

Aesop,

“He that always gives way to others will
end in having no principles of his own.”

Aesop, Fables

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Typeface

Helvetica

Credits

Feature: "Aesop." Encyclopedia of World Biography. 2005. Encyclopedia .com. (April 19, 2011). <http://www.encyclopedia.com/doc/1G2-3435000013.html> Fables: <http://classsiclit.about.com/library/bl-etexts/gtownsend/bl-gtownsend-aesopfab-preface.htm> (April 19, 2011)

Aesop's Life...	p04
Freed from Slavery...	p05
Tales Reflected Human Folly...	p06
Thrown from Cliff...	p07
Censored for Children's Sake...	p08
The Fables...	p09
The Mule...	p10
Fox and Lion...	p11
Dancing Monkeys...	p12
Fisherman Piping...	p13
The Crow and the Pitcher...	p14
Wolf and Goat...	p15

Contents

Aesop's



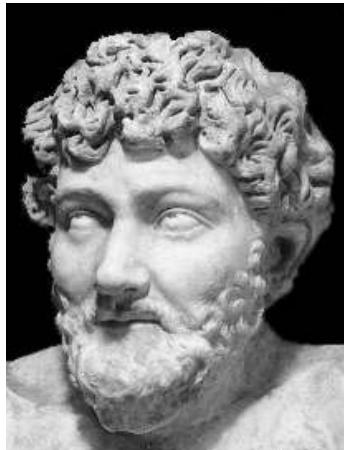
Aesop

Little is known about the ancient Greek writer Aesop (c. 620 B.C.E.–c. 560 B.C.E.), whose stories of clever animals and foolish humans are considered Western civilization's first morality tales. He was said to have been a slave who earned his freedom through his storytelling and went on to serve as advisor to a king. Both his name and the animist tone of his tales have led some scholars to believe he may have been Ethiopian in origin.

Freed from Slavery

Aesop never wrote down any of the tales himself; he merely recited them orally. The first recorded mention of his life came about a hundred years after he died, in a work by the eminent Greek historian Herodotus, who noted that he was a slave of one Iadmon of Samos and died at Delphi. In the first century C.E., Plutarch, another Greek historian, also speculated on Aesop's origins and life. Plutarch placed Aesop at the court of immensely weighty Croesus, the king of Lydia (now northwestern Turkey). A source from Egypt dating back to this same century also described Aesop as a slave from the Aegean island of Samos, near the Turkish mainland. The source claims that after he was released from bondage he went to Babylon. Aesop has also been referred to as Phrygian, pointing to origins in central Turkey settled by Balkan tribes around 1200 B.C.E. They spoke an Indo-European language and their communities were regularly raided for slaves to serve in Greece.

The name "Aesop" is a variant of "Aethiop," which is a reference to Ethiopia in ancient Greek. This and the trickster nature of some of his stories, where humans are regularly outwitted by a cleverer animal figure, has led some scholars to speculate that Aesop may have been from Africa. The link was discussed in a *Spectator* essay from 1932 by the critic J. H. Diberg. There are two tales from Aesop in which a man tries to come to the aid of a serpent, and Diberg noted that such acts mirror "the habitual kindness shown to snakes by many tribes: for snakes are the repositories of the souls of ancestors and they are cherished therefore and invited to live in the houses of men by daily gifts of milk."



The Fame of Aesop Lived On

About two hundred years after his death his statue, carved by Lysippus, was erected in Athens, and it was placed in front of the statues of the Seven Sages.

Tales Reflected Human Folly

Anthropomorphism, or animals with human capabilities, is the common thread throughout Aesop's fables. The most famous among them are "The Tortoise and the Hare," in which the plodding turtle and the energetic rabbit hold a race. The arrogant hare is so confident that he rests and falls asleep halfway; the wiser tortoise plods past and wins. "Slow but steady wins the race," the fable concludes. These and other Aesop fables, wrote Peter Jones in the *Spectator* in 2002, often pit "the rich and powerful against the poor and weak. They stress either the folly of taking on a stronger power, or the cunning which the weaker must deploy if he is to stand any chance of success; and they often warn that nature never changes."

Several phrases are traced back to the fables of Aesop, such as "don't count your chickens before they are hatched," which concludes the tale of the greedy "Milkmaid and Her Pail." In "The Fox and the Grapes," a fox ambles through the forest and spies a bunch of grapes. Thirsty, he tries in vain to reach them but finally gives up and walks off muttering that they were likely sour anyway. From this comes the term "sour grapes."



Did Aesop invent the Fable?

