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## TELLING FABLES

Fables are a really good starting point if you want to learn to tell stories, or indeed if you prefer to be a writer and want to learn how to handle a plot well and imaginatively.

The fables presented here are for re-telling, whether out loud or on the page. This downloadable document is written so that younger writers who want to play with and explore fables imaginatively (and perhaps even enter an Imaginary Journeys story competition) can make use of most of it as much as the many adults who are interested in stories and storytelling.

There are various kinds of story here, from ancient tales that will match most people's ideas of what fables are to modern yarns that probably don't. All of them can be re-shaped in your own way – you can make your own unusual versions, perhaps using the characters and setting as given here, but inventing all sorts of interesting details, perhaps making entirely different stories in ancient or modern or even futuristic and fantasy settings. You'll find some tips below to help you to do that, but first a few general points.

### **What are fables?**

People have been telling fables for centuries. Some reckon that a fable has to be about animals that can talk, or maybe things like stones or trees or swords or spoons behaving like human beings. It's true that some of the oldest stories we know about are 'beast fables' – stories where animals have conversations and so on; well known ancient collections of fables like those of Aesop or perhaps the Indian *Panchatantra* have lots of stories of jackals and rabbits and foxes and goats and all sorts. It's also true that there are fables

from all sorts of countries where the characters are anything from a brick to a meatball. But there are also lots of stories about people that are called fables too. Confusing, isn't it?

Actually, the word fable has been used in quite a lot of different ways over the centuries. If you look in old dictionaries, you will find that at one time, if someone told you that you were 'telling fables', they'd have meant that you were simply lying! And that is odd really, because these days we mostly think of fables as being stories that mean something and maybe help you to see the truth better – they have a point if you like, even if what happens in them doesn't seem exactly likely. Some people even think that you always have to have a moral spelled out at the end of your fable – 'liars will never be believed', 'don't go round being nasty to people if you want them to be nice to you' and so on. But spelling out morals tends to spoil a story, suggesting that it means just one thing or worse, giving the feeling that a story is like some kind of medicine that's 'good for you'. The best fables can mean quite a lot of different things; they could make you think and imagine in all sorts of new ways if you let them.

So let's say instead that a fable is a story that shows you something, that has a bit of a point to it (or several points) and leave it at that. Except to say also that fables can be a lot of fun too, because there are so many ways to tell old ones and invent new ones. In a world where anything can talk and have adventures, you never know quite what is going to happen next – and you can also make all sorts of unusual things happen.

### **Traditional Fables: 4 Animal Fables**

The following 4 fables are traditional. Each is presented in two versions. The first is a more interesting and detailed telling, which we hope will get readers interested in them. They are not be as detailed as it's possible to be and if you told the story out loud or imagined it thoroughly and then wrote your own version, you might discover all sorts of extra detail. The second versions are brief, summaries of the kind you might find in a dictionary of

fables and folklore. We hope this will help you to see the basic plot clearly and will also give an idea of how much you can vary a fable just by retelling it. You can find more examples on Rob Parkinson's CD, *Fabulous Fables*, available from Imaginary Journeys. You can also find games for varying fables and other stories in Rob's *Yarn Spinning* and *New Lamps from Old* booklets, also available from the site.

## **1. The donkey & the lion**

*(Ugandan fable)*

### **Version 1. (Some extra detail.)**

At one time in East Africa, donkeys had never ever been seen. So when a donkey came to that land and met a lion, the lion had not the faintest idea of what kind of creature it might be. The donkey gave a deafening bray of fear but the lion sprang back, shocked and also confused by the ear-splitting din. 'What sort of creature are you?' he gasped as he recovered, putting his paws over his ears.

'Me?' says the donkey, spotting that this obviously very fierce creature seemed scared and deciding to push his luck. 'Oh, I'm of the mighty race of donkeys, the strongest and bravest of creatures.'

'Come with me,' says the lion respectfully, thinking he'd best be careful in case this creature's bite was as bad its bark. 'You are very welcome.'

The donkey followed the lion, but soon there was a stream to cross. The lion leapt over it effortlessly. The donkey leapt too – and landed half way across. It had to splash its way to the far side in a very undignified way. 'I thought you said you were strong,' snorted the lion in contempt.

'Yes indeed I am,' insisted the donkey as it hauled itself up onto the bank, spluttering and wheezing. 'That's why I never miss the chance to hunt. In that stream there was a huge fish twice as big as you. If only you'd had the

courage to help me catch it, we'd have had enough food for days. Now it has escaped.'

The lion looked ashamed as they walked on, but presently they reached a place where the wall of a ruined building blocked their way. The lion leapt again, this time through a gap quite high up in the wall. The donkey, however, realized that he could never match that feat, so he turned around and aimed a hefty kick with both hind feet. The wall promptly crumbled and the donkey marched through as the dust settled, to find the lion looking very impressed. 'You are indeed strong. I couldn't have done that. Come and meet my companions.'

Now the lion led the donkey to a valley where there were many other lions and introduced him as a strong and bold creature they should all respect. The other lions looked doubtful, but the donkey beckoned them. 'Come and join me in a feast now,' he said and he took them to a part of the valley he had spotted on the way where there were many thistles.

'What do you mean?' the bewildered lions growled. 'This is a terrible place we avoid at all times. Those horrible sharp things that get into the soft pads of our paws! They're so dangerous!'

'No they are not, they're delicious. Look!' And the donkey waded in among the thistles and began to munch away happily. Yet, though he challenged them again and again to do so, the lions dared not follow him.

Well, what with that and the stories the first lion told the others of the donkey's incredible deeds on the way to the meeting, fame of this new creature's power and strength was soon spreading like wildfire driven by a whirlwind through the lion kingdom and beyond. Very soon, they chose the lion as their king and he ruled amongst them for many a long year.

But you see, just because it looks like a king and all the stories say that it's a king, it doesn't mean it's not a donkey underneath.

