

Children's Tales
for
Grown-Ups

NINE FABLES

RETOLD BY HERBERT MCKAY

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IX.

The Unwritten Treaty.

“BE careful,” said the worm to the slug, “there is one of those nasty birds over there. What ugly things they are!”

“Not half so ugly as men. Ugh!” said the slug.

“Men are big, not ugly. They don’t eat worms.”

“But they cut them in two with spades.”

“Only by accident. There is nothing so ugly as a bloated over-grown bird eating a slender delicate worm.”

“Except,” said the slug, “a monstrous man crushing a tender slug under his clumsy hoofs. Birds I can tolerate. They are not so big as men.”

“But they hop quicker and eat more for their size,” said the worm.

“Not slugs, they don’t eat slugs. We have a treaty with the birds, you know.”

“Was it signed?” asked the worm.

“There was no need. You see it is a matter of convenience. We don’t get eaten, and the birds don’t get their beaks slimy.”

“Convenience is a great thing,” said the worm, “but it isn’t everything. Well, good-bye; I am going in till the bird goes.”

“And I am staying out till the man comes.”

“Slugs are nasty slimy things,” said the thrush, “but in these hard times one must eat what one can get,” and he swallowed the slug with a wry face.

VIII.
Sour Grapes.

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He put his shoulder to the barrel and pushed and panted and panted and pushed till he got it nearly to the top. But it broke away at the last moment and rolled down the hill.

He rolled it up again and again perseveringly. He tried as often as Sisyphus. He tried indeed just once more, because at last he succeeded and the barrel was placed on end under the vine.

Joyfully he climbed on the barrel and bit at the fruit.
Then he jumped down with a bark of disgust.
The grapes *were* sour.

Cause and Effect.

It hadn't rained for forty days and forty nights.

"The reason it doesn't rain," said the guinea-fowl, "is that the barometer is very high."

But no one listened to her.

"The reason is," said the duck with the black wings, "that the pond is nearly empty. When the pond is empty it doesn't rain."

"It's the hen-house," said the black hen. "Whenever the roof drips there is rain."

"It is certainly the hen-house," said all the hens.

"It comes from the trees," said the turkey. "The leaves drip and then there is rain, and the more they drip the heavier it rains."

"It is my kennel," chuckled Bruno, the wise old dog. "The more it leaks the more it rains."

At that very moment it began to rain in torrents.

"The pond is full," quacked the ducks. "Look at the pond."

"Oh, do look at the hen-house roof—dripping!" shrieked the hens.

"The leaves—look at the leaves," gurgled the turkeys.

"And my kennel leaks. I can feel it on my back," chuckled Bruno.

"The barometer has gone down," said the guinea-fowl.

But no one took any notice of her—quite properly.

II.

Belling the Cat.

THE only question is," said the old mouse, "who is to bell the cat?"

"An absurd question," said the strategist.

"It has finished the story for hundreds of years," said the old mouse crossly.

The strategist turned his back on the old mouse. "What is needed," he said, "is a plan. We must make the cat appear ridiculous, and the people of the house will see it is no use as a mouser. Then they will turn it into a pet cat and bell it themselves."

"Shall we send a deputation?" growled the old mouse.

"We must go out and hunt for food in the daytime," said the strategist.

"We shall all be killed," cried the mice, shivering with terror.

"No more than are killed now," said the strategist. "Less, in fact, because cats do not see so well in the daytime."

And it turned out as the strategist predicted. Mice ran about boldly everywhere, and though the cat caught some of them the people of the house were dissatisfied. "We might as well drown that cat at once and get a real mouser," said the master.

"Oh, don't drown poor pussy," said the little girl. "Do let me keep her."

Well, mind you put a bell round her neck, then," laughed the master of the house, "so that she may know that she's not a real mouser."

That night there was joy unheard of among the mice. They scampered about happily, and ran away chuckling when pussy came tinkling along. The strategist was crowned king.

Next day the real mouser arrived. His first victim was the strategist.

VII.

The Judgment of the Ass.

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VI.

The Cat and the King.

THE cat looked at the King.

She was the boldest cat in the world, but her heart stood still as she vindicated the immemorial right of her race.

