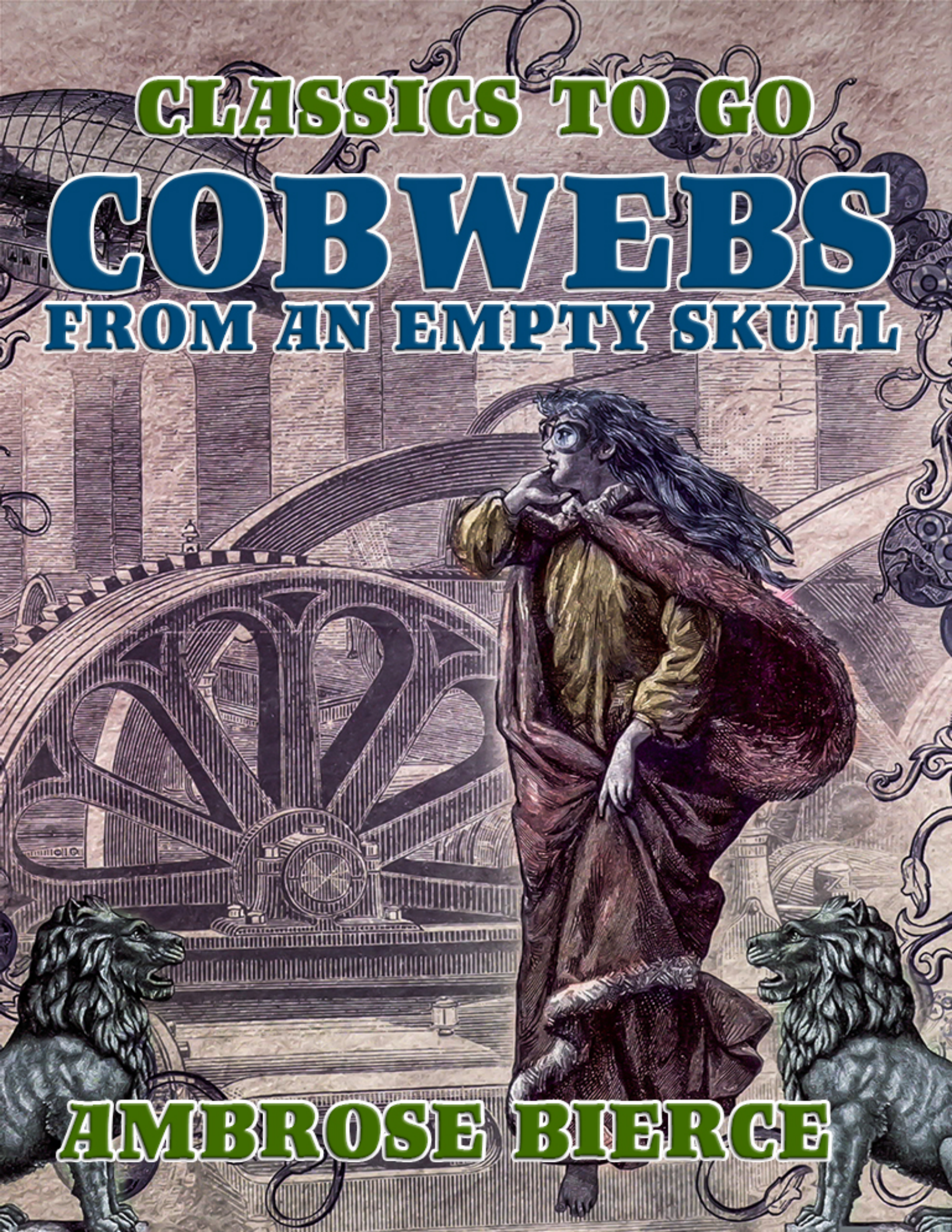
CLASSICS TO GO

COBWEBS FROM AN EMPTY SKULL



AMBROSE BIERCE

Cobwebs from

An Empty Skull

Ambrose Bierce

PREFACE.

The matter of which this volume is composed appeared originally in the columns of "FUN," when the wisdom of the Fables and the truth of the Tales tended to wholesomely diminish the levity of that jocund sheet. Their publication in a new form would seem to be a fitting occasion to say something as to their merit.

Homer's "Iliad," it will be remembered, was but imperfectly appreciated by Homer's contemporaries. Milton's "Paradise Lost" was so lightly regarded when first written, that the author received but twenty-five pounds for it. Ben Jonson was for some time blind to the beauties of Shakespeare, and Shakespeare himself had but small esteem for his own work.

