

Thomas More Reader: Countryfold Stories and Animal Fables (modernized selections)

14. “The Fools and the Rain”

[From *The Four Last Things, The Supplication of Souls, Dialogue of Conscience* (Scepter 2002)]

“The first fable, the one about the rain that washed away the wits of all who stayed outside when it fell, I have often heard before. It was a tale told so often among the King’s Council by my Lord Cardinal [Wolsey], when His Eminence was chancellor, that I could not easily forget it. For in truth, in times past, when dissension began to come up between the Emperor and the French king in such a way that they were likely to, and did indeed, go to war, there were in the Council here sometimes different opinions. Some were of the mind that it would be wise for us to sit still and leave them alone. But ever against that way of thinking, my Lord used this story of those wise men who, because they did not want to be washed with the rain that would make all the people fools, went themselves into caves and hid themselves under the ground. But once the rain had made all the rest fools, and these men came out of their caves wanting to utter their wisdom, the fools agreed together against them and soundly beat them, then and there. And so, said His Eminence, if we were to be so wise as to sit in peace while the fools fought, they would not fail afterwards to make peace and agree among themselves and eventually all fall upon us.

“I will not dispute His Eminence’s counsel, and I trust we never made war but as reason would dictate. But yet his telling of this fable did in his day help the king and the realm to spend many a fair penny. However, that business is over and His Eminence is gone, God rest his soul.

“And therefore I shall now come to this Aesop’s fable as my Lord so cheerily laid it out for me. If those wise men, Meg, when the rain was over and they came outside and found all people fools, wished that they too were fools just because they could not rule them, then it would seem that the fools’ rain was so severe a shower that even through the ground it sank into their caves and poured down upon their heads and wet them to the skin, and made them more addlebrained than those that stayed outside. For if they’d had any sense, they might well have seen that if they had been fools too, that would not have sufficed to make them rulers over the other fools, any more than the other fools over them, and that of so many fools, not all could be rulers. Now, when they longed so badly to bear a rule among fools that, in order to do so, they would have been glad to lose their good sense and be fools too, obviously the fools’ rain had washed them fairly well. Although, to tell the truth, if before the rain came they thought that all the rest would turn into fools, and they were then either so foolish that they wanted to, or so crazy as to think that they would, being so few, rule so many fools, and did not have sense enough to realize that there are none so unruly as they that lack sense and are fools, then these supposedly wise men were stark fools before the rain came.

“Anyway, daughter Roper, whom my Lord takes here for the wise men, and whom he means by the fools, I cannot very well guess; I cannot well read such riddles. For to adapt what Davus says in Terence, ‘Non sum Oedipus’—you’re quite familiar with this, I may say—I’ll make this, ‘Non

sum Oedipus, sed Morus' [I am not Oedipus, but More], which name of mine, what it means in Greek, I need not tell you. But I trust my Lord reckons me among the fools, and so I reckon myself, as my name is in Greek.

24. “Jupiter and the Snail”

[From *Dialogue of Comfort Against Tribulation* (Scepter, 1998)]

There are also some, I say, who are reluctant to die because they lack good sense. These people believe in the world that is to come, and they hope to go there one day; yet they love so much the wealth of this world, and such things in it that delight them, that they will fight tooth and nail to keep them as long as they possibly can. And when they see themselves allowed in no way to keep that wealth any longer, when death comes to take them away from it, then, for lack of anything better, they will consent to be—as soon as they are gone—hoisted up to heaven and placed right next to God.

These folk are fools as totally idiotic as would be a man who kept from his childhood a bag filled with cherry stones, and who conceived such a fantasy about it that he would not trade it in for a bigger bag filled with gold. And, Nephew, these folk fare as did a snail, I believe it was, that Aesop tells about in one of his fables. It seems that when Jupiter (whom the poets pretend is the great god) invited all the lowly creatures of the earth to a great, grand feast that it pleased him to prepare for them (I forget on what occasion), the snail kept herself at home and would not go there. And when Jupiter asked her afterward why she had not come to his feast—where, he said, she would have been very welcome and would have had a great time, seeing a magnificent palace and being delighted with many wonderful pleasures—she answered him that she loved no place as much as her own house. At that answer Jupiter became very angry. He said that since she loved her house so much, she would never again have to leave it; from then on, wherever she went, she would always carry her house on her back. And so, they say, she has done ever since. I know for a fact that she does so now, at least, and that she has done so for as long as I can remember.

