

FOREST FRIENDS

BY ROYAL DIXON

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**TO
ANNE RHODES
FAITHFUL FRIEND, GOOD FELLOW, AND RARE SOUL**

FOREST FRIENDS

I

MRS. ELEPHANT'S MOONLIGHT DANCE

It was a beautiful evening in the forest, and under the moonlight there was a great gathering of friends. Mr. and Mrs. Elephant, and the Kangaroos, the Foxes, and the handsome Leopards, even sprightly little Miss Lynx, and a number of the aristocratic jungle Deer were seated, all in a great circle, around the pleasant pool which shone in the moonlight, and displayed the loveliest of lilies afloat upon its surface.

"Then, it is decided," said the venerable Mr. Tapir. "We are, my friends, going to contest for a dancing prize. It is felt that such an entertainment will relieve the rather tedious monotony of our evenings in this lovely spot.

"One week from to-night there will be the finest party we have ever given. No expense is to be spared. Music will be supplied by the celebrated company of Baboons and Macaws; and the ladies will adjourn, forthwith, as a committee on refreshments."

Mr. Tapir went on at great length, for all the animals loved to hear him talk, and he loved to hear himself. He had been to London. He knew how things ought to be done. So he said it all over several times, but he always ended with, "and the ladies will adjourn forthwith," which beautiful words struck the animals as the finest they had ever heard.

"What oratory! Such a flow of London speech!" they whispered. And the lovely Miss Giraffe broke down and cried. Such is the power of eloquence.

Great jealousies ensued, however, for Mrs. Kangaroo let it be known straightway that the prize was hers for sure. No one could dance as she could. She had only to straighten her waist, lift her chin, and give a leap. It was her specialty.

"When it comes to grace and speed," Mrs. Leopard remarked, "there is something in my motion which is utterly lacking to the rest of you."

Now, Mrs. Elephant kept quiet. She knew what they thought of her. She was always referred to as "that good, solid, easy-going person" unless her friends were spiteful, when they did not hesitate to call her "that ungainly old cow of an elephant." She knew their ways and spite.

"But I shall get that prize," she grunted, as she trudged to her handsome, roomy home under the chocolate trees. Nor did she feel less determined in the cool bright morning, when, as a rule, the resolutions of the night before grow pale. Immediately she put her housekeeping into the hands of her sister-in-law, who was young and willing.

"I have much to do," she said.

Then she set out to find her friends, the bull-frogs. They would pipe their tunes all day in the shade, and she would practise her steps.

It was hard at first, but soon she devised a wonderful dance. Up and down and around she went all day, and most all night. But she

kept her doings a secret; and it was well she did, for all the animals would only have laughed at her had they seen her flopping around on the edge of the bull-frogs' pond.

The night of the dance came. The elegance of the costumes and the abundance of the refreshments were a delight.

It was a little game of sly Mrs. Fox's to urge everybody to eat as much as possible, and this she would do with the sweetest smile.

"Oh, do eat another bunch of bananas," she would say to Mrs. Elephant; for she wanted everybody to overeat except herself. Then they could not dance, she knew, and she would get the prize if she showed only her wonderful walking steps.

But the animals guessed her scheme. They only thanked her, and stroked their dresses or went off into corners to try their steps.

It was a brave show, and after a few had risen to the floor and danced their steps, favor was plainly directed to the lithe and lovely Mrs. Leopard.

"Just wait for Mrs. Kangaroo," was whispered from one to another. "She's wonderful, you know."

Then Mrs. Kangaroo came forth. Yes, it was marvelous what she could accomplish. First she strutted high and proud, then she bounded up and down, and finally made a great leap; but it was a leap before she looked, for what did she do but jump right into the lily pond, *ker-splash!*

Great embarrassment seized the company, and the less polite, such as the monkeys, simply yelled in derision.

"Mrs. Elephant! Mrs. Elephant!" was now the cry.

"Yes, yes, Mrs. Elephant!" came from all sides; for the animals, already amused by Mrs. Kangaroo's unfortunate conclusion, were ready to be boisterous. They could roar at Mrs. Elephant if they wanted to; she was so thick-skinned, as they thought, that you could never hurt her feelings anyway.

