

The Racers

Hans Christian Andersen

A prize was offered - or rather two prizes, a large one and a small one - for the greatest speed shown, not in just one race, but by one who had been racing for the whole year.

"I won the first prize," said the Hare. "Of course, one can expect justice when one's own family and good friends are members of the jury; but for the Snail to have received the second prize I consider almost an insult to me!"

"No," assured the Fence Rail, who had been witness to the distribution of prizes. "You have to consider diligence and good will. Several very worthy persons made that remark to me, and I quite agree with it. Of course, the Snail took a whole six months to cross the threshold, but he broke his thighbone in his haste, for haste it was for him. He devoted himself entirely to this race; and he even ran with his house on his back. All this is very commendable, and so he was awarded second prize."

"I think my claims ought to have received consideration," said the Swallow. "I believe no one has shown himself swifter than I, in flight and motion. And where haven't I been? Far, far away!"

"That's just your trouble," said the Fence Rail. "You don't settle down enough. You're always going somewhere, leaving the country when it begins to freeze here. You haven't any love for your fatherland, so you can't claim any consideration in it."

"But suppose I slept the whole winter through on the moor," asked the Swallow, "slept my whole time away. Then would I deserve to be considered?"

"Get an affidavit from the old woman of the marsh that you slept a half year in your fatherland, and then your claims will be given consideration."

"I really deserved the first prize instead of the second," said the Snail. "I know perfectly well that the Hare ran only because he was afraid, whenever he thought danger was near. On the other hand, I made the trial the task of my life, and I have crippled myself through my efforts. If anyone had a right to the first prize it was I; but I'm not making a fuss; I despise fusses!" And then he spat.

"I can give you my word of honor," said the old Signpost who had been one of the judges, "that each prize, at least as far as my influence went, was awarded with strict justice. I always proceed according to order, reflection, and calculation. Seven times before now I have had the honor of helping in giving out the prize, but not until today have I been able to do it in my own way. At each distribution I have always had something specific in mind. For the first prize I have always started from the first letter of the alphabet, and for the second I've started from the last. If you'll give me your attention for a moment I'll explain it to you. The eighth letter of the alphabet from *A* is *H*. That stands for *Hare*, so I voted the first prize to go to the Hare. And the eighth letter from the end is *S*, so I voted the second prize to the *Snail*. Next time the letter *I* will get the first prize and *R* the second. There should always be proper order in everything. One must have certain rules to go by."

"Well, I should certainly have voted for myself, if I hadn't been one of the judges," said the Mule, who was also a juryman. "People must consider not only how quickly you run, but other conditions that are pertinent, such as how much you are able to pull. But I wouldn't have laid stress on this point this time, nor about the shrewdness of the Hare's flight - how cleverly he sprang suddenly to one side, in order to lead people into a wrong track and away from his hiding place. No, there is still another thing of great importance to many people that should be considered. It is called 'the beautiful.' I saw it in the Hare's handsome, well-made ears; it's really a pleasure to see how long they are. I thought I was

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seeing myself when I was small; that's why I voted for him."

"Oh, hush!" said the Fly. "As for me, I won't make a speech; I just want to say one word. I know for certain that I've outrun more than one hare. The other day I broke the hind legs of a young one. I was sitting on the railway engine at the front of the train. I often do that; you can see your own speed so well there. For a long time a young hare ran in front of the engine - he had no idea I was there. At last, just as he was going to turn off the tracks, the locomotive ran over his hind legs and broke them, because I was sitting on it. He remained lying there, but I passed on. That was certainly outrunning him; but I don't need the prize."

"It seems to me," thought the wild Rose, although she didn't speak it out loud - it was not her nature to express her ideas openly, though it might have been a good thing to do - "it seems to me that the Sunbeam should have had the first prize, and the second, too. It crosses in a moment the limitless space from the sun to us and brings such power that all nature is awakened by it. And under its beauty we roses blush and become fragrant. These high and mighty judges don't seem to have noticed it at all. If I were a Sunbeam I'd give them each a sunstroke! But then, it would only make them crazy, and they'll probably be that, anyway. No, I won't say anything," thought the wild Rose. It's peaceful here in the woods; it's delightful to bloom, to shed fragrant perfume everywhere, to live in story and in song! But the Sunbeams will outlive all of us."

"What's the first prize?" asked the Earthworm, who had overslept and just now arrived.

"Free entrance to a kitchen garden," said the Mule. "I suggested that prize. The Hare must and should have it; as a clear-thinking and rational member of the committee, this seemed to me a sensible way of looking at it. I was determined that he should have it, so now the Hare is provided for. The Snail has permission to sit on the stone fence and enjoy the moss and sunshine; and in addition to this, he has been appointed one of the head judges of the next race. It is sensible to have one who has practical knowledge of the business at hand sitting on a committee, as the humans call it. I must say I expect a great deal from the future - we have already made such a sound beginning!"

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