

Christmas Comes to a Turtle

I don't know what we're going to do about Dumbo's leg," Sally Martin said. Her ten year old brother, Todd, acted as if he knew exactly what could be done. "Well, maybe we could—no we can't," he said. "Maybe we could—no that won't work either."

Some answer, Sally thought. Even I could do better than that.

The two of them had decided to call their pet turtle, Dumbo. They said his shell was shaped like an elephant's ear. Several months earlier, they had found him in a field near their California home. At that time, they noticed he walked sort of lopsided. After getting him home, they saw why. One foot had been cut off, or maybe bitten off at what they decided was between the knee and ankle.

Their father said they had better keep him, for his own protection. He certainly couldn't get around very well. Finding food for himself would be hard work. Their yard was protected from dogs and other animals. It had a chain-link fence with small openings, and Dumbo was too large to get through them. He

had shade under the back porch and a big pan of water.

They soon found out why he needed protection. He would walk just so far, and then fall over. Their yard sloped steeply from the house down to the fence. If Dumbo's bad leg was on the down-slope side he tipped over very easily. If he landed on his back, they knew he could never turn over. That was one of the tragedies of a turtle's life.

One sunny afternoon Sally found Dumbo out in the yard lying on his back. He was kicking his legs in an effort to turn over. With his legs flying out in all directions, Sally couldn't pick him up. "Todd! Todd!" she cried out frantically.

Todd ran to her side. "What is it, Sally?" he asked. But there was no need to ask. Noting Dumbo on his back, Todd picked him up quickly and carried him to the house. "He's probably dehydrated," Todd said. "We don't know how long he's been out in the sun."

Sally followed at Todd's heels. "Why don't we put him in the bathtub for a while," she said. "That way he can soak his skin and drink water at the same time."

"That's a great idea," Todd said. "I wish I'd thought of it. Sometimes, a little sister can be quite smart." Todd grinned.

Sally considered that a compliment. She knew it was hard for Todd to admit a girl wasn't so dumb, after all.

After that they kept a close watch on Dumbo, hardly ever letting him out of their sight. But it was hard on Dumbo, they knew. He needed more freedom. It was a good thing it was Christmas vacation and they were home all day.

Sally worried constantly about Dumbo, and what would happen after they went back to school. Their parents both worked, and Dumbo would be alone all day.

"We could put him in a big flat box where he wouldn't have much chance of tipping over," Sally said to Todd. "But that seems so cruel. He wouldn't get enough exercise." Sally felt tears stinging her eyes, and hastily brushed them away. She hoped Todd hadn't noticed. He hated cry babies.

She looked up to see if Todd had noticed her tears and was surprised to see that he had a few of his own.

That evening, they talked to their parents about Dumbo's problem.

"I really think we should take him to a vet," their mother said.

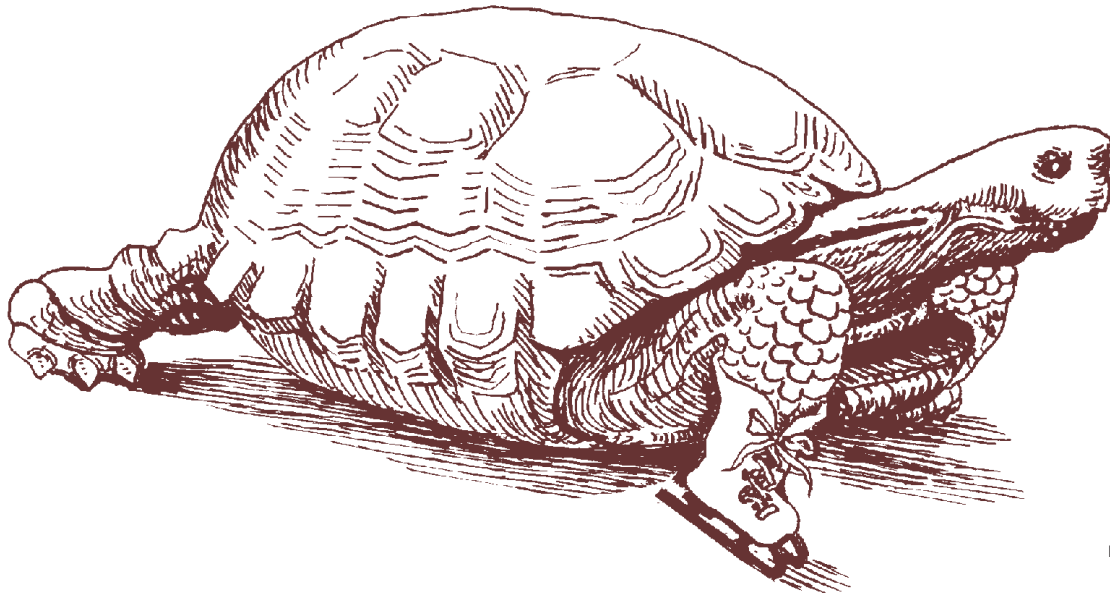
"What can a vet do, Dad?" Todd asked his father. "Will he hurt Dumbo in any way?" Todd looked worried.

