

To Monseigneur The Dauphin.[1]

I sing the heroes of old Aesop's line,
 Whose tale, though false when strictly we define,
 Containeth truths it were not ill to teach.
 With me all natures use the gift of speech;
 Yea, in my work, the very fishes preach,
 And to our human selves their sermons suit.
 'Tis thus, to come at man, I use the brute.

Son of a Prince the favourite of the skies,
 On whom the world entire hath fix'd its eyes,
 Who hence shall count his conquests by his days,
 And gather from the proudest lips his praise,
 A louder voice than mine must tell in song
 What virtues to thy kingly line belong.
 I seek thine ear to gain by lighter themes,
 Slight pictures, deck'd in magic nature's beams;
 And if to please thee shall not be my pride,
 I'll gain at least the praise of having tried.

[1] This dedication prefaced La Fontaine's first collection of his Fables, which comprised Books I. to VI., published in 1668. The Dauphin was Louis, the only son of Louis XIV. and Marie-Thérèse of Austria. He was born at Fontainebleau in 1661, and died at Meudon in 1712, before his father, the "Grand Monarque," had ceased to reign. The Dauphin being but a child, between six and seven years old, at the time of this dedication, La Fontaine's act may be viewed rather as an offering to the King, than to the child himself. See the Translator's Preface.

BOOK I.

I.--THE GRASSHOPPER AND THE ANT.[1]

A Grasshopper gay
 Sang the summer away,
 And found herself poor
 By the winter's first roar.
 Of meat or of bread,
 Not a morsel she had!
 So a begging she went,
 To her neighbour the ant,
 For the loan of some wheat,
 Which would serve her to eat,
 Till the season came round.
 'I will pay you,' she saith,
 'On an animal's faith,
 Double weight in the pound
 Ere the harvest be bound.'

The ant is a friend
 (And here she might mend)
 Little given to lend.
 'How spent you the summer?'
 Quoth she, looking shame
 At the borrowing dame.
 'Night and day to each comer
 I sang, if you please.'
 'You sang! I'm at ease;
 For 'tis plain at a glance,
 Now, ma'am, you must dance.'

[1] For the story of this fable, as for the stories of so many of the fables which follow, especially in the first six books, La Fontaine is indebted to the Father of Fable, Aesop the Phrygian. See account of Aesop in the Translator's Preface.

II.--THE RAVEN AND THE FOX.[2]

Perch'd on a lofty oak,
 Sir Raven held a lunch of cheese;
 Sir Fox, who smelt it in the breeze,
 Thus to the holder spoke:--
 'Ha! how do you do, Sir Raven?
 Well, your coat, sir, is a brave one!
 So black and glossy, on my word, sir,
 With voice to match, you were a bird, sir,
 Well fit to be the Phoenix of these days.'
 Sir Raven, overset with praise,
 Must show how musical his croak.
 Down fell the luncheon from the oak;
 Which snatching up, Sir Fox thus spoke:--
 'The flatterer, my good sir,
 Aye liveth on his listener;
 Which lesson, if you please,
 Is doubtless worth the cheese.'
 A bit too late, Sir Raven swore
 The rogue should never cheat him more.

[2] Both Aesop and Phaedrus have a version of this fable.

III.--THE FROG THAT WISHED TO BE AS BIG AS THE OX.[3]

The tenant of a bog,
 An envious little frog,
 Not bigger than an egg,
 A stately bullock spies,
 And, smitten with his size,
 Attempts to be as big.
 With earnestness and pains,
 She stretches, swells, and strains,