

To Fly To Siberia

By Elsie Locke

© *Elsie Locke Memorial Trust*

Twice every day, as it crept over the mudflats, the tide whispered to Kato, the godwit. Its tiny waves made a soft chuckling sound.

'Hurry, hurry,' said the tide. 'Look, I am all around you. Soon your food will be covered: the worms, the sea-centipedes and the small crabs. Soon your mudbank will be deep down under the water. Your long legs will never reach so far. Fly now, Kato, fly to the shore where your friends have arrived already.'

Though Kato loved flying, she loved eating more. She always stayed as long as she could on the mudflats, burrowing for the little creatures that she ate. She pushed her long beak into the mud and it came up again with nothing.

The seagulls rode on the ripples and laughed.

'What a silly long beak,' they scoffed. 'What is the use of it? Why don't you pick up scraps along the beach, as we do?'

A shag popped up from under the water where he had been swimming. He gobbled a tiny sprat.

'Live fish, live fish!' he said happily.

The seagulls started their teasing again. 'Why don't you catch fish, Kato? Isn't that long beak any use for catching fish?'

Kato took no notice. Once more she thrust her beak into the last bare patch of mudbank, and this time came up with a wriggling sea-centipede. Kato made sure that the seagulls could see it, and then swallowed it down. Delicious! Who would want to pick up stale crusts or rotting meat, or gobble live fish with their tough bones and fins, when such juicy food could be pulled from its hiding place?

'Hurry, hurry,' whispered the tide. 'I am all over your mudbank.'

Kato raised her strong wings and flew. Between the mudflats and the noisy great ocean was a sandspit, dry and warm, where the tide could not reach. This was where the birds rested. Hundreds of godwits were there already with their beaks pointed into the wind. Beside them, in another flock, were the oystercatchers, neat in their black and white outfits. Although the godwits and the oystercatchers were relatives, they didn't have much to do with each other.

Kato found a small space and was ready to enjoy a rest and a doze. But today there was no rest within the flock. They had been excited yesterday, and the day before. Today it

was worse than ever. Every few moments a small group flew up into the air in the strangest way. Sometimes they made a V-shaped formation, like aeroplanes; or they circled round and round like corkscrews; or they rose straight upwards, stretched their wings and dropped sideways. Pairs of birds, a male and a female, would break away and have a game in the air, twisting, turning, and zigzagging about. They called to one another with shrill voices.

'What is the matter with you?' said Kato to Timu, who was stamping his feet beside her. 'Why don't you rest when you have the chance?'

'Rest? Rest?' said Timu rudely. 'It's easy to see why YOU think about resting. Look at your breast feathers - pale grey! You're only a youngster, not properly grown up. See, I have grown rich red feathers to show that I'm ready for the long flight.'

'I love flying,' said Kato. 'May I come too? Where are you going?'

'If you were old enough,' said Timu, 'you would feel the urge to practise with your wings, as I do. You wouldn't be as well coloured as I am because you are a female, but you'd have some red feathers on your breast. I must look for an older godwit to be my mate. We are going north to the faraway country of Siberia, where we make our nests. We hatch our chicks there, and enjoy the sun of summertime while it is winter on the mudflats and the resting grounds here in New Zealand.'

'You are talking nonsense,' said Kato. 'I don't remember such a country.'

'All the same, you must have been hatched there too, before you flew south with the flock on the wings of the wind.'

'Then how do you remember, when I cannot?' asked Kato.

'The wind speaks to me. The wind says "Make ready, Timu, it is nearly time to go. Practise your flying, for it will take many days, and sometimes you can rest on an island, but not often." Some day, Kato, the wind will also speak to you,' said Timu.

But she could hear only the voice of the tide - 'Come now! Come to feed, Kato, I am going out again!'

Next day the flock was more excited than ever. Suddenly, with a loud cry, an old strong godwit rose into the air, and in a few moments the other birds were following behind him. They stretched out in the sky in a long spiral like a loose skein of wool. Timu joined the skein.