## **Version 2. A brief telling (less interesting?):**

Donkeys were once not known in Uganda. A lion met the first one that came to visit and believed this donkey when he said he was strong – until the donkey could only jump half way across a stream he could leap over easily. But the donkey claimed he had been fishing for a large fish and the lion believed him again. Next the lion jumped over a ruined wall. The donkey knew he couldn't do the same, so he kicked the wall over with his strong hind feet. Now the lion took the donkey to meet all the other lions. The donkey challenged them all to follow him into a valley full of thistles. They dared not since thistles would hurt their paws and were amazed to see this strange and obviously strong creature munching happily on the thistles. They were so impressed and indeed scared that they elected him as their king and so the donkey soon ruled over all the animals in Uganda.

Both versions © Rob Parkinson 2009

## **The Fox & the Cockerel**

*(English/European fable – after Geoffrey Chaucer)*

### **Version 1. (With some extra detail.)**

'Oh Chanticleer, what a magnificent bird you are!' That's what the cockerel told himself every single morning as the sun rose and as his own marvellous voice soared above the farm to greet it. He was indeed a fine specimen, with his cockerel comb redder than fine coral, his beak black as jet and his feathers like the burnished gold. 'Oh Chanticleer, you are a genius!'

It wasn't an opinion his wife, Madame Pertelote, shared. Like all wives perhaps, she saw through the bluster, didn't set much store by his fabulous talents. 'Pride goes before a fall,' she'd tell him.

Well, one night the cockerel had a dream, or rather a nightmare, and he woke up all in a fluster and filled with terror. There had been this hound-like

creature, with a colour something between red and yellow, its tail and both its pointed ears black-tipped, his eyes glowing fiery orange. He told his wife, who told him in as many words to shut up and go back to sleep. 'Dreams are just air,' she said curtly. 'Forget about them!'

Oh but Chanticleer couldn't forget, not for the rest of that night. What if it was a true dream, a prophecy? Those things happened. People dreamed dreams that warned them.

The next morning with the first light, it was out into the yard as usual. 'Sing!' he told himself. 'Sing away the troubles. That's the way!' And he was about to sing when he saw it – the shape, the form, just the way he'd seen it in the dream. Russel the Fox ready to spring just as soon as he was in range. He turned to go back to the safety of the henhouse.

Fox, seeing his chance was all but gone by, said smoothly: 'Please, Mr Singer, do sing! I've come all this way especially to hear you. Surely you won't disappoint me now. Why, I knew your father, Chanticleer the First. I often used to listen to his dulcet tones. But by all reports from what I've caught of your songs from the woods, you're even better. Do sing for me, go on now. I'd love to make you famous as the greatest of all cockerel singers. I'd love to introduce you to my own children... Such a beautiful voice.'

For Chanticleer, those words were purest music. At last, someone who recognized his talent! Would he sing? Of course he would. When your chance of celebrity comes, you have to take it so he'd been told. 'Well now, this is a little number I call Cock-a-doodle doo... a 1, a 2, a 1 2 3 4...  
Aaaaargh!

Of course, as he wound up to give his loudest of crows, fox jumped up and grabbed him and was away across the fields in no time. The cockerel struggled but it was no good. Squawk and flap as he might, the fox had him tightly gripped by the golden throat with his sharp white teeth. Time enough now to regret his folly. Time enough to see how he'd been caught.

'Stop! Stop! Stop! That's our cockerel!' Shouts the farmer, running out of the house and pulling on his breeches at more or less the same time.

'Stop! Stop! Stop!' bellowed the farmer's men, brandishing pitchforks and giving chase. But fox was well away. On the edge of the woods, he paused, listening to the hue and cry. Chanticleer's small brain was racing. 'Just listen to that!' he says, 'they think I'm theirs but of course I'm yours now. You should tell them, otherwise they'll never know what a great thief you are. Tell them how you tricked me, tell them how clever you are. Then they'll understand and tell stories about you ever afterwards. You're really something you know, quite a con artist.'

Hearing that, the fox was struck by the truth of it. Of course, they'd never know, never recognize the artfulness, the guile, the sheer skill with which he'd caught that cockerel. So there and then he opened his mouth to shout back his story.... And Chanticleer was away, escaped as fast as he could, flew up onto the branch of a tree.

'Oh dear me, Mr Cockerel,' says Fox, seeing how he himself had now been tricked but thinking he might still rescue his meal, 'how untrusting you are! Surely you didn't think I was going to harm you. I was just taking you back to sing for family. They're all music lovers, every one of 'em.'

'Not you, not me,' says Chanticleer. 'Once bitten, twice shy. I'll not come near you again.' And he didn't. He wasn't going to be caught out by the trick and the trap of words – the way you've been caught by this trick and trap of words.

*This fable is part of The Nun's Priest's Tale from The Canterbury Tales by the famous 14<sup>th</sup> Century English poet, Geoffrey Chaucer. Some of the description in this version is based on Chaucer's poem; some is based on the way Rob Parkinson has told this tale as part of his Tales on Tales on Canterbury Tales performance.*

**Version 2. A brief telling:** There was once a cockerel who loved the sound of his own voice as he crowed every morning. One day he spotted a fox sneaking up on him, just as he was about to sing. The fox, who knew he wasn't close enough to spring on the cockerel, flattered the cockerel and pretended that he'd only come to hear him sing. The vain cockerel believed him but, as soon as he put back his head, planning to show off to the fox by crowing as loud as he could, the fox seized his chance and grabbed him. Soon the cockerel found himself being dragged across the field, away to the fox's lair. He flapped his wings and struggled as much as he could, but the fox was stronger. The farmer and his men, who heard all the commotion, were soon chasing, but the fox was well away. They'd never catch up. So the cockerel told the fox he was really clever and should at least stop long enough to tell the farmer and the men all about his cunning tricks there and then, otherwise they'd not realize how brilliant he was. The fox, as much flattered, as the cockerel had been earlier, opened his mouth to do so. That allowed the cockerel to escape, to fly up and perch in a tree where the fox couldn't get him.

