HEAD.)

So the three swam to the edge of the forest where the monkey leaped to his tree, shouting, "Like I said, my heart is up here! Won't you come up to the tree if you wish to have it?"

"How can I get up there?" asked the crocodile.

"I can help you," replied the monkey. And with that he hurled some sturdy vines to the two crocodiles and instructed them to tie the vines around their necks so he could hoist them into the tree.

The careless crocodiles became so enmeshed in the vines and so engrossed in their plot that they didn't realize the clever monkey was hanging them!

(WITH REMORSE FOR THE FOOLISH CROCODILES, THE SAGE OLD HERMIT MERCIFULLY LOOSENED THEIR NOOSES AND WATCHED THEM SINK INTO THE BOWELS OF THE RIVER.)

* * Tai leo in Lao is the equivalent of "This kills me!" or "Oh murder!"

* * The hermit is a traditional figure in Lao tales; he signifies wisdom