No. In Greece, during the times of the Tyrants, when free speech was dangerous, the fable began to be used for political purposes. Aesop developed the ancient beast tale which flourished in India long before. He found that this style of primitive wisdom furnished an effective garb with which to clothe the naked truth. Tyranny and rebellion alike were stayed by this off-hand, ready-made weapon of the man of action who united presence of mind with presence of wit. Even when free speech was established among the Hellenic democracies the custom of using fables in serious public orations as

Thrown from Cliff

According to myth, Aesop won such fame throughout Greece for his tales that he became the target of resentment and perhaps even a political witch-hunt. He was accused of stealing a gold cup from Delphi temple to the god Apollo and was supposedly tossed from the cliffs at Delphi as punishment for the theft. His tales told of human folly and the abuses of power, and he lived during a period of tyrannical rule in Greece. His defense, it is said, was the fable "The Eagle and the Beetle," in which a hare, being preyed upon by an eagle, asks the beetle for protection. The small insect agrees, but the eagle fails to see it and strikes the hare, killing it. From then on, the beetle watched the eagle's nest and shook it when there were eggs inside, which then fell to the ground. Worried about her inability to reproduce, the eagle asks a god for help, and the deity offers to store the eggs in its lap. The beetle learns of this and puts a ball of dirt there among the eggs, and the god—in some accounts Zeus, in others Jupiter—rises, startled, and the eggs fall out. For this reason, it is said, eagles never lay their eggs during the season when beetles flourish. "No matter how powerful one's position may be, there is nothing that can protect the oppressor from the vengeance of the oppressed" is the moral associated with this particular fable.

The first written compilation of Aesop's tales came from Demetrius of Phaleron around 320 B.C.E., *Assemblies of Aesopic Tales*, but it disappeared in the ninth century. The first extant version of the fables is thought to be from Phaedrus, a former slave from Macedonia who translated the tales into Latin in the first century C.E. in what became known as the *Romulus collection*. Valerius Babrius, a Greek living in Rome, translated these and other fables of the day into Greek in the first half of the 200s C.E. Forty-two of those, in turn, were translated into Latin by Avianus around 400 C.E. There is also a link between Aesop and Islam. The prophet Mohamed mentioned "Lokman," said to be the wisest man in the east, in the 31st sura of the Koran. In Arab folklore, Lokman supposedly lived around 1100 B.C.E. and was an Ethiopian. His father, it was said, was descended from the biblical figure Job. Some of his tales may have been adapted by Aesop some five centuries after his death.



Aesop Plate

Almost certainly Aesop (who was notoriously deformed; especially the head). The animal there is a dog, and it's an image associated with the story of the dog and the black smiths. They seem to be sitting on anvils, with Aesop holding a hammer.

Censored for Children's Sake

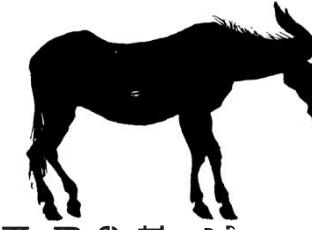
The Latin translation of Aesop's fables helped them survive the ages. Their enduring appeal, wrote English poet and critic G. K. Chesterton in an introduction to a 1912 Doubleday edition, might lead back to a primeval allure. "These ancient and universal tales are all of animals; as the latest discoveries in the oldest prehistoric caverns are all of animals," Chesterton wrote. "Man, in his simpler states, always felt that he himself was something too mysterious to be drawn. But the legend he carved under these cruder symbols was everywhere the same; and whether fables began with Aesop or began with Adam ... the upshot is everywhere essentially the same: that superiority is always insolent, because it is always accidental; that pride goes before a fall; and that there is such a thing as being too clever by half."

Aesop's tales were known in medieval Europe, and a German edition brought back to England by William Caxton, along with the first printing press in England, was translated by Caxton and became one of the first books ever printed in the English language. A 1692 version from English pamphleteer Roger L'Estrange A Hundred Fables of Aesop was popular for a number of years, and the Aesop fables began to be promoted as ideal for teaching children to read. A discovery by contemporary scholar Robert Temple and his wife Olivia, a translator, resulted in a 1998 Penguin edition that contained some ribald original tales they found in a 1927 Greek-language text. As David Lister explained in an article for London's Independent newspaper, "many of the never before translated fables were coarse and brutal. And even some of the most famous ones had been mistranslated to give them a more comforting and more moral tone. What the Temples began to realise was that the Victorians had simply suppressed the fables which shocked them and effectively changed others."