*Both versions © Rob Parkinson 2009.*

## **The Frog & the Antelope**

(Widely known tale. Based on a South African version)

Frog says to Antelope one day, 'Let's have a race!'

Antelope thinks, 'What, some slimy little frog that jumps and swims and crawls. Hah! I'm as fast as the wind whisking over the veldt! That little idiot doesn't stand a chance!' But out loud it just said, 'All right then ... if you want to look a fool!'

The race was all set up and the animals all came to watch. There were monkeys who'd come down from the trees, there were hippos who'd hauled themselves out of the mud, there were gazelles and gnus and zebras and giraffes and all sorts more. They all cheered excitedly as the antelope flexed

its sleek muscles and the frog bounced up and down on the spot, each preparing for the contest in its own way. The smart money was on the antelope of course. It had escaped even the cheetah in its time, whilst the frog... well it had been clever enough to get away from the crocodile not so long before that, but all the same...

'On your marks... get set...!' The elephant gave a sudden trumpeting sound and that was the signal for the race to begin. The antelope bounded forward, its fleet hooves scudding over the dry grasses and away in a trail of orange brown dust. Meanwhile the frog did what it could do best, it leapt high...

In no time at all the antelope was away over the plain and up a rise of ground, a mile or more from the start its strong strides eating up the distance. At the top, it paused for a moment to enjoy the satisfaction of seeing the frog back there struggling through the dust, but even as it did so, suddenly, out of nowhere, the frog was leaping past and hopping on down the slope beyond. Antelope couldn't believe its eyes. This was some frog. All the same, it didn't take long to overtake it and race away another mile and stop again. This time there'd be no sign of Frog, it felt sure of that. But WHOOSH! Bounce, bounce! There the horrid thing was again, surging ahead. Again antelope put on a spurt, moving up to top gear and accelerating away. Soon it was racing towards the finishing line. Glancing to either side and then behind, there was no sign of Frog, so it slowed to a canter to make the most of the victory moment. At that instant, Frog appeared and flashed past it, crossing the finishing line to the wild cheers and shrieks and screeching and chattering of all the other creatures.

So frog, not antelope, won the race. Of course, if they had the kind of stewards' enquiry they have after races these days, they might not have left that frog as the winner, but who knows if that such things ever happen – at least until the world's end. You see there are those who like morals in these tales, and they might be inclined to tell you that you can always do better than you think if you try hard as frog certainly did – and do what you can do

best. Frog did that all right too. When the race began, it leapt high, high up in the air.... and then landed ... on antelope's back. So antelope carried frog that day, without knowing it. When it stopped, Frog jumped off and jumped past, when it started again, Frog leapt back on and so on, until the finishing line approached, when it leapt the last bit fresh as a daisy. Maybe that's not fair, but as they say sometimes, maybe it's not fairness that life's all about.

**Version 2. A brief Telling:** The frog and the antelope once had a race.

Antelope thought it could win easily and didn't run particularly fast at first. But when it stopped, there was the frog hopping past. So the antelope bounded forward, soon overtook the frog and raced onwards, until at the top of a hill, it decided to stop long enough to look back and see where the frog had got to. Suddenly the frog was leaping past – it couldn't have been far behind at all. Again the antelope bounded forward and this time it kept on going after it passed the frog once again, leaping onwards until the finishing line was in sight. Then it glanced around and, seeing no sign of the frog nearby, slowed down to take the cheers of the other animals that had come to watch. Just as it did so, the frog appeared, apparently from nowhere. With a couple of rapid leaps, it hurtled over the finishing line and won the race. You see, the frog had leapt aboard at the beginning and been riding on the antelope's back most of the way – apart from the two times the antelope had stopped and then of course, when the end was very close. How fair was that?

*There are a lot of variations on this fable, with different creatures as the main characters. For example, there is one where an eagle and a wren have to fly as high as possible and the wren gets onto the eagle's back and flies the extra bit when the eagle is exhausted. The first version here is transcribed from a recording Rob Parkinson did for the Fabulous Fables CD. This story was not included, but may be (with others) on a future collection.*

*Both versions © Rob Parkinson 2009*

## **The Blue Jackal**

*(Indian fable)*

### **Version 1.**

A jackal was once sneaking around a village looking for some food to steal. He saw someone putting something into a big pot and decided that it

must be food. As soon as the pot was left alone, he crept up and jumped into it, only to find himself splashing around in a dark, thick liquid.

Now that pot had been filled with dye by a dyer. That day he had been doing blue. Instead of its normal brown-grey, camouflaged shade, his fur was now a deep, strong blue. No matter how much he tried to wash it off in the river, he stayed blue. But the jackal, being just as crafty as jackals are supposed to be, didn't tell the other animals what had happened. Instead, he said that he was a king come to rule over them. Because he looked so different with his blue fur, they didn't recognize him and so they believed what he said.

To begin with, it was just the small animals that heard the story from him, but word quickly spread. Soon every creature, from the mouse to the mongoose to the monkey to the buffalo and the gazelle and even the tiger, was coming to see the marvelous blue king of animals. The jackal had a wonderful time telling them all what to do. The only creatures that knew him for what he was were the other jackals, but he'd no time for them, now that he was a king. They didn't like that - the way he gave himself airs and looked down on them. They decided to teach him a lesson. One night, when the moon was big and full, they went up onto a hill overlooking the place where the blue jackal was holding court with animals all around him. They sat round in a ring and they howled.