What would the King say? What would the King do?

Would he call her up to sit on his royal shoulder? If so, she would purr her loudest to drown the beating of her heart, and she would rub her head against the royal ear. How splendid to be a royal cat!

Or perhaps he would appoint her Mouser to the King's Household, and she would keep the King's peace with tooth and claw.

Or perhaps she would become playmate to the Royal children, and live on cream and sleep all day on a silken cushion.

Or—and this is where her heart ceased to beat—perhaps she would pay the price of her temerity and the Hereditary Executioner would smite on her head.

She had put it boldly to the test, to sink or swim. What would the King do?

The King rose slowly from his throne and passed out to his own apartments, whilst all the Court bowed.

The King had not noticed the cat.

III.

Its Own Reward.

“WHAT fun!” cried the wasp.

“Where?” asked the bee looking up with a subdued smile.

“I mean I can't help laughing,” said the wasp.

“A disgusting habit,” said the bee.

“Look at those people nearly out of their wits. Here goes for old Bless-my-Soul again!” He flew off and buzzed round the old gentleman's neck and then flew back to the bee, laughing louder than ever at his purple rage.

“I don't know what you think of your conduct,” said the bee severely, “but I think it is insects like you who give us all a bad name.”

“Be hanged to your bad name,” scoffed the wasp. “A short life and a merry one, say I.”

“A busy life and a useful one, rather,” said the bee. “I am proud to be the friend of man.”

“Good heavens!” shouted the wasp. “Here comes old Bless-my-Soul bent on murder. Look out! I'm going for his neck.”

Old Bless-my-Soul slashed wildly with his table-napkin and slew the bee. He went back triumphantly with his spoil.

“A bee!” shouted everybody. “I thought it was a wasp. I didn't know bees were like that.”

“All insects are vicious,” said old Bless-my-Soul.

The Hunger-Strike.

DID you hear that?" cried the white hen.

"What?" asked all the other hens.

"He called us—cluck-cluck-cluck," said the white hen.

"Why shouldn't he?" asked all the other hens.

"I didn't mean he called us 'cluck-cluck-cluck,'" said the white hen hastily. "I was only choking with rage when I said that. He called us—cluck-cluck-cluck——"

"She's going to lay an egg," said the black hen with interest.

"Poultry!" screamed the white hen suddenly.

"Poultry?" gasped the other hens.

"Poultry!—he called us 'poultry'—oh, cluck-cluck-cluck——"

"Something must be done," said the yellow hen.

"We must have a hunger-strike till he apologises," said the thin hen importantly.

"But we shall be hungry," cried all the hens.

"That is the essence of a hunger-strike," said the thin hen.

Just then the keeper arrived with food for the fowls.

"We mustn't run to him," they said to one another. "It's a hunger-strike, you know!" cried the hens.

"I have an idea," shouted the fat hen as she ran; "the more we eat the longer we shall hold out."

"So we shall," cried all the hens as they scurried after the fat one.

V.

The Rivals.

THE frog challenged the nightingale to a singing contest. "Of course for gurgling and untotored warbling I know he has it," he said to his friend the toad, "but in technique I shall beat him hollow."

So the jury was chosen. The nightingale proposed the lark, the thrush, the blackbird and the bullfinch as experts in singing, and the frog proposed the starling, the linnet, the chaffinch and the reed-warbler.

The nightingale was overcome with emotion at the generosity of the frog, and insisted on adding the crow and the toad as experts in croaking.

The nightingale sang first, whilst his trade rivals sat and chattered. They chattered so loud that the nightingale stopped singing in a huff.

"You are hardly at your best, you know, old thing," said the linnet sympathetically.

"You will find these throat lozenges excellent for hoarseness," said the blackbird.

"His upper register is weak—abominably weak," said the starling to the lark.

"Perhaps if his voice were trained," suggested the lark.

Meanwhile the frog croaked away lustily, but no one listened to him. "The jury must vote by ballot," he said as he finished the last croak.

"Of course we must," twittered the jury.

The frog won by eight votes to two.

"I voted for the nightingale," whispered the crow to the toad.

"So did I," whispered the toad.