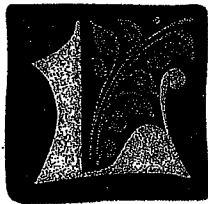


ARGENTINA



This tale from Patagonia, a region in the southernmost part of South America, describes how a peaceful group of people are forced to make a difficult decision in order to save their way of life.


The Gentle People



ong, long ago this land was home to a community of gentle people who were as happy and content as they could be. They lived in complete harmony with one another and with all the natural world.

Theirs was a beautiful land, crisscrossed by clear streams and brightened by sparkling jewels that lay upon the ground. The countryside was blanketed with sweet-smelling flowers, because when one was picked, two more grew in its place. The people had a special magic to turn flowers into living birds, and so the air was filled with happy bird-song from morning till night. And all the wild animals, even the shyest creatures, were fearless and tame.

The gentle folk were ruled by a kindly prince who was as wise as he was good. He gathered his people together on the eve of each full moon to celebrate the community's good fortune. The animals and birds would join them, sharing in the music and laughter. Once a year a special celebration was held, and on this day each person was granted



one wish. Life was so good that the gentle people often could think of nothing to wish for.

There was one thing the prince forbade the people to do, and that was to journey so far north that they no longer could see the stars of the Southern Cross.




The prince told his people that a forest stood just beyond that point, a forest so dense that daylight never penetrated it.

As none of the people had any wish to leave their own country, nor any desire to visit this forbidden place, they were not troubled by their prince's warning.

One day a member of the community chanced upon a bird unlike any he had seen before. Its shimmering feathers were colored like the rainbow, and its song was so haunting that it stopped the man in his tracks. The man drew closer to the bird to see it more clearly, but when he was near enough to touch it, the bird flitted away to another branch.

The man was puzzled because no bird in this happy land had ever done that before. He tried to approach it again, speaking soothingly and extending his hand. The bird flew a short distance away, to another tree.

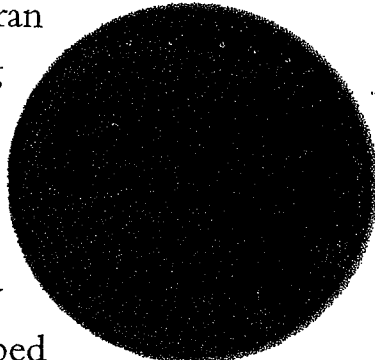
The man was completely enchanted by this mysterious bird, and followed after it. The bird fluttered from one tree to another, and before he knew what had happened, the man found that he'd been led right into the forbidden forest. It was so dark that he could not even see his hand in front of his face.



The man blindly stumbled on until he found himself in a small clearing where a group of fierce-looking men were gathered around a fire. They were clothed in ragged skins, and their teeth were yellow and pointed. Some were eating the raw flesh of animals; others were arguing and roughly shoving one another.


When the fierce ones spied the man from the gentle people, they quickly surrounded him, tearing at his clothing. Some grabbed the feathers from his hair; others snatched the gems he wore on his fingers and around his neck and wrists. The man was even more astounded when the brutes began fighting among themselves for the things they had taken from him. Horrified, he turned and ran from the forest, not stopping until he was back among his own people.

The man went straight to the prince to tell him what he had seen in the dark woods. The prince listened to his tale in silence. "You have met the greedy and selfish people," he said with a grave voice. "I hoped this day would never come. I must call a gathering of our people to let them know what has happened and to decide what we must do."



And so a meeting was called. All the people, animals, and birds gathered as they always did at celebration time, filling the air with laughter and song. But when they saw the sad face of their prince, they fell silent and waited for him to speak.

"I have terrible news for you all," the prince began. "The greedy and selfish people who live in the dark forest have discovered us." Then the prince asked the man to tell the others what he had seen in that cheerless place. For the first time, the gentle people could not smile but looked at each other sadly.



“The selfish ones will not be satisfied until they have discovered where we live,” the prince told his people. “We must prepare ourselves for their arrival.”

“How will we do that?” asked a woman in the crowd.


“If you like, I can arm you all with weapons, and we can fight the greedy ones when they come,” the prince said. He paused for a moment, then continued. “But you’ll be taking a great risk if you do that. Having learned to fight and to kill and bring death upon others, you will turn upon each other and bring death to your own people. The animals will learn to fear you and will run from you when they hear you approaching. The flowers will no longer blossom as they do now, and the sparkling gems will be hidden from sight deep within the earth.”

The people all looked at one another, shaking their heads.

“We do not want that to happen,” they said. “Is there no way we can change our shape so the greedy ones do not recognize us?”

The prince thought for a moment. “Follow me!” he urged his people, turning and running. The gentle people hurried after him, and not a moment too soon, because the greedy and selfish people had just crested a nearby hill, trampling flowers and kicking up stones as they came.

The people ran, and when they reached the river, the prince told them they would be changed once they had crossed to the other side. The people splashed into the shallows, and, one by one, as they climbed



up on the far shore, they turned into guanacos (hwa-NAH-cohs), relatives of the gentle llama. The prince was the last to ford the river, and he, too, was transformed into a guanaco, slightly larger than the rest.

To this day, when you see these stately creatures gathered in their herds, you can always tell which one is the prince. He is the tallest one, standing guard away from the others. He is keeping a lookout for the greedy and selfish people.

It is said that whenever a guanaco dies, a gold-tipped blue flower springs up in its place. When the very last guanaco left on earth finally dies, the greedy and selfish people will also be extinct. When that happens, the blue flowers will all bend their heads to the earth together, and the gentle people will return to their land, to live in harmony with the natural world, as they once did, long ago.