All of the animals heard them. Some of the small ones shuddered and shivered at the sound. 'It's just those filthy jackals,' growled the tiger. But then they saw something strange. Their blue king was howling too. He just couldn't help joining in. It was his nature and there was nothing he could do about it. When one jackal begins to howl, other jackals join in. From that moment, all the animals knew that their blue king was just a jackal, not royal at all. They left him there and then.

That's how the old saying started: "If you want to know who is a jackal,

don't look at the colour of their fur. Just wait till they howl."

**Indian fable**

**Brief telling:** A jackal once fell into a pot of blue dye, so that all of his fur was dyed a bright blue. The other animals no longer recognized him as a jackal, so he told them he was a king. They believed him and he ruled over them for a time. However, the other jackals were jealous and one night they went up onto the hillside and howled at the moon, as jackals do. The blue jackal, hearing them and relying on his instinct without a moment's thought, joined in. It seemed a natural thing to do. When the animals heard this, they were no longer deceived by the evidence of their eyes, because their ears told them it was a jackal.

**Note:** *This fable has been included with the notes and tips for children going in for the 2009 Imaginary Journeys Fabulous Fables competition. It's from India, where jackals are as well known as foxes are in many parts of Britain today – wild dog-like creatures that are crafty scavengers. If you want to insult someone in India or Africa or anywhere they have them, suggesting that they are too crafty and not to be trusted, you might call them a jackal.*

*Both versions © Rob Parkinson 2009*

## **Transposing stories: Two costume dramas**

Here are two new and original stories. Younger readers may find these a little more difficult to follow. Both of them are based on one of the four fables told above. Which one is it? If you spot which it is, how closely has the pattern of the original been followed in each case.

### **1. The Elvis Outfit**

Elvis Presley is famous, just about everyone knows that. Sadly, he died young though there are a lot of people who virtually worship him to this day. He's sometimes called 'The King of Rock 'n' Roll' – or just 'The King'. He was certainly a great singer. Especially in the later part of his career, he would wear very exaggerated costumes in his performances – gold and glitter and frills and all sorts. Those are the kind of costumes people put on to do

imitations of him – because there are many who like to pretend to be Elvis, some a lot better at doing so than others.

I want to tell you about one Elvis imitator who did something many who came after him probably wish they could have done. His name was Martin Stone and he was from Manchester, in England. Or maybe I should say is from Manchester England, because Martin is still alive and living in that part of the world. He told me this story himself, which is how I know that it is true.

Now Martin had been crazy about Elvis since he was 12. At the age of 22, he scraped enough money to pay for a cheap flight across the Atlantic and to take a series of greyhound buses down to Las Vegas, where Elvis was going to do some live shows to launch his performing career again. He couldn't afford to get in, but he hoped he might get a glimpse of his idol. Martin had styled himself on Elvis, wore his hair just the way Elvis was wearing it, had practised doing all the Elvis moves, watched Elvis in all his films, could curl his lip and snarl like Elvis, could smile cutely like Elvis, had mimed to Elvis's records over and over again and probably knew more about Elvis than the singer did himself. The only thing he couldn't do was the most important thing of all. He could walk like Elvis, even talk like Elvis but he could never sing like Elvis.

Martin spent days just hanging around in the right places. Sometimes he thought he saw Elvis, sometimes he even thought Elvis had seen him. There were other fans, amongst them guys dressed up like Elvis the same way he was. It was all very strange, as if there were mirrors all around reflecting that one incredible person, Elvis. He talked to some of these look-alikes, shared Elvis stories and facts. Some were friendly, so were definitely odd, weird even. But anyway, the word went round one day that Elvis was doing a photo call to publicize the new show. He found out about the location and managed to get there, but he soon found there was no way he was going to get inside with the photographers. He was lingering in the street nearby when he suddenly saw a figure walking along the street towards him. He was wearing dark glasses and was hunched down sulkily into a big jacket with a hat crammed onto his head. Maybe it was supposed to be a disguise, but that

wasn't going to put off a dedicated fan like Martin. This was no second rate copycat; this was Elvis himself, in the flesh. You just knew that straight away if you knew Elvis the way he did. Martin just stood there gaping, too shocked even to hold out the autograph book. And he was even more shocked when Presley stopped, looked at him for several seconds and then said: "Hey fella! I've seen you before. You're good, you're just right in fact. You want a job? Come with me.'

Martin says he walked beside Elvis in a kind of a dream, wondering if he'd died and gone to paradise, whilst Elvis steered him into a hamburger joint several blocks away and ordered coffees and a burgher each, paid for them and then told him what he wanted him to do. 'You see fella, you look so darn like me that I reckon it might work.'

It seems that it had all been too much. Someone had designed these costumes for Elvis to wear and they'd really gone over the top. Gold and glitter and frills and... well, Elvis had worn some gear in his time, but this was too much. Trouble was, his manager Colonel Tom Parker, wanted him to wear the crazy things, part of the new image he reckoned. Presley had stormed out, hence the hasty disguise that didn't quite work. Seeing Martin had given him an idea. He wanted Martin to go back and take his place for a while, wear the clothes, strut his stuff in front of the cameras. 'Sometimes it gets kind of lonely being Elvis, you know,' the star told him. 'Sometimes I just want to be an ordinary guy in the street for a while. If everyone knows I'm in there, they're not going to notice me out here.'

What could Martin say? Of course he said yes, anything to help Elvis. Actually, he says, he suddenly felt sorry for the singer, suddenly saw him as just a human being like himself, with human feelings and problems. But there wasn't much time for those kinds of thoughts. He and Elvis went somewhere they could exchange their jackets without being seen and Elvis gave him his security pass and a few other things, telling him exactly how he was to get back into the venue, what he was to say, how he was to act. 'Just don't say

much, fella,' he insisted. 'Pretend you're still in a bit of a sulk, ok? They're used to that from guys like me.'