'The wind calls us to Siberia, to the faraway land!' he cried to Kato. 'We'll be back, we'll be back when the summertime comes!'

Kato looked around her. There were other godwits remaining, twenty of them, dressed as usual in their brown and grey feathers. There was one with red on her breast, but she was very old, and not very strong. They drew close together, for they felt lonely now and rather afraid, and small in numbers beside the crowd of oystercatchers. Indeed, there was nobody in between Kato and these black-and-white relations. She plucked up courage to speak.

'Are you going on a long flight too?' she asked. 'Will you make your nests in a faraway land?'

'No, no, no,' said the oystercatchers. 'We make our nests in the riverbeds or near the inland lakes. A pair here, and a pair there, and a pair somewhere else. It's a secret, it's a secret,' they added.

Kato fell silent. At least there were twenty other godwits to keep her company through the winter. They must remain together and try not to feel the loneliness.

The autumn days were already shorter and colder. Now a storm came from the south to pelt the godwits with rain and hail. The little flock had to find a hollow that was sheltered by sand dunes. But when the storm died away and the sun shone warm after a frost, they came back to the sandspit.

A white cloud came drifting gently on the east wind over the ocean. Kato, with her beak pointing into the wind, saw a tiny speck against the whiteness of the cloud. She did not know why she cried out - but as soon as she heard her own cry, she knew it was a call of alarm.

That speck meant danger, and the godwits must not wait until the danger came upon them. They must go out to drive it away.

Kato cried out again, and her companions answered. Like the old strong godwit who had taken the lead on the long flight, she must take the lead today. The black speck was low over the ocean. The rest of the little flock were behind her now, flying low too, above the breakers and the blue swell of the sea.

Kato could see the speck of danger quite clearly now. She had never before seen the Arctic skua gull which is dark in its colour and dark in its ways. But something within her warned that if this evil bird should reach their sandspit, one of the godwits would be taken for his meal. They could not fight him when they were at rest.

The skua was close enough now for her to see the ugly beak stretched forward and the dark wings beating. It was enough to make the heart of any smaller bird leap with terror. But Kato had strength because of the wall of godwits behind her, and she did not falter. Soon the skua would know that strength, too.

And so it happened at last. The skua wheeled away sharply and began to climb in the sky. Perhaps he thought that the godwits would never follow to such a height. But what was the sense of leaving him up there? He would only take his time and swoop down on the sandspit when the godwits had settled again.

Kato went upwards after him. The godwits were doing the chasing, not the skua.

He went as high as he dared and then there was only one place left for him to go - away out to sea again. The skua was beaten. Soon his dark body was a speck in the distance once more, growing smaller and smaller.

Kato looked down. The ocean was far below, but there was a splendid feeling in being up so high, riding the wind. And now the wind spoke to her, as Timu had said the wind spoke to him.

'Next year. Next year,' whispered the wind, 'you will go to the faraway land of Siberia. You will make a nest. You will lay your own eggs. You will hatch out your chicks and bring them to ride on my wings to your own dear mudflats, to your own warm sandspit.'

The oystercatchers were watching as the godwits came back.

'Did you win?' asked one of them eagerly. 'Did you drive the enemy right away?'

'Yes,' said Kato. She turned to her twenty friends in the godwit flock.

'Did you hear the wind talking? Did you? We need not feel lonely any more. The winter will pass and the summer time will come, and our companions will return. When summer changes to autumn we will be beautiful like them in our new feathers. The wind has promised. Next year WE will ride on his wings to the faraway land of Siberia.'

'We heard, we heard,' said the other young godwits. But the one who had stayed because she was very old, and not strong, said nothing. She was content to remember how she too had flown on the long flight, in her time.

Now there was another voice, the voice of the tide.

'Come now! Come to feed!' whispered the tide. 'I am going out. Fat little crabs, juicy worms, sea-centipedes! Even in the winter there is food left for you!'

Kato flew happily to her mudbank.