But Mrs. Elephant was very modest, and a trifle grand. Besides, she was all polished and trimmed in a manner most affecting. All that afternoon her sister-in-law had stood in the water with her, smoothing down her dress and rubbing her head; and two simple palm leaves behind her ears, with a little rope of moon-flowers garlanded over her placid forehead gave her a regal aspect which the animals were surprised and delighted to note.

"How thin she's grown! How do you suppose she did it?" they gasped.

Then Mrs. Elephant danced.

At her special request, Mr. Frog played for her, not too fast, on his elegant flute. But scarcely had she taken her first two steps when the orchestra struck up that grand old march, *Tigers Bold and Monkeys Gay*, which, as you know, would set anybody a-marching even if they had nowhere to go.



"AT HER SPECIAL REQUEST, MR. FROG PLAYED FOR HER, NOT TOO FAST, ON HIS ELEGANT FLUTE"

Waving her splendid arms to the sky, and making the most wonderful bows, flapping her ears and curling and pointing her trunk, all to the tune of the music, she was, as the eloquent Mrs. Tapir was moved to say, "as majestic as the night."

At her signal, when she knew she had captivated the audience, the music changed, and she came tripping toward them with open arms and the pinkest, biggest smile the world has ever seen. She begged them all to strike up the chorus; and suddenly, without knowing what they were about (for such is the way with an audience, once the hard-worked artist has enraptured his fellow-beings), they were all shouting the stirring words:

I'm the jungle dandy, O,

You're the zebra's daughter,
Come an' kiss me, handy, O,
Nuts and orange water.

Of course she took the prize. And all she would say, or all, indeed, that can be got out of her to this day, about it is:

"Practise, my dears, practise. No, I have never done it since, nor would I think of trying. I only wished to feel in my old age that I had accomplished something. The race, as wise men have said, is not to the swift. Determination and careful, unremitting practise: that's what is wanted."

II

OLD LADY WILDCAT'S FEAST

Sister Alligator and Miss Mud-Turtle had always been exceedingly good friends, and always helped each other out of trouble. One day Miss Mud-Turtle flopped over to Sister Alligator in great excitement.

"Look here, my friend, I'm going to have a picnic over on the other side of your big pond, and I want you to help me!" she said.

"Well, I'm right here to do what I can for you. Just tell me of what service I may be," replied Sister Alligator, as she lazily opened her sleepy eyes.

"You are a wonderfully good neighbor," declared Miss Mud-Turtle, "and I was just wondering if you would mind carrying all my young friends, the swamp turtles, across the pond on your big back? It would take you only a minute to swim us across, and if we tried to go around the pond, I am afraid Old Lady Wildcat might catch us on the way. You know she is always trying to get the best of us mud-turtles."

Sister Alligator's sleepy eyes opened wider.

"I have the very idea!" she exclaimed. "Just send Old Lady Wildcat an invitation to come to the picnic. Then I'll swim out into the pond and dive under and drown her, for all of you mud-turtles can swim."

Miss Mud-Turtle laughed so hard she had to wipe the tears from her eyes.

"Sister Alligator, your sleepy old head is not on your body for nothing! You surely have some brains! That is the very idea for disposing of Old Lady Wildcat! I'll make a carpet out of her soft hide for my young friends to play on before the sun goes down."

So Miss Mud-Turtle sent an invitation to Old Lady Wildcat, all written on a grape leaf in grand style. It told of the big dinner they were to have, and where it was to be, and that Sister Alligator would carry them all across the pond on her back.

When Old Lady Wildcat got the invitation she mewed to Mr. 'Possum, who had brought it, that she would be there all right, but that they must be very careful when they carried her over the pond, as her rheumatism was bad.

Then, when Mr. 'Possum went to take her message to Miss Mud-Turtle, Old Lady Wildcat laughed so loudly she had to hide her face with her paws for fear Miss Mud-Turtle would hear her. She was just planning how to get the best of Miss Mud-Turtle.

"Whenever I dine with low-down mud-turtles and alligators it is time for me to lose this fine coat of mine. I suppose they forget who I am! Ha! What would all my grandchildren think of their grandmother dining with mud-turtles!"

Then she began laughing again, and her grandchildren, who were sleeping away up in the branches of a big pine-tree, came down to see what had tickled her so.