The long and the short of it is that, surprising though it seems now, it actually worked. What seemed only a few minutes later, Martin had flashed the pass at the stage door and was inside being hastily hustled into just the kind of costume those Presley imitators put on today, except of course that it was a new thing then. They were all in a hurry, because there were a lot of people waiting and getting restless, people the Colonel wanted to stay impressed. Everyone behind the scenes had been frantically searching for Elvis and there had even been rumours he'd been kidnapped. They were all so relieved that the hunt was over that no one looked too closely and the light back there was not too good owing to some problems with the electrical system. Martin was bustled along and soon found himself walking out onto a platform, whilst flash bulbs went off all around him and the strains of Teddy Bear, one of his old 'fifties hits, blared out over the sound system.

There was a kind of gasp as he appeared. The sight of all that stagey glitter and the king of Rock 'n' Roll himself in the midst of it. well, it sort of hit people, even the seasoned press guys who had seen all kinds of things - including by then the hippies and the flower people of course. They were as shocked as Martin had been in a different way half an hour or so before. Martin reckons that to begin with, somehow or other, he just seemed to know exactly what to do. He felt high on all the attention, even believed for a while that he was Elvis. So he strutted his stuff just like Elvis had said, just like Elvis in fact. Or maybe even better because Martin was younger and probably fitter - apparently he used to work out regularly.

It all went fantastically. The cameras clicked, the bulbs flashed, everyone was calling out and cheering. He was doing brilliantly when suddenly he looked and he saw them there, amongst the crowd but somehow separate - two, three, four... maybe even seven or eight of them. Elvis look-alikes, Elvis fans, Elvis imitators just like him - except that, unlike him, they had managed to get press passes to the event somehow. There was something about them,

something that told him that they were not quite taken in, that they suspected something, all of them in their different ways. It was one of them who started the chant: 'Elvis sing! Elvis sing! Elvis sing!' They did it with such power and conviction that soon the pressmen and everyone there were joining in with the chant. Somewhere near the stage, he could hear an intro being strummed out on a piano. The Colonel had guessed something like this would happen, even if Elvis had not. He and the pianist had decided that Elvis would prove that he was as great as ever by singing one of his biggest hits, 'It's Now or Never', a number based on an old Italian song that was nearer to opera than rock 'n'roll, a number that took some singing in fact, a song in which he was supposed to hit an incredible high G sharp.

Martin says his blood really did seem to run cold at that moment, as the hush fell and the piano meandered through a suggestion or two of the melody and a bit of improvisation, then the intro all over again to give him time to settle. Then the pianist began to stab at the same chord, waiting for 'Elvis' to come in. Martin knew he had to go for it, really sing it out and he managed the first line, hearing his own voice coming back at him, thin, hoarse, not rich and full like Elvis at all but breathed into the microphone in a way that suggested that The King might be teasing his audience. Then he faltered, stopped, coughed a lot, several times over... 'Hey wait a minute, fellas!' he wheezed between the coughs. 'Let me get a drink some place. I'll be back.'

He rushed off stage and out to his dressing room. Maybe he could buy a bit of time, not long, just enough to think of a better excuse. That's when he saw Elvis, grinning broadly. 'Nice one, boy! You did a good job. But listen to me, don't give up the day job! You ain't no singer.'

It was Martin's turn to be relieved then. It turned out that Elvis had been in the audience watching – he had a spare pass so he could get back in and couldn't resist joining the audience, watching what was supposed to be himself. He reckoned Martin had given him some great ideas about how he could use that costume in his act and he pressed a generous bundle of dollar

bills into his hand, despite Martin's protests. Martin took the fancy costume off, Elvis put it on and the King himself went back in front of the press, sang his song and knocked 'em all flat as they say – he had something to prove after Martin's false start on *It's Now or Never*, which he sang fantastically.

Elvis went on to do a season of performances in Las Vegas that has become legendary. He was brilliant. After Martin's contribution, he took to those costumes and they became his trademark. Martin got to ride in the limo with Elvis and he was given a whole lot of things he'll still show you if you ever go and visit him – pictures and shirts and boots and even a guitar complete with a fur-lined crocodile skin case, all of which had belonged to Elvis, the kinds of things collectors pay a fortune for. But you know, even though he still thinks Elvis is the greatest, he never ever dressed like him again after that, never even mimed to a record in private. In fact, if you looked at him now, you'd find it hard to imagine that anyone ever took him for Elvis. 'I don't know,' he told me, 'somehow you grow out of those things. I'm just happy to be me these days.'

The strange thing is that, if you see some of the pictures of Elvis that fans still put up on their walls, it is actually Martin Stone from Manchester underneath, photographed on that day before he tried to sing. Have a very close look if you ever see one and you might realize just how true this story is.

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### **The luck of the Devil.**

Marietta was a thief, a very good one at that. She had stolen all kinds of things – diamond brooches and gold medallions, precious silver from purses and sacred treasures from churches. And she had never ever been caught.

'You wait,' the old lags of Venice would say, shaking their heads, 'one day it will happen. Sooner or later you'll get too careless or just too clever. We all know, it's happened to us. We all thought we'd never get caught once, just like you – when we were young, when we had our looks and our strength. '

Marietta would toss her glossy black curls back contemptuously and part her perfect red lips to show her perfect pearly white teeth in a cheeky smile that was also a sneer. She was beautiful, she was young and she was clever, so why should she listen to these toothless old fools, these mere common criminals. 'You never had my talent,' she would say in her heavily accented, sing-song southern Italian tones that seemed almost foreign to people in Venice with their quite different ways with words. 'You never had my luck either, the luck of the devil.'

It was true, everyone agreed it, she had the luck of the devil. Who else would have dared to attempt to steal Donna Maria's famous tiara, the one that included no less than four of the most famous diamonds the world the 15<sup>th</sup> Century had known, each exquisite and perfectly faceted, each blended into the design of the whole by a master jeweler.

