

The Milkmaid and Her Pot of Milk

A milkmaid had been out to milk the cows and was returning from the field with the shining milk pail balanced nicely on her head. As she walked along, her pretty head was busy with plans for the days to come. "This good, rich milk," she mused, "will give me plenty of cream to churn. The butter I make I will take to market, and with the money I get for it, I will buy a lot of eggs for hatching. How nice it will be when they are all hatched and the yard is full of fine young chicks. Then when May Day comes, I will sell them, and with the money, I'll buy a lovely new dress to wear to the fair. All the young men will look at me. They will come and try to propose to me—but I shall very quickly send them about their business!" As she thought of how she would settle that matter, she tossed her head scornfully and down fell the pail of milk to the ground. All the milk flowed out, and with it vanished butter and eggs and chicks and a new dress and all the milkmaid's pride.

Moral: It's unwise to count your chickens before they are hatched.

The Donkey and the Lapdog

There was once a donkey whose master also owned a lapdog. This dog was a favorite and received many a pat and kind word from his master as well as choice bits from his plate. Every day, the dog would run to meet the master, frisking playfully about and leaping up to lick his hands and face. All this the donkey saw with much discontent. Though he was well fed, he had much work to do; besides, the master hardly ever took any notice of him. Now the jealous donkey got it into his silly head that all he had to do to win his master's favor was to act like the dog. So one day, he left his stable and clattered eagerly into the house. Finding his master seated at the dinner table, he kicked up his heels and, with a loud bray, pranced giddily around the table, upsetting it as he did so. Then he planted his forefeet on his master's knees and rolled out his tongue to lick the master's face, as he had seen the dog do. But his weight upset the chair, and donkey and man rolled over together in the pile of broken dishes from the table. The master was much alarmed at the strange behavior of the donkey and, calling for help, soon attracted the attention of the servants. When they saw the danger the master was in from the clumsy beast, they set upon the donkey and drove him back to the stable with kicks and blows. There they left him to mourn the foolishness that had brought him nothing but a sound beating.

Moral: It is better to be true to your own character and nature than to imitate others.

The Stag and His Reflection

A stag, drinking from a crystal spring, saw himself mirrored in the clear water. He greatly admired the graceful arch of his antlers, but he was very much ashamed of his spindling legs. “How can it be,” he sighed, “that I should be cursed with such legs when I have so magnificent a crown?” At that moment, he scented a panther and in an instant was bounding away through the forest. But as he ran, his wide-spreading antlers caught in the branches of the trees, and soon the panther overtook him. Then the stag perceived that the legs of which he was so ashamed would have saved him had it not been for the useless ornaments on his head.

Moral: What is most truly valuable is often despised.

The Owl and the Grasshopper

An owl who was sitting in a hollow tree, dozing away a summer’s afternoon, was very much disturbed by a rogue of a grasshopper singing in the grass beneath. So far from keeping quiet or moving away at the request of the owl, the grasshopper sang all the more and called her an old blinker who only came out at night when all honest people had gone to bed. The owl waited in silence for a time and then artfully addressed the grasshopper as follows: “Well, my dear, if one cannot be allowed to sleep, it is something to be kept awake by such a pleasant voice. And now that I think of it, I have a bottle of delicious nectar. If you will come up, you shall have a drop.” The silly grasshopper came hopping up to the owl, who at once caught and killed him and finished her nap in comfort.

Moral: Flattery is not proof of admiration.

The Donkey and His Masters

A certain donkey that belonged to a gardener was weary of carrying heavy burdens and prayed to Jupiter to give him a new master. Jupiter granted his prayer and gave him for a master a tilemaker, who made him carry heavier burdens than before. Again he came to Jupiter and besought him to grant him a milder master or, at any rate, a different one. The god, laughing at his folly, thereupon gave him over to a tanner. The donkey was worked harder than ever and soon upbraided himself for his stupidity. “Now,” he said, “I have a master who not only beats me while I live but who will not spare my hide even when I am dead.”

Moral: It’s better to be content with what you have.