



# Androcles and the Lion

*Egypt, Greece and Rome*

In ancient times there was a slave called Androcles who, one night, longing for the free man's life he had once enjoyed, decided to escape from his master's house and ran away into the forest.

Androcles thought that perhaps he could reach the harbour and stow away on one of the ships that sailed from there. He was a strong man, for his years as a slave had hardened him. But he was also clever and skilful, so he had no trouble in finding his way along the paths that might lead him to his goal. So, in order not to be discovered, he took a path that he knew might lead him through the mountains to the harbour, avoiding the busier road of the glens.

As he was climbing, he thought he heard a wailing sound. And, as the sound came from the path he had to cross, he decided to creep closer, lest he be surprised by his chasers.

As he turned around a bend he saw the entrance to a cave and, next to it, a lion lying on the ground. There was blood on one of his forelegs and, straining his eyes, he discovered that the lion had a splinter in his claw.

Androcles thought at first of moving on. Seeing the situation the lion was in, he had no fear that he might be attacked by the lion. However, the animal's cries made his heart ache, so he decided to approach, with extreme caution, to see if the animal would let himself be helped. When the lion saw him, he bared his teeth. But, seeing Androcles approaching

on all fours, he sensed that he had no bad intentions, so he let him approach and touch him.

Finally, Androcles removed the splinter and then, using his knowledge of healing herbs, applied a poultice to the wound, which he held in place with a bundle of dried herbs.

Seeing that the lion had accepted his presence meekly, and also seeing that in such a place it would be difficult to find him, he decided to go into the cave to rest for a few hours. With the lion at the gate, it would be difficult for his hunters to approach him. Finally, with the exhaustion and anguish of the whole day, Androcles fell fast asleep.

When he woke up, he was surprised to see that the lion had left a piece of meat next to his head, as if it were a grateful gift. He was touched by the lion's gesture and decided to stay with his extraordinary companion for another day.

On the following day, Androcles set off again, but with such bad luck that he was discovered by his pursuers when he had stopped to drink water at a river. He was dragged off, handcuffed and pushed, and brought before the emperor, who was already aware of the slave's escapade because his master was a friend of his. And with the smile of one who knows no mercy, the emperor condemned Androcles to be devoured by wild beasts in the arena a week later.

On the appointed day everyone in the city came to witness the tragic show. Word had spread and everyone wanted to see Androcles, the slave who had outwitted the guard of one of the most respected houses in the city, struggling futilely with a wild beast.

When the bugles blew, Androcles was forced to jump into the arena. In spite of his anxiety, he walked slowly and steadily to the centre of the palestra under the shouting of the crowd in the terraces. In his left hand he held tightly the small dagger he had been given as his only defence. When he finally reached the centre of the ring, he stood gravely, yet proudly, awaiting his fate.

It didn't take the emperor long to give the order to bring in the first animal. It was a lion. The lion, after moving somewhat bewildered left and right around the arena in search of an escape route, spotted Androcles

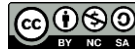
and headed towards him. The crowd, eager for intense emotions and anticipating the outcome, spurred the animal on with shouts.

The lion approached Androcles slowly, and finally, barely three paces from him, lowered his neck meekly and gently touched him with his head, like a cub looking for a caress. It was then that Androcles recognised the lion whose paw he had healed days before and, kneeling before him, threw the dagger aside and wrapped his arms around his neck.

The emperor was so shocked that he sent for Androcles to explain what had happened and, after hearing the amazing story he told him, he decided to pardon the slave, setting him free and ordering the lion to be released in the same place where they had found him. □

Adapted by Marta Ventura (2024).

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## Comments

Possibly a folk tale in its origin, it is noteworthy that it is one of the few stories attributed to Aesop in which a character's own name appears. Perhaps, as some claim, this story is not even Aesop's original, for 'Phaedrus certainly did not include it among the fables in his Latin translation of Aesop' (Marco, 2013).

In fact, Marco claims that this story was first written down in the *Noctes Atticae* (V, 14) by Aulus Gellius (2<sup>nd</sup> century e.c.), who puts this story in the mouth of a certain Apion, who claimed to have personally witnessed the event, although Marco states that this story may have originally been 'a traditional tale that was already circulating in ancient Egypt' (ibid.).

Lastly, Marco also finds this ancient tale of Androcles and the lion in *De Natura Animalium* (7, 48), by Claudius Elian (3<sup>rd</sup> century e.c.).

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## Sources

Aesop (1912). Androcles. En *The Fables of Aesop*, edited by Joseph Jacobs (pp. 60-61). London: Macmillan & Co. Available on <https://ia601301.us.archive.org/3/items/cu31924053968099/cu31924053968099.pdf>

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## Associated text of the Earth Charter

Principle 1a: Recognize that all beings are interdependent and every form of life has value regardless of its worth to human beings.

## Other passages that this story illustrates

Preamble: To move forward we must recognize that in the midst of a magnificent diversity of cultures and life forms we are one human family and one Earth community with a common destiny.

Principle 1b: Affirm faith in the inherent dignity of all human beings and in the intellectual, artistic, ethical, and spiritual potential of humanity.

Principle 2: Care for the community of life with understanding, compassion, and love.

Principle 15: Treat all living beings with respect and consideration.