It seemed that the lady and her husband, Don Alfonso, would be visiting the Doge, the man who was almost a king in Venice in those days. Of course today you would say that the famous, half submerged city of Venice with its endless narrow streets, canals and picturesque gondolas, is in Italy. Five hundred years ago, in Marietta's time, it was really a separate city state. Like Firenze or as we would call it Florence, where the visiting couple came from. The pretty, raven-haired young aristocrat (who was a cousin of the King of France himself and was also said to be a great actress, skilled in the art of poetry and telling stories) would be travelling from Florence with her husband, a member of the famous Medici family who ruled in that city, because there was an important trade treaty to be signed. But of course, before that there would be feasting and music and dancing and a wonderful welcome for these important folk. And the countess would appear in her finest robes, wearing the tiara. Unless of course Marietta had her way.

She had discovered exactly where the couple would be staying and worked out exactly how she could steal the thing and, just as important, how she could sell it afterwards. Those canals that criss-cross the city were perfect

for a thief. A gondola could move almost silently along the channels, under the arches, through the tunnels. By night, under cover of darkness, she would jump from a gondola onto a pipe, up some ivy, along a ledge and she'd be in... She was planning it out, working it out, thinking it through, making her final preparations during the afternoon, as she punted a gondola borrowed from a friendly gondolier even as the visiting couple arrived on a gilded barge of state with twenty strong men to row it and were cheered in their stately progress through St Mark's square to the palace, where they would be housed. Indeed an hour later she was still lingering, under the very archway beneath the grand room where they would sleep, as they settled in and prepared for the evening. She liked to do her homework very thoroughly.

Now the Donna Maria and her noble husband were very grand but they were also human beings. And human couples in any age do very human things – like having arguments for example. As Marietta looked and watched and listened, she realized what was going on up there: they were having what we might call a real hum-dinger, a shouting match, a royal row. Goodness knows exactly what it was about, but Donna Maria was obviously a fiery and fierce lady and whatever her husband had done, she was not about to forgive it. She shouted insults and threats and a torrent of accusations that grew louder and louder, until leaning out of the window three floors up, she screamed: 'And as for this present of yours, this ridiculous dress, if you think that I am going to wear it to impress this Doge of yours tonight, well you can think again! I shall stay in my room and this is going into the canal!' And she hurled something out that fluttered down and would have landed right in the water and been ruined had not Marietta, in the gondola, caught it and stowed it away at once. A moment later, a man's head appeared at the window above, the face red with bluster and anger. 'Where is it! That robe cost a fortune you mad woman. Don't you recognize quality!'

But whatever Donna Maria said to that, Marietta never knew because by that time she and the gondola were fifty metres or more down the tunnel with the treasure and well out of sight. When she got it home and spread it out,

she was amazed. It was a perfect crimson gown, decorated with the finest embroidery and studded with pearls. Any lesser thief would have called it a day; it must have been worth more than most poor folk would make in a year. But Marietta had her mind set on the famous tiara and she was not about to give up. The dress was perfect for a new and particularly daring plan.

As the narrow cobbled streets darkened that the evening, Marietta was back again, this time at the front gate. A whole retinue of visiting rich folk none of the guards knew well were in town as part of this occasion. In this fine costume, who would suspect she was a thief? She would choose her moment, slip into the building and find the right room – she already had the plan of the place memorized from a sketch she had bribed one of the servants to make for her as part of her first plan. It should not be hard, just a question of playing her usual incredible luck. But she hadn't counted on the monster sulk.

Donna Maria was sulking and she was very good at it. She obviously meant to pay her husband back very thoroughly for whatever it was that he had done. She was going to stay in her room, refuse to go the evening at the Doge's palace. Don Alfonso had been beside himself with frustration, pleading with his wife at the door to her dressing room, which she had locked firmly. This would be an embarrassment. If the Doge took it wrongly, it could be worse. He might feel deliberately insulted and that could mean an end to the trade agreement. Finally he had lost all patience. 'If you will not come, then I must go alone,' he had shouted hotly. 'But please, if you still respect our noble city of Firenze even if you do not respect me, please follow. It is your duty! I shall await you in the barge for 10 more minutes only!'

The Donna was not so easily moved. She stubbornly stayed locked away in her room as Don Alfonso swept out to the courtyard and down the steps to the waiting barge, bobbing on the canal. It was a magnificently gilded and painted boat, lavishly furnished with embroidered velvet cushions; the Doge had judged that the couple would enjoy a moon-lit ride to his own palace,

some distance away beyond the Grand Canal. Servants holding flaming torches bowed as he passed. Respectful guards stood by the barge. Don Alfonso allowed himself to be helped aboard and sat down... then stood up again. He had caught sight of her. Donna Maria must have changed her mind. He could clearly see her outlined in the archway. Or thought he could see her. She had put on that gown he had paid so much for and which (he saw now) she had somehow tricked him into believing she had thrown into the canal. He smiled ruefully and not without affection – he loved his wife, despite her temper and strange ways. 'The witch,' he muttered to himself. 'The wicked little witch!' And then aloud, very loudly in fact, he shouted: 'HERE! This way my darling!'

Marietta turned at once – what else could she do since all eyes were upon her now. Of course it had been she that Don Alfonso had mistaken for his wife. Whilst the Don was boarding the boat with everyone watching, she had hoped she could slip into the corridors of the palace. But now she'd been spotted, she had no choice but to trust her luck as the servants ushered her towards the waiting barge. They, at least, were convinced that she was Donna Maria – a woman not much older than herself they had only glimpsed once, when she had arrived in a stately procession. Why should they suspect her? She had the same kind of glossy, dark hair, was about the same height and was certainly very beautiful. And then of course, they were seeing her by torchlight, with the shadows flickering around her. But what of Don Alfonso? Surely he wouldn't be taken in – unless she could act the part, keep her distance.