Vincent: Actually, Uncle, it seems to me that this story is not entirely fictional. I really think that much of what you are saying is quite true.

Anthony: By that fictional fable, Aesop meant to point out the foolishness of anyone who so sets his fancy upon some small, simple pleasure that he cannot find it in his heart to forgo it, either for the pleasure of a better person or to gain some better thing. By such silly stubbornness people sometimes incur great indignation and thereby suffer no little harm.

25. “The Old Hart that fled from a little Bitch”

[From *Dialogue of Comfort Against Tribulation* (Scepter, 1998)]

However, I am reminded of a fable of Aesop's about a great, old hart that fled from a little bitch.

For a long time she kept pursuing him, kept chasing him, but then she lost sight of him and he hoped—more than halfway gave up on him. This gave him some time to get together and talk with one of his companions. He began to deliberate with this other hart as to what was best for him to do: whether to keep running and try to get farther away from her, or to turn back and fight with her.

The other hart advised him to run no farther. For if he did, he said, the bitch might happen to find him again at a time when, from the labor of running farther, he would have run out of breath, and also out of all strength. Then, lying where he could not bestir himself, he would be killed. If, on the other hand, he were to turn around and fight, he would be in no danger at all. “For the man with whom she hunts is more than a mile behind her,” he said, “and she is but a little body, scarcely half as big as you, and your horns could thrust through her before she could touch your flesh with teeth more than ten times as long as the ones she has.”

“Upon my word,” said the old hart, “I really like your counsel, and I think that everything you’re saying is true. But I’m afraid that once I hear the barking of that bad-tempered bitch, I will forget all this and take to my heels. However, if you will go back with me, then I think the two of us together will be strong enough against that one bitch.” The other hart agreed, and so they both decided on that plan of action. But just as they were about to hustle themselves forward with it, the bitch recovered the scent. On she came, yelping, in their direction. And as soon as the harts heard her, they both ran away as fast as they could!

In all seriousness, Uncle, I’m afraid that’s the way it would go with me, and with many others too. Even if we think that in what you say you’re talking reason, and in our minds agree that we should do as you say—yes, and perhaps think also that we would indeed do as you say—yet as soon as we should once hear those hellhounds, these Turks, come yelping and bawling at us, I’m afraid our hearts would soon fall as clean away from us as those other harts flee from the hounds.

26. “The Fond Tale of Mother Maud: The Confessions of an Ass and a Wolf”

[From *Dialogue of Comfort Against Tribulation* (Scepter, 1998)]

When I was a little boy, there was a good old woman who helped my mother take care of us children. We called her Mother Maud—I believe you’ve heard of her?

Vincent: Oh, yes, I’ve heard a lot about her.

Anthony: Well, she used to sit by the fire with us children and tell us many childish stories. But as Pliny says that there is almost no book so bad that one cannot find in it something good, so I think there is almost no story so silly that it cannot, in one way or another, serve some serious purpose.

Among the many silly stories she told us, I particularly remember one about an ass and a wolf that once upon a time went to confession to a fox. The poor ass, it seems, went to confession during Shrovetide, a day or two before Ash Wednesday, but the wolf would not go to confession

till he first saw Palm Sunday pass by, and then he found some excuse not to do it till Good Friday.

Before the ass said “Bless me, Father,” the fox asked him why he had come for confession so soon, before Lent had even started. The poor beast answered him that it was for fear of mortal sin—he did not want to lose his share in any of those special prayers that the priest says during Shrovetide for those who have already made their confession.

Then, in his confession, he mentioned this astonishing scruple that he had on his conscience. He had, one morning, given his master cause for anger. Before it was time for his master to rise, he had, with his rude roaring, roused him from his sleep and thus robbed him of his rest. With that fault the fox, good and prudent confessor that he was, dealt as follows. He instructed the ass to do this no more, but, instead, to lie there quietly and go back to sleep like a good son, as it were, until his master was up and ready to go to work. Thus he could be sure not to wake him up anymore.