Appearing each week in "FUN," these Fables and Tales very soon attracted the notice of the Editor, who was frank enough to say, afterward, that when he accepted the manuscript he did not quite perceive the quality of it. The printers, too, into whose hands it came, have since admitted that for some days they felt very little interest in it, and could not even make out what it was all about. When to these evidences I add the confession that at first I did not myself observe anything extraordinary in my work, I think I need say no more: the discerning public will note the parallel, and my modesty be spared the necessity of making an ass of itself.

D.G.

FABLES OF ZAMBRI, THE PARSEE.

I.

A certain Persian nobleman obtained from a cow gipsy a small oyster. Holding him up by the beard, he addressed him thus:

"You must try to forgive me for what I am about to do; and you might as well set about it at once, for you haven't much time. I should never think of swallowing you if it were not so

easy; but opportunity is the strongest of all temptations. Besides, I am an orphan, and very hungry."

"Very well," replied the oyster; "it affords me genuine pleasure to comfort the parentless and the starving. I have already done my best for our friend here, of whom you purchased me; but although she has an amiable and accommodating stomach, *we couldn't agree*. For this trifling incompatibility—would you believe it?—she was about to stew me! Saviour, benefactor, proceed."

"I think," said the nobleman, rising and laying down the oyster, "I ought to know something more definite about your antecedents before succouring you. If you couldn't agree with your mistress, you are probably no better than you should be."

People who begin doing something from a selfish motive frequently drop it when they learn that it is a real benevolence.

II.

A rat seeing a cat approaching, and finding no avenue of escape, went boldly up to her, and said:

"Madam, I have just swallowed a dose of powerful bane, and in accordance with instructions upon the label, have come out of my hole to die. Will you kindly direct me to a spot where my corpse will prove peculiarly offensive?"

"Since you are so ill," replied the cat, "I will myself transport you to a spot which I think will suit."

So saying, she struck her teeth through the nape of his neck and trotted away with him. This was more than he had bargained for, and he squeaked shrilly with the pain.

"Ah!" said the cat, "a rat who knows he has but a few minutes to live, never makes a fuss about a little agony. I don't think, my fine fellow, you have taken poison enough to hurt either you or me."

So she made a meal of him.

If this fable does not teach that a rat gets no profit by lying, I should be pleased to know what it does teach.

III.

A frog who had been sitting up all night in neighbourly converse with an echo of elegant leisure, went out in the grey of the morning to obtain a cheap breakfast. Seeing a tadpole approach,

"Halt!" he croaked, "and show cause why I should not eat you."

The tadpole stopped and displayed a fine tail.

"Enough," said the frog: "I mistook you for one of us; and if there is anything I like, it is frog. But no frog has a tail, as a matter of course."

While he was speaking, however, the tail ripened and dropped off, and its owner stood revealed in his edible character.

"Aha!" ejaculated the frog, "so that is your little game! If, instead of adopting a disguise, you had trusted to my mercy, I should have spared you. But I am down upon all manner of deceit."

And he had him down in a moment.

Learn from this that he would have eaten him anyhow.

IV.

An old man carrying, for no obvious reason, a sheaf of sticks, met another donkey whose cargo consisted merely of a bundle of stones.

"Suppose we swop," said the donkey.

"Very good, sir," assented the old man; "lay your load upon my shoulders, and take off my parcel, putting it upon your own back."

The donkey complied, so far as concerned his own encumbrance, but neglected to remove that of the other.

"How clever!" said the merry old gentleman, "I knew you would do that. If you had done any differently there would have been no point to the fable."

And laying down both burdens by the roadside, he trudged away as merry as anything.

V.

An elephant meeting a mouse, reproached him for not taking a proper interest in growth.

"It is all very well," retorted the mouse, "for people who haven't the capacity for anything better. Let them grow if they like; but *I* prefer toasted cheese."

The stupid elephant, not being able to make very much sense of this remark, essayed, after the manner of persons worsted at repartee, to set his foot upon his clever

conqueror. In point of fact, he did set his foot upon him, and there wasn't any more mouse.

The lesson imparted by this fable is open, palpable: mice and elephants look at things each after the manner of his kind; and when an elephant decides to occupy the standpoint of a mouse, it is unhealthy for the latter.