The Mule

A MULE, frolicsome from lack of work and from too much corn, galloped about in a very extravagant manner, and said to himself: "My father surely was a highmettled racer, and I am his own child in speed and spirit." On the next day, being driven a long journey, and feeling very wearied, he exclaimed in a disconsolate tone: "I must have made a mistake; my father, after all, could have been only an ass."



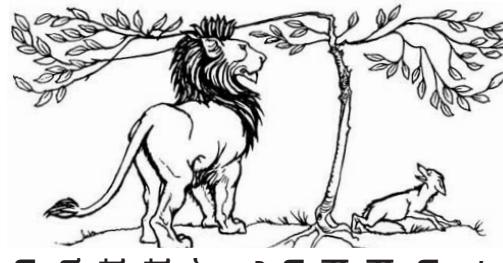
The Crow and the Pitcher

A CROW perishing with thirst saw a pitcher, and hoping to find water, flew to it with delight. When he reached it, he discovered to his grief that it contained so little water that he could not possibly get at it. He tried everything he could think of to reach the water, but all his efforts were in vain. At last he collected as many stones as he could carry and dropped them one by one with his beak into the pitcher, until he brought the water within his reach and thus saved his life.



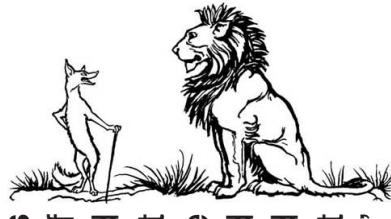
The Fox and the Lion

WHEN A FOX who had never yet seen a Lion, fell in with him by chance for the first time in the forest, he was so frightened that he nearly died with fear. On meeting him for the second time, he was still much alarmed, but not to the same extent as at first. On seeing him the third time, he so increased in boldness that he went up to him and commenced a familiar conversation with him.



The Fox and the Grapes

A FAMISHED FOX saw some clusters of ripe black grapes hanging from a trellised vine. She resorted to all her tricks to get at them, but wearied herself in vain, for she could not reach them. At last she turned away, hiding her disappointment and saying: "The Grapes are sour, and not ripe as I thought."



The Dancing Monkeys

A PRINCE had some Monkeys trained to dance. Being naturally great mimics of men's actions, they showed themselves most apt pupils, and when arrayed in their rich clothes and masks, they danced as well as any of the courtiers. The spectacle was often repeated with great applause, till on one occasion a courtier, bent on mischief, took from his pocket a handful of nuts and threw them upon the stage. The Monkeys at the sight of the nuts forgot their dancing and became (as indeed they were) Monkeys instead of actors. Pulling off their masks and tearing their robes, they fought with one another for the nuts. The dancing spectacle thus came to an end amidst the laughter and ridicule of the audience.



The Fisherman Piping

A FISHERMAN skilled in music took his flute and his nets to the seashore. Standing on a projecting rock, he played several tunes in the hope that the fish, attracted by his melody, would of their own accord dance into his net, which he had placed below. At last, having long waited in vain, he laid aside his flute, and casting his net into the sea, made an excellent haul of fish. When he saw them leaping about in the net upon the rock he said: "O you most perverse creatures, when I piped you would not dance, but now that I have ceased you do so merrily."



The Crow and the Pitcher

A CROW perishing with thirst saw a pitcher, and hoping to find water, flew to it with delight. When he reached it, he discovered to his grief that it contained so little water that he could not possibly get at it. He tried everything he could think of to reach the water, but all his efforts were in vain. At last he collected as many stones as he could carry and dropped them one by one with his beak into the pitcher, until he brought the water within his reach and thus saved his life. Necessity is the mother of invention.



The Walnut-Tree

A WALNUT TREE standing by the roadside bore an abundant crop of fruit. For the sake of the nuts, the passers-by broke its branches with stones and sticks. The Walnut-Tree pitifully exclaimed, "O wretched me! that those whom I cheer with my fruit should repay me with these painful requitals!"



The Wolf and the Goat

A WOLF saw a Goat feeding at the summit of a steep precipice, where he had no chance of reaching her. He called to her and earnestly begged her to come lower down, lest she fall by some mishap; and he added that the meadows lay where he was standing, and that the herbage was most tender. She replied, "No, my friend, it is not for the pasture that you invite me, but for yourself, who are in want of food."



The Lamb and the Wolf

A WOLF pursued a Lamb, which fled for refuge to a certain Temple. The Wolf called out to him and said, "The Priest will slay you in sacrifice, if he should catch you." On which the Lamb replied, "It would be better for me to be sacrificed in the Temple than to be eaten by you."