Old Lady Wildcat was holding her sides and dancing about in glee.

"Oh, children," she laughed, "we're going to have some fun! Old Miss Mud-Turtle is trying to get your grandmother to dine with her across the pond. Get yourselves ready for the big feast, and I'll start over on Sister Alligator's back, while you all go on ahead and eat up the dinner."

"Hooray!" cried the young wildcats. "We'll slip along behind to see how you get started, and then we'll run around the pond and get the dinner before Miss Mud-Turtle and Sister Alligator can come."

So Old Lady Wildcat loped down to the pond, and there were Miss Mud-Turtle and Sister Alligator. All the little mud-turtles climbed on the alligator raft.

"Be very careful, Mrs. Wildcat," Sister Alligator cautioned, "not to wet your feet. You might take cold."

Old Lady Wildcat smiled pleasantly and jumped; and then away swam Sister Alligator.

It was fine riding till they got to about the middle of the pond. Then Sister Alligator stopped.

"I'm very sorry," she said politely, "but I have the cramps, *ooh! ooh!* I must drop to the bottom of the pond."

And down she dived.

But Old Lady Wildcat was too quick for her. She sprang up into the air and caught a grapevine, climbed up on it, and finally got to land. Then she ran through the woods to where her grandchildren were, and there they had the greatest feast you ever saw.

Finally, just as Sister Alligator and Miss Mud-Turtle with all the children came in sight, Old Lady Wildcat climbed up into a tree and laughed and mewed at them.

And this is what she said:

"Never try to fool folks, Sister Alligator and Miss Mud-Turtle, by plotting against them, for you'll find that you are only fooling yourselves!"

III

MRS. FROG CHANGES HER DRESS

"Also, it is said that ages and ages ago Mrs. Frog and her family dwelt at the bottom of the sea."

"In the ocean?" queried surprised little Kingfisher, who was listening to all that Professor Crane could tell him.

"Yes, in the great salt water," replied Professor Crane, as he shifted his position and stood on the other leg. "Far deeper it was, too, than this pond."

For the learned Crane and little Kingfisher were spending a quiet hour under the shade of the wild orange trees, on the shores of a narrow lagoon. It was a hot, still day, and they were each of them resting after a morning's exertion. Professor Crane was always a talker after dinner, for he knew much and was sociable. He could discourse by the hour if any one would listen; and if nobody was disposed to heed him, he would meditate by himself. But just now he had an alert and inquisitive companion, for if Kingfisher loved two things in the world, one was to hear all the scandal, and the other was to pick feathers out of the back of a crow as he flew.

But apparently Professor Crane had decided to tell no more, for he rested his long bill on his breast, and let his eyes close to a narrow slit. This made him look infinitely wiser than he really was; but like a good many talkative persons he knew the value of waiting to be asked.

Kingfisher eyed his friend earnestly and opened his mouth several times to speak, but shut it again. Finally, however, thinking that Professor Crane had forgotten what he was saying, he piped out:

"How strange!"

And that stirred the venerable scholar to resume his narrative.

"Yes, strange indeed; yet nothing so wonderful after all. Nothing is past belief if you have studied long enough, and I have had signal advantages. It was, you may be pleased to know, a relative of mine, a Doctor Stork, who had perched all his life on the chimney of a great university in Belgium, who told me the truth about the frog. Of course, that is nothing to you, as you are not versed in the universities. But that's not your fault. At any rate, as I was saying, Mrs. Frog lived in the sea and had a palace of coral and pearl. She was very much larger than she is now, and was of a totally different color. She was red as the reddest coral, and her legs were as yellow as gold. Very striking, she was; and her voice was a deep contralto. But she was never content with her home, and couldn't decide whether she wanted to be in or out of the water. That's the way with all inferior characters. Men, you observe, are given to such traits of indecision, never being content where they are.

"Mrs. Frog, for all the pleasures of her coral hall, found it pleasant to sit on the rocks and stare at the land. And the more she stared, the more she wished to go ashore. But she was built for swimming, you know, and, for the life of her, she couldn't get over the sands."

"How on earth did she learn?" put in Kingfisher.

"Necessity and, as I might say, emergency," Professor Crane replied. "One day she let the waves carry her high and dry on the

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