"Well, the vet can probably make him a little plastic leg. But it takes a long time for an animal to get used to such a thing." His father studied Todd for a moment. "Sometimes the skin gets irritated, and animals can get blood poisoning the same as we can."

advice—and I have none to give. The more she thought of Dumbo's dilemma, the harder it was to keep from crying. She suddenly burst into tears, sobbing violently.

Feeling Todd's hand on her shoulder, she finally stopped crying and swallowed hard. "You know what makes me feel so bad," she said. "It's because tomorrow's Christmas and we can't give Dumbo a present he can really use. If we could only give him a foot." She took Dumbo from her brother's arms, and hugged the turtle tightly.

Todd said, "I have a Christmas gift for you anyway."



Flaucy Schwenk

"We'll think about it," Todd said, leaving the room hurriedly. He had Dumbo grasped tightly in his arms.

Sally followed. She could barely wait to ask Todd what the big problem was. "Why are you so upset?" she said.

"Don't you know what blood poisoning is?" Todd asked. "People often die from blood poisoning. And that could happen to Dumbo." He blinked his eyes hard.

Sally was really worried now. "Let's forget about the vet," she said. "I'd rather keep Dumbo as he is, or find some other way."

"Well, what other way?" Todd looked at Sally questioningly.

Sally thought, the first time he's really wanted

"I don't want any Christmas gift if Dumbo doesn't get his," Sally said, and ran from the room.

That evening, Sally avoided the family as much as possible and went to bed early.

Todd got up after his parents went to bed and wandered around the house. He discarded one idea after another, all of them plans on how to help Dumbo.

He finally wandered down to the basement. There were a lot of their old toys in a big trunk. Maybe I'll find something here, he thought. He picked through the toys several times, and suddenly the answer was in his hand. He couldn't believe his good luck.

Dumbo can have his Christmas gift after all, Todd thought. He took the toy to Dumbo. "Boy,

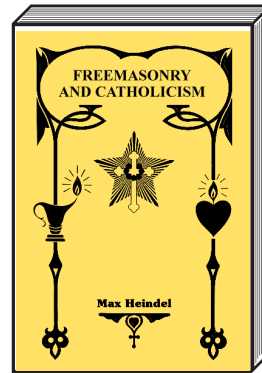
TO A SNOWFLAKE

What heart could have thought you?—
Past our devisal
(O filigree petal!)
Fashioned so purely,
Fragilely, surely,
From what Paradisal
Imagineless metal,
Too costly for cost?
Who hammered you, wrought you,
From argentine vapour?—
“God was my shaper.
Passing surmised,
He hammered, He wrought me,
From curled silver vapour,
To lust of His mind:—
Thou could'st not have thought me!
So purely, so palely,
Thinly, surely,
Mightily, frailly,
Insculped and embossed,
With His hammer of wind,
And His graver of frost.”

—Francis Thompson

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will Sally be surprised,” he said.

Next morning, Christmas day, Todd sprang his surprise. He set Dumbo down on the kitchen floor. The turtle sort of walked and slid across the floor. He was awkward, but at least he didn't tip over.

Sally squealed with joy. “Oh, how did you do that?” she asked, and ran to Dumbo. She found a doll's ice skate on Dumbo's leg. It was a learner's skate, with double runners. The shoe was laced all the way up Dumbo's leg, and fit him perfectly.

“The canvas shoe is a lot softer and more pliable than a stiff plastic leg could ever be,” Todd explained.

His mother and father praised him till he was embarrassed. But he rather liked all the attention.

Sally ran and hugged Todd. “No turtle ever had a better Christmas gift,” she said, and she hugged him again. □

—Ruth La Boda