VI.

A wolf was slaking his thirst at a stream, when a lamb left the side of his shepherd, came down the creek to the wolf, passed round him with considerable ostentation, and began drinking below.

"I beg you to observe," said the lamb, "that water does not commonly run uphill; and my sipping here cannot possibly defile the current where you are, even supposing my nose were no cleaner than yours, which it is. So you have not the flimsiest pretext for slaying me."

"I am not aware, sir," replied the wolf, "that I require a pretext for loving chops; it never occurred to me that one was necessary."

And he dined upon that lambkin with much apparent satisfaction.

This fable ought to convince any one that of two stories very similar one needs not necessarily be a plagiarism.

VII.

An old gentleman sat down, one day, upon an acorn, and finding it a very comfortable seat, went soundly to sleep. The warmth of his body caused the acorn to germinate, and it grew so rapidly, that when the sleeper awoke he found himself sitting in the fork of an oak, sixty feet from the ground.

"Ah!" said he, "I am fond of having an extended view of any landscape which happens to please my fancy; but this one

does not seem to possess that merit. I think I will go home."

It is easier to say go home than to go.

"Well, well!" he resumed, "if I cannot compel circumstances to my will, I can at least adapt my will to circumstances. I decide to remain. 'Life'—as a certain eminent philosopher in England wilt say, whenever there shall be an England to say it in—'is the definite combination of heterogeneous changes, both simultaneous and successive, in correspondence with external co-existences and sequences.' I have, fortunately, a few years of this before me yet; and I suppose I can permit my surroundings to alter me into anything I choose."

And he did; but what a choice!

I should say that the lesson hereby imparted is one of contentment combined with science.

VIII.

A caterpillar had crawled painfully to the top of a hop-pole, and not finding anything there to interest him, began to think of descending.

"Now," soliloquized he, "if I only had a pair of wings, I should be able to manage it very nicely."

So saying, he turned himself about to go down, but the heat of his previous exertion, and that of the sun, had by this time matured him into a butterfly.

"Just my luck!" he growled, "I never wish for anything without getting it. I did not expect this when I came out this morning, and have nothing prepared. But I suppose I shall have to stand it."

So he spread his pinions and made for the first open flower he saw. But a spider happened to be spending the summer in that vegetable, and it was not long before Mr. Butterfly was wishing himself back atop of that pole, a simple caterpillar.

He had at last the pleasure of being denied a desire.

Hæc fabula docet that it is not a good plan to call at houses without first ascertaining who is at home there.

IX.

It is related of a certain Tartar priest that, being about to sacrifice a pig, he observed tears in the victim's eyes.

"Now, I'd like to know what is the matter with *you*?" he asked.

"Sir," replied the pig, "if your penetration were equal to that of the knife you hold, you would know without inquiring; but I don't mind telling you. I weep because I know I shall be badly roasted."

"Ah," returned the priest, meditatively, having first killed the pig, "we are all pretty much alike: it is the bad roasting that frightens us. Mere death has no terrors."

From this narrative learn that even priests sometimes get hold of only half a truth.

X.

A dog being very much annoyed by bees, ran, quite accidentally, into an empty barrel lying on the ground, and looking out at the bung-hole, addressed his tormenters thus:

"Had you been temperate, stinging me only one at a time, you might have got a good deal of fun out of me. As it is, you have driven me into a secure retreat; for I can snap you up as fast as you come in through the bung-hole. Learn from this the folly of intemperate zeal."

When he had concluded, he awaited a reply. There wasn't any reply; for the bees had never gone near the bung-hole; they went in the same way as he did, and made it very warm for him.

The lesson of this fable is that one cannot stick to his pure reason while quarrelling with bees.

XI.

A fox and a duck having quarrelled about the ownership of a frog, agreed to refer the dispute to a lion. After hearing a great deal of argument, the lion opened his mouth to speak.

"I am very well aware," interrupted the duck, "what your decision is. It is that by our own showing the frog belongs to neither of us, and you will eat him yourself. But please remember that lions do not like frogs."

"To me," exclaimed the fox, "it is perfectly clear that you will give the frog to the duck, the duck to me, and take me yourself. Allow me to state certain objections to—"

"I was about to remark," said the lion, "that while you were disputing, the cause of contention had hopped away. Perhaps you can procure another frog."

To point out the moral of this fable would be to offer a gratuitous insult to the acuteness of the reader.