Down the steps and along a short gangway she tripped, almost dancing, so light on her feet, a perfect thief. A perfect actress too, as she took her place in the barge, choosing a seat at a distance from the Don, looking as sulky as she could and very far from forgiving. The torchlight played across her beautiful features but the Don greeted her without suspecting. 'My darling, I thank you for this!' he whispered with a surge of real, heartfelt gratitude. Marietta turned away, sniffing, not saying anything, relieved that he had not yet realized. Had she known about the Don's eyesight, she would have been

even more relieved. He was severely long-sighted. At a distance, things were sharp and clear, which is why he had noticed Marietta in the archway. Things close to him were too often hopelessly blurred, especially by torchlight. For the moment, she was safe. If she could not know that, at least she sensed it as the barge set off, with four other boats around it, carrying soldiers armed to the teeth, guarding them. A good thief is also like a good card player, always alert to the way the luck is running.

The luck of the devil. It certainly seemed to be with her to an incredible extent that day. She could scarcely believe it when Don Alfonso stretched across and put something into her hands. Looking down, she saw that it sparkled brilliantly in the moonlight. 'My darling,' the Don was mumbling meekly, 'I am so sorry I did not trust you. I feared you might throw this too into the canal. But here it is now with my trust that you will wear it for me tonight rather than throwing it and the future of our city away.'

It was a pretty speech and Marietta allowed herself to smile just a little. It was a genuine smile too, but not for the reasons Don Alfonso would have guessed. This was a smile of triumph. What he had given her was the very thing she had come for, the tiara itself. She certainly would not be throwing that into the water in a hurry. She had done it, got the thing! All she had to do now was to find a way of getting away with it.

Chances for escape were not easy to see. They duly arrived at the Doge's palace, surrounded by the guards, were escorted up the steps and inside and indeed presented to the Doge, a very old man who squinted at her and smiled in appreciation of her delicate beauty, kissing her hand with his dry old lips. She bowed and curtsied and smiled and said as little as she could, afraid that her lack of knowledge of courtly ways of behaving and speaking might give the game away. She did the same thing during the banquet that followed, when again there were few chances for escape since she was surrounded. Perhaps it would have to wait until the end of the evening. Perhaps Don Alfonso would continue to be fooled. Perhaps there would be a chance to take even more from him...

'My lady, please...' She realized with a shock that a hush had fallen on the room and that the Doge was speaking to her with what seemed a devilish smile. I have heard so much about your great skill in speaking the poetry of the bards and telling stories from the great Boccaccio. Please now, give us one of your famous recitations...'

Both stories © Rob Parkinson 2009

### ***Making up your own new story based on a fable.***

In the same way as has been done in the last two stories above, you can make up new fables using the example of any of the stories in this set, or indeed using any other fables and other traditional tales. This has happened very naturally in traditional storytelling as stories have been passed on and as people have made them their own and told them in ways that appeal to other people in their own countries. To do this:-

1. Have a close look at the story and decide what the simplest version of the story would be (as in the outlines given after the longer fables above).
2. Decide on some of the things you would like to change. For example: characters – will you change the animal characters into human beings or other animals or maybe even aliens?
3. Will you change the kind of place you would imagine this happening in or at? Will a village become a town? Will a story set in India move to Iceland or Italy? Will it be winter instead of summer, rainy instead of dry?
4. Will a story set in the ancient past move into the present or the future?
5. Can a story about a man or a boy become a tale about a woman or a girl?
6. Can you invent and imagine all sorts of details that will come into this new version of the story?
7. Can you tell this new version of the story to someone and get them to ask you about it the details of it? (How old was he or she? What colour was his or her hair/shirt/jacket? How did they do this or that? Etc etc)

Remember that your new story doesn't have to have a moral at the end or look like a fable in other ways. There are some more short summary versions of fables at the end of this download.

### ***Making up a fable using old sayings***

There are lots of other ways to make up new fables. One of them is to take a saying that people repeat and turn it into a story that makes the point that the saying makes. Here is a brief and perhaps obvious example – the old saying is given to you in the title of the story.

### **A stitch in time saves nine**

A man put on his best suit to go to an important meeting with nine important and very serious people to whom he would make his own very serious presentation. As he put on the jacket, he noticed that there was a slight tear at the back, right in the middle, on the seam. Probably he'd caught it on a nail or something of the sort. It would take five or ten minutes to sort it out because he's have to take off the jacket, get out the needles and thread and then tack it together as best he could - he wasn't very good at stitching. Time was short, the taxi would be coming for him and he wanted to concentrate on being very serious, so he didn't bother. Later, when it was finally time to talk to the nine important people, he put on a particularly serious and important face, stooped to pick up his serious and important notes - and heard a seriously nasty tearing sound. To his horror, the whole jacket came apart and flapped around him uselessly and ridiculously. What's worse, he soon saw that the important people thought it was very funny. He had looked so silly at that moment that all nine of them were in stitches.

*Here are some more sayings to experiment with. You can take them seriously or you can do silly versions of course.*

Look before you leap.

Least said, soonest mended.

You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make it drink.

Pride goes before a fall.

Honesty is the best policy.

If at first you don't succeed, try, try and try again.

(There are very many more of course.)

### **More fables in brief**

*Here are some more short tales that could be considered fables for one reason or another. You can use all of them to make your own new stories or you could just tell them in your own way.*

### **Good Luck/Bad Luck**

There was a farmer once and everyone said that he was lucky. He had a wife who loved him, a fine young son, a good house and fertile land sheltered by the hills. And he had the finest and fastest horse in all the land. Everyone said he had good luck.

Now one day, the horse ran away and people said that was bad luck, but the farmer would only say: "Let's wait and see about that."

Well, after a time, that horse came back from the wild leading a whole herd of wild horses. It had become their leader. The farmer penned them up and now of course people were saying how lucky he was. "Wait and see," was still all he'd say.