To tell you the poor ass’s entire confession would be a long work, for everything he did was mortal sin to him, the poor soul was so scrupulous. His wise and wily confessor, however, regarded all these things as the trifles that they were. And afterward he swore to the badger that he’d gotten so worn out from sitting so long and listening to this ass that, were it not for the sake of appearances, he would rather have spent that whole time sitting at breakfast with a good fat goose. But when it came to the giving of the penance, the fox found that the most serious sin the ass had confessed was gluttony. And therefore he prudently gave him as his penance that he should never out of greediness for food either harm or hinder any other beast in any way—that he should just eat his own food and not look for more.

Now, as good Mother Maud told it to us, when the wolf went on Good Friday to confess to Father Reynard (for that was, she said, the fox’s name), this confessor shook at him his big rosary beads (which were almost as big as bowling balls) and asked him why he had come so late. “Indeed, Father Reynard,” he said, “I must tell you the truth—for I have come, as you well know, to do just that. I didn’t dare come any sooner for fear that you would have given me, for my gluttony, the penance of fasting for some part of this Lent.”

“Oh, no,” said Father Fox, “I’d never be that unreasonable, especially since I myself don’t fast for any of it. For I may say to you, son, here in confession, just between the two of us, that it is no commandment of God, this fasting—it’s only a human invention. The priests make people fast, they make them worry about the moonlight in the water, they make complete fools out of people, but I guarantee you, son, they’ll make no such fool out of me. For I myself have eaten meat all through this Lent. However, because I certainly wouldn’t want to cause any scandal, I’ve eaten it secretly, in my bedroom, out of the sight of all those foolish brethren whose weak, scrupulous consciences would be offended by it. And so would I counsel you to do.”

“Indeed, Father Fox,” said the wolf, “I already do this as best I can, thanks be to God. For when I go to my meat, I take with me no companions except such sure-footed brethren as are of my own nature. Their consciences are not weak, I can assure you—their stomachs are, in fact, as strong as mine.”

“Well, then, no problem,” said Father Fox.

But after that, the wolf confessed to being such a great plunderer that he sometimes devoured as much meat at one time, and thus in effect spent as much for one meal, as might well have bought enough food to last some poor man, along with his wife and children, almost a whole week. And the fox prudently reproved that point in him. He preached to him a sermon on his own practice of temperance, which included, he said, never spending more than sixpence for a meal—actually, not even that much. “For when I bring home a goose,” he said, “I don’t get it from the butcher’s shop, where folk can find them with their feathers already plucked off and can see which is the fattest and then for sixpence choose and buy the best one. No, I get it at the housewife’s house, firsthand—she can, you know, afford to sell them at a somewhat cheaper price than the butcher can. True, I don’t have the opportunity to see them already plucked, or to stand there and choose them in the light of day; I have to go there at night and just pick one at random, and when I get home I have to do myself all the work of plucking it. But for all that, even it turns out to be just skin and bones and not worth, I think, even fourpence, it sometimes still makes both my lunch and my supper.

“Now, then, as for your living off of plundering, I can find no fault with that. You have lived this way for so long that I don’t think you could do any different. I therefore think it would be foolish of me to forbid you to go on plundering. To tell the truth, that would even go against my conscience. For I know perfectly well that you’ve got to live, and that you know no other way to do so. It therefore stands to reason that you must live by plundering. Still, you know, too much is too much. Moderation, or a happy medium, is a rule that I gather, from what you’ve confessed, you’ve never learned to observe. Your penance, therefore, is precisely this: For the rest of this year you shall never eat a meal that is worth more than sixpence, as nearly as your conscience can guess the price.”

Thus I have related to you, as Mother Maud related them to us, the confessions of the ass and the wolf. But what now concerns us is the consciences of them both in the actual performing of their penances.