XII.

An ass meeting a pair of horses, late one evening, said to them:

"It is time all honest horses were in bed. Why are you driving out at this time of day?"

"Ah!" returned they, "if it is so very late, why are you out riding?"

"I never in my life," retorted the ass angrily, "knew a horse to return a direct answer to a civil question."

This tale shows that this ass did not know everything.

[The implication that horses do not answer questions seems to have irritated the worthy fabulist.—TRANSLATOR.]

XIII.

A stone being cast by the plough against a lump of earth, hastened to open the conversation as follows:

"Virtue, which is the opposite of vice, is best fostered by the absence of temptation!"

The lump of earth, being taken somewhat by surprise, was not prepared with an apophthegm, and said nothing.

Since that time it has been customary to call a stupid person a "clod."

XIV.

A river seeing a zephyr carrying off an anchor, asked him, "What are you going to do with it?"

"I give it up," replied the zephyr, after mature reflection.

"Blow me if *I* would!" continued the river; "you might just as well not have taken it at all."

"Between you and me," returned the zephyr, "I only picked it up because it is customary for zephyrs to do such things. But if you don't mind I will carry it up to your head and drop it in your mouth."

This fable teaches such a multitude of good things that it would be invidious to mention any.

XV.

A peasant sitting on a pile of stones saw an ostrich approaching, and when it had got within range he began pelting it. It is hardly probable that the bird liked this; but it never moved until a large number of boulders had been discharged; then it fell to and ate them.

"It was very good of you, sir," then said the fowl; "pray tell me to what virtue I am indebted for this excellent meal."

"To piety," replied the peasant, who, believing that anything able to devour stones must be a god, was stricken with fear. "I beg you won't think these were merely cold victuals from my table; I had just gathered them fresh, and was intending to have them dressed for my dinner; but I am always hospitable to the deities, and now I suppose I shall have to go without."

"On the contrary, my pious youth," returned the ostrich, "you shall go within."

And the man followed the stones.

The falsehoods of the wicked never amount to much.

XVI.

Two thieves went into a farmer's granary and stole a sack of kitchen vegetables; and, one of them slinging it across his shoulders, they began to run away. In a moment all the domestic animals and barn-yard fowls about the place were at their heels, in high clamour, which threatened to bring the farmer down upon them with his dogs.

"You have no idea how the weight of this sack assists me in escaping, by increasing my momentum," said the one who carried the plunder; "suppose *you* take it."

"Ah!" returned the other, who had been zealously pointing out the way to safety, and keeping foremost therein, "it is interesting to find how a common danger makes people confiding. You have a thousand times said I could not be trusted with valuable booty. It is an humiliating confession, but I am myself convinced that if I should assume that sack, and the impetus it confers, you could not depend upon your dividend."

"A common danger," was the reply, "seems to stimulate conviction, as well as confidence."

"Very likely," assented the other, drily; "I am quite too busy to enter into these subtleties. You will find the subject very ably treated in the Zend-Avesta."

But the bastinado taught them more in a minute than they would have gleaned from that excellent work in a fortnight.

If they could only have had the privilege of reading this fable, it would have taught them more than either.

XVII.

While a man was trying with all his might to cross a fence, a bull ran to his assistance, and taking him upon his horns,

tossed him over. Seeing the man walking away without making any remark, the bull said:

"You are quite welcome, I am sure. I did no more than my duty."

"I take a different view of it, very naturally," replied the man, "and you may keep your polite acknowledgments of my gratitude until you receive it. I did not require your services."

"You don't mean to say," answered the bull, "that you did not wish to cross that fence!"

"I mean to say," was the rejoinder, "that I wished to cross it by my method, solely to avoid crossing it by yours."

Fabula docet that while the end is everything, the means is something.

XVIII.

An hippopotamus meeting an open alligator, said to him:

"My forked friend, you may as well collapse. You are not sufficiently comprehensive to embrace me. I am myself no tyro at smiling, when in the humour."

"I really had no expectation of taking you in," replied the other. "I have a habit of extending my hospitality impartially to all, and about seven feet wide."

"You remind me," said the hippopotamus, "of a certain zebra who was not vicious at all; he merely kicked the breath out of everything that passed behind him, but did not induce things to pass behind him."

"It is quite immaterial what I remind you of," was the reply.

The lesson conveyed by this fable is a very beautiful one.

XIX.