The wild horse had to be broken in and trained of course. The farmer's son was a good horseman, but one day one of the wildest horses threw him and he broke his leg. This was set badly. When it came out of the splints, it wasn't straight any more so that he always walked with a limp after that. "What bad luck!" everyone said. "Just let's wait and see," said the farmer.

Not long afterwards, the king of the neighbouring country declared war on the king of the farmer's land. All the young men were called up to fight but the farmer's son couldn't go because of his limp. He wouldn't be able to march in time with the others so he stayed behind. Well, he might have that limp but he was strong and fit enough to work on his father's land. The other farmers, whose sons were all off to war, said jealously: "You're lucky!" "I think I'll wait and see about that," said the farmer.

Soon the foreign armies, who were much better trained, started to win. The army from the farmers' land retreated and the foreign troops came marching into the farmer's part of the country, stealing this and burning that. The farmer's house, looking so prosperous, was a prime target. They spent a long time taking everything there and meanwhile, the troops from the farmers land rallied and drove them back and won the war. But the farm was a smoking ruin. Everything was gone. "Bad luck," said all the people. "Let's wait and see," said the farmer.

The very next day, in the wreckage of his house, the farmer found a trap door that led to a secret vault. And in that, he soon discovered a fabulous treasure, buried there hundreds of years before.

"What incredible luck," everyone said.

But the farmer said: "Wait and see..."

*Chinese story*

## **The Lion and the Man**

A man was walking with a lion. The two of them were talking. 'Human beings,' the man insisted, 'are much greater than beasts.' By way of proof, he pointed to a statue standing in the market place. It showed a man with his foot on the head of a lion he had conquered.

'Ah yes,' said the lion. 'But it would look a little different if a lion had made that statue.'

Aesop

## **The Other Lion**

A young lion was thirsty. He needed to go down to the waterhole to drink, a thing he'd never done alone before. There had always been other, older lions from the pride to go in front of him. He had learned caution however, so he approached the water carefully, looking to the right and to the left and all around, sniffing the air, listening closely. You had to beware – there could be lions from another pride or hunters or... But everything seemed fine. The coast was clear, so the young lion looked down into the water – and was surprised and horrified and even terrified to see that another lion was looking straight back at him from just under the water's surface, a fierce lion with a great mane and sharp looking teeth. The lion sprang back, startled and suddenly afraid. He ran off to some bushes nearby – the lion in the water looked as though it might well be stronger than him, more dangerous. He wasn't ready for a fight.

After long minutes during which his thirst for the water became steadily stronger and more pressing in the hot African sunshine, when he was sure there were no signs of his enemy, the lion sneaked down again to the water. Same result! The creature in the water looked wild and fierce and about to attack. Again he ran away rather than fight. Again he waited until all seemed clear... and hesitated.

At last he could stand it no more. He realized he would have to fight for the precious water if the lion was still selfishly hogging it. He ran and hurled himself into the waterhole – and found no lion there at all. It was, of course, only his own reflection, only himself. And there's no need to be afraid of yourself, is there?

*Persian fable (included in the 13th Century Masnawi of Jala'udin Rumi)*

## ***The Fool & the String***

A simple country lad went to market in the town and he saw a man shouting: "Good sense for sale. Who'll buy good sense and true wisdom from me today?"

Now this lad had very often been told by his mum and dad and just about everyone in his village that what he very much needed was to find a little more good sense and wisdom. In fact, his mother had shouted something to that effect to him that very morning when he had clumsily spilled all the milk they had for the day on the floor. So, thinking to do the right thing for once in his life, he went and paid all the money he had in his pockets to the sense seller. The man handed him a ball of string and told him to walk away, unrolling the string as he went. When he reached the end of it, fifty metres or so away, he found a piece of paper. Looking up, he saw that the good sense seller waving him goodbye and walking away, so he looked down again and read the paper which said "Keep as far away from people who claim to sell wisdom and good sense as the length of this string."

Had the lad been cheated or not?

*Turkish fable*

### **Following instructions.**

Another lad had a lot more strength than good sense, so they said. He'd learned none of that at all, but least he'd make a good guard. No one would want to tangle with such a fellow, towering there beside the big wooden door to the rich man's house. The head servant gave him strict instructions to follow. 'You must guard this door with your life and at all times. Beware of all thieves and tricksters. Let none but you turn the handle until I or the master himself should give the command.'

Despite all that, the house was robbed that very night. It was easy to see why because there was no door in place at all, just a doorway anyone might walk through. They found the lad wandering happily through the streets of the town with the great door, which he'd lifted off its hinges, strapped firmly to his back. 'I've guarded the door well, sir,' he said. 'No one has dared to try and steal it.'

### **Milk cows & weddings**

The plans for the wedding had to be sorted out properly. You'd want the guests to be well fed and watered. There were a lot of things to get, a lot of expense, but at least that family would not want for milk. In the part of the world where this little story happened, you see, a village wedding would have to have good milk for all the guests – and cheese, and butter and cream. All of which they could have in good measure. The bride's dad had got it all worked out. He had his own cow, only the one, but it gave the best and the creamiest, purest white milk in all the land. His house was well known for it and all that his wife made from it – the tastiest of cheeses, the smoothest of butters, the richest and thickest of creams. Every day this wonderful cow gave exactly 4 litres of the stuff.

The man did his calculations carefully. He'd need 40 times the milk he normally had from the cow for the wedding, so for 40 days he stopped milking her – so that she could save the milk up and he'd be able get all he needed not too long before the wedding.

Did it work? Of course not. When a cow's not milked, it stops making the milk altogether. Instead of 40 times the milk, he'd none at all. But if there's a moral or several there, it's not for me to spell that all out. Morals are like milk - and you can only take so much milk at a time.

*Both the last 2 tales re-told from The Ocean of Story by Somadeva (10<sup>th</sup> Century Indian)*

*All notes and any versions of stories not otherwise noted are*

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