

Aesop's Fables

23. TWO TRAVELLERS AND A BEAR

By Sue Reid

One cold winter's day two friends set off to travel to the town. They talked and laughed as they strode along. It was cold and snow was falling but the two men hardly noticed - they were enjoying each other's company so much. What a pleasant fellow he is, each of them thought. I'm glad that we are travelling together.

The road to the town lay through a forest. It was late by the time the men reached it.

'We should turn back,' one of them said to the other nervously. 'It'll soon be dark and there are bears in that forest.'

His friend was just as scared as he was. But didn't want his friend to know. So he laughed. 'Pah! Bears. That's nothing to be afraid of. I fought a bear once - and he ran away.'

The other man felt ashamed of himself. I am a coward, but he is brave, he thought. 'Then we'll go on,' he said.

It was very dark in that forest. The trees grew close together. It was hard to see the road clearly. It was hard to see anything at all!

But the man wasn't afraid any more. He listened as his friend told him all about his fight with the bear. 'It was very big,' he boasted. 'Twice as big as me. But I picked up a stick and fought it off.'

All of a sudden there was an enormous crash. And out of the bushes lumbered - a bear! The men had never seen such a huge bear. When it saw the men it licked its lips. 'At last!' it said, standing up on its hind legs and growling. 'Dinner!'

With a cry of fright, the friend ran to the nearest tree and hauled himself up onto a branch.

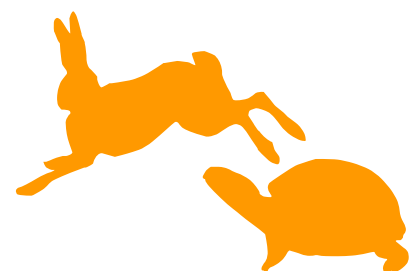
'Aren't you going to fight it?' the man cried.

'Fight it! You must be mad,' said his friend. 'It will kill us.'

The man ran up to the tree where his friend crouched, trembling. 'There's room for us both in that tree,' he cried. 'Help me up.'

But his friend pushed him away. 'No there isn't. Find somewhere else to hide,' he said.

'What shall I do?' the man thought.





The bear was so close now he could have stretched out a hand and touched it. 'If I try to run it will run faster. If I fight it, it will kill me. It is bigger and stronger than me.'

He flung himself to the ground and lay there, as still as he could. 'Perhaps it will leave me alone,' he thought, 'if it thinks I am dead.'

The bear was very hungry. It hadn't eaten for a long time. But it was puzzled when it saw the man drop to the ground. 'Is he dead?' it wondered. 'Let me see.'

It bent down, so close that the man could feel its fur brush his cheek. Then it put out a paw and prodded him. The man lay still, his heart pounding. 'Any minute now,' he thought, 'that bear will tear me to pieces.'

But the bear got up. 'He hasn't moved. He must be dead,' it thought. 'And I don't like dead meat.' And it ambled away sadly into the forest.

The man got up and dusted himself down. He didn't look at his friend. He was very angry with him. He had pretended to be brave, but he was a coward. He had left him to face the bear on his own.

'I saw the bear whisper in your ear,' the friend said climbing down from the tree. 'What did he say?'

'He said a man who leaves his friend to face danger isn't a true friend.'

And with that he turned away, leaving the other to make his own way home.