A man was plucking a living goose, when his victim addressed him thus:

"Suppose *you* were a goose; do you think you would relish this sort of thing?"

"Well, suppose I were," answered the man; "do you think *you* would like to pluck me?"

"Indeed I would!" was the emphatic, natural, but injudicious reply.

"Just so," concluded her tormentor; "that's the way *I* feel about the matter."

XX.

A traveller perishing of thirst in a desert, debated with his camel whether they should continue their journey, or turn back to an oasis they had passed some days before. The traveller favoured the latter plan.

"I am decidedly opposed to any such waste of time," said the animal; "I don't care for oases myself."

"I should not care for them either," retorted the man, with some temper, "if, like you, I carried a number of assorted water-tanks inside. But as you will not submit to go back, and I shall not consent to go forward, we can only remain where we are."

"But," objected the camel, "that will be certain death to you!"

"Not quite," was the quiet answer, "it involves only the loss of my camel."

So saying, he assassinated the beast, and appropriated his liquid store.

A compromise is not always a settlement satisfactory to both parties.

XXI.

A sheep, making a long journey, found the heat of his fleece very uncomfortable, and seeing a flock of other sheep in a fold, evidently awaiting for some one, leaped over and joined them, in the hope of being shorn. Perceiving the shepherd approaching, and the other sheep huddling into a remote corner of the fold, he shouldered his way forward, and going up to the shepherd, said:

"Did you ever see such a lot of fools? It's lucky I came along to set them an example of docility. Seeing me operated upon, they 'll be glad to offer themselves."

"Perhaps so," replied the shepherd, laying hold of the animal's horns; "but I never kill more than one sheep at a time. Mutton won't keep in hot weather."

The chops tasted excellently well with tomato sauce.

The moral of this fable isn't what you think it is. It is this: The chops of another man's mutton are *always* nice eating.

XXII.

Two travellers between Teheran and Bagdad met half-way up the vertical face of a rock, on a path only a cubit in width. As both were in a hurry, and etiquette would allow neither to set his foot upon the other even if dignity had permitted prostration, they maintained for some time a stationary condition. After some reflection, each decided to jump round the other; but as etiquette did not warrant conversation with a stranger, neither made known his intention. The consequence was they met, with considerable emphasis, about four feet from the edge of the path, and went through a flight of soaring eagles, a mile out of their way![A]

XXIII.

A stone which had lain for centuries in a hidden place complained to Allah that remaining so long in one position was productive of cramps.

"If thou wouldst be pleased," it said, "to let me take a little exercise now and then, my health would be the better for it."

So it was granted permission to make a short excursion, and at once began rolling out into the open desert. It had not proceeded far before an ostrich, who was pensively eating a keg of nails, left his repast, dashed at the stone, and gobbled it up.

This narration teaches the folly of contentment: if the ostrich had been content with his nails he would never have eaten the stone.

XXIV.

A man carrying a sack of corn up a high ladder propped against a wall, had nearly reached the top, when a powerful hog passing that way leant against the bottom to scratch its hide.

"I wish," said the man, speaking down the ladder, "you would make that operation as brief as possible; and when I come down I will reward you by rearing a fresh ladder especially for you."

"This one is quite good enough for a hog," was the reply; "but I am curious to know if you will keep your promise, so I'll just amuse myself until you come down."

And taking the bottom rung in his mouth, he moved off, away from the wall. A moment later he had all the loose corn he could garner, but he never got that other ladder.

MORAL.—An ace and four kings is as good a hand as one can hold in draw-poker.

XXV.

A young cock and a hen were speaking of the size of eggs. Said the cock:

"I once laid an egg—"

"Oh, you did!" interrupted the hen, with a derisive cackle. "Pray how did you manage it?"

The cock felt injured in his self-esteem, and, turning his back upon the hen, addressed himself to a brood of young chickens.

"I once laid an egg—"

The chickens chirped incredulously, and passed on. The insulted bird reddened in the wattles with indignation, and strutting up to the patriarch of the entire barn-yard, repeated his assertion. The patriarch nodded gravely, as if the feat were an every-day affair, and the other continued:

"I once laid an egg alongside a water-melon, and compared the two. The vegetable was considerably the larger."

This fable is intended to show the absurdity of hearing all a man has to say.

XXVI.

Seeing himself getting beyond his depth, a bathing naturalist called lustily for succour.

"Anything *I* can do for you?" inquired the engaging octopus.