

This is one of the tribal legends of an Australian aborigine, told to Michael Sawtell, by David Unaipon, a full blood aborigine

How . . .

THE TORTOISE GOT HIS SHELL

An Old Aboriginal Legend

Long, long ago, all the bush birds and animals lived in a big deep valley that was hemmed in on all sides by big rough hills. Food had become very scarce, and all the birds and animals held a great "yunmundi" conference to discuss the problem of food.

All the birds and animals talked and talked, and yet they came to no decision as how to obtain more food. At last the tortoise arose to speak, and all the animals laughed. Everybody laughed at the tortoise, for he was so slow and ungainly, and everybody looked upon the tortoise as a fool, because he was always asleep.

However, the tortoise proposed that the big eagle hawk, the fierce king of birds, who was a great hunter, should fly over the ranges and find some food.

"Oh, yes," said the big eagle hawk, and away he flew over the ranges.

When the eagle hawk reached a long way over the other side of the ranges, he saw a beautiful country full of all kinds of food. But he saw there were no birds or animals there, only one little willy wagtail.

So the eagle hawk said to the little willy wagtail, "May I fetch my brothers and sisters who are starving into this beautiful country of yours?"

"Oh, yes," said the wagtail, "but you must wrestle with me first."



Of course, the big strong eagle hawk thought this was easy, but the cunning little wagtail had placed some sharp fish bones like spikes in the ground, where they were to wrestle. When they began to wrestle the wagtail was very quick and nimble and hopped and jumped about as he does to-day.

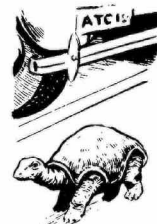
Suddenly, the wagtail tripped the eagle hawk, who fell among the sharp spikes, and was pinned to the ground. Then he was at the mercy of the wagtail, who at once pecked him to death.

All the other birds and animals over the range waited and waited for the eagle hawk to return.

At last, they became tired of waiting, and they sent out the kye hawk. But the kye hawk met the same fate as the eagle hawk. Then the magpie, the wombat, the dingo, and others. But the wicked little wagtail tripped them all on to his spikes and then pecked them to death. All the birds and animals became very afraid, at no one returning. Things became serious, food had to be found somewhere.

At last, the old tortoise volunteered to go. Away he went, crawling painfully slowly over the ranges, and into the land of the wagtail. As usual, the wagtail invited the tortoise to wrestle.

"Oh, yes," replied the tortoise, "but just wait awhile."



The tortoise went into the bush, and cut a "coolamon" (a long wooden dish for carrying water), out of a gum tree, and a thick string of bark. The tortoise placed the "coolamon" on his back, and he tied the thick sheet of bark on as a breastplate. Then away he went to wrestle the wagtail.

The lively, quick wagtail soon hopped around and tripped up the slow old tortoise, but when the tortoise fell on the spikes the "coolamon" protected him. Again and again the wagtail threw the tortoise, but either the "coolamon" on his back, or his bark breastplate always saved the tortoise. After a while the wagtail became exhausted, and the tortoise fell upon the wagtail, and killed him.

Of course, the tortoise let all the birds and animals know as quickly as he could where there was plenty of food.

Now, what the eagle hawk, and the dingo, and the kangaroo failed to accomplish with brute force, the slow moving old tortoise achieved with wisdom, and as a memorial of a great victory in overcoming a cunning and wicked enemy, he is to be seen through the long years of his lifetime seeking no applause, but humbly bearing his shield.