The poor ass, right after his confession, during which he had gotten very hungry, saw a sow lying with her pigs, all well covered up in new straw. He drew near, thinking he might eat some of the straw, but then his scrupulous conscience began to torment him on that matter. His penance being that he should not, out of greediness for food, do any kind of harm to any other beast, he thought he must not eat even one straw there, lest for lack of that straw some of those pigs might happen to die from the cold. So he stayed hungry until someone brought him some food. But then, when he was about to fall to it, he fell into yet another scruple. The thought came into his mind that he couldn’t eat that food, either, without breaking his penance, since his spiritual father had commanded him that he should not, in getting food for himself, hinder in any way any other beast. For if he did not eat that food, he thought, then some other beast might happen to get it, and so by eating it he would perhaps be hindering another. So he just stood there, still fasting, until, after he told someone the reason, his spiritual father came and taught him better. He then cast off that scruple and properly fell to his food, and was a right honest ass for many a good day after.

The wolf, on the other hand, when he came out from confession clean absolved of his sins, proceeded to do something similar to what a certain nagging wife, when she came home from confession one day, told her husband she was going to do. “Cheer up, man,” she said, “for today, thanks be to God, I made a very good confession and got thoroughly absolved. So now I intend to stop all my old nagging, and start over afresh!”

Vincent: Oh, now, Uncle, is it fair to tell it that way? I myself heard her say that, but she said it as a joke, to make her husband laugh.

Anthony: Actually, she did seem to mean it halfway as a joke. For when she said she would stop all her old nagging, there I think she was joking. But what she said about beginning it all afresh, that, I’m afraid, her husband found to be meant in all seriousness.

Vincent: Well, I’m going to tell her what you said, I promise you.

Anthony: And then you’ll find that I’ve told you the truth! But whatever she did, this is what the wolf, at least, did do after he cast out in confession all his old plundering. Hunger then prodded him to go forth and, as that nagging wife said, begin it all afresh. Yet a prodding of conscience pulled and held him back, for he did not want to break his penance by taking for his meal any prey that could be sold for over sixpence.

Well, it so happened that as he went prowling for some sustenance, he came to a place where, a few days before, a man had gotten rid of two old horses that were lean and lame. They were, in fact, so sick that there was hardly any flesh left on them. One of them, by the time the wolf came by, could hardly stand on his legs, and the other was already dead, and his skin ripped off and carried away. When the wolf suddenly came upon them, he at first was going to feed upon them and whet his teeth on their bones. But then he looked around and caught sight of a fair cow in an enclosed field, walking with a young calf by her side, and as soon as he saw them, his conscience began to trouble him about both of those two horses. He sighed and said to himself, “Alas, wicked wretch that I am, I almost broke my penance without even realizing it! For yonder dead horse—I’ve never seen a dead horse sold in the market, and so I could not guess, to save my life or my sinful soul, what price I should set on him. But in my conscience I set him far above sixpence, and therefore I dare not meddle with him.

“Now, then, yonder live horse is in all likelihood worth a great deal of money. For in this country, horses are expensive, especially such gentle amblers. I see by his pace that he does not trot; in fact, he can barely shift a foot. And therefore I may not meddle with him, for he very far exceeds my sixpence.

“Of cows, however, this country has plenty, while of money it has very little. Considering, therefore, the abundance of cattle and the scarcity of money, yonder piddling cow seems to me, in my conscience, worth no more than fourpence, if even that much. And her calf, now, cannot be worth more than half as much as she is. Since, therefore, the cow is in my conscience worth but fourpence, my conscience cannot allow me—on pain of sin—to price her calf above twopence. And so the both of them together don’t add up to more than sixpence, and therefore I

can eat them both at this one meal without breaking my penance at all.” And thereupon he did so, without any scruple of conscience.

If such beasts could speak now, as Mother Maud said they could then, some of them would, I dare say, tell a tale that makes almost as much sense as this one! Actually, if it would not have lessened the impact of old Mother Maud’s tale, a shorter version would have sufficed. But as preposterous as this parable is, our purpose is served by the point that it makes: namely, that the “terror of the night” of a somewhat scrupulous conscience, though it is quite troublesome and painful to the one who has it (as it was to this poor ass here), is nevertheless not as harmful as a conscience that is overly permissive, that one can adjust to suit one’s own fancy, sometimes pulling it tight and sometimes stretching it out, like a belt, to serve on every side for one’s own convenience (as did here the wily wolf).