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The Racers

by

Hans Christian Andersen

(from *Hans Andersen Forty-Two Stories* [1930], translated by M. R. James)

A prize—in fact, two prizes—were offered, a large and a small one, for the greatest speed attained, not in a single race, but for running during the whole year.

"I got the first prize," said the Hare. "Justice is sure to be done if one's own family and good friends are the judges; but that the Snail should have got the second prize I consider almost a personal insult."

"No", insisted the Gatepost, who had been a witness of the award, "account must also be taken of hard work and good intentions. That was what several respectable persons said, and I took the same view. The Snail, it is true, took half a year to get over the doorstep, but he fractured his thigh in his hurry, and that was in his favour. He has lived wholly and solely for this race, and he ran with his house on his back. All this is most creditable to him, and therefore he got the second prize."

"I might well have been considered too," said the Swallow. "No one, I believe, showed himself swifter in flight and in turning than I did; and then where haven't I been? Far! Far! Far!"

"Yes, that's just your misfortune," said the Gatepost. "You gad about too much. You're always off out of the country the moment the frost begins here. You have no love for your native land; you can't be considered."

"But if I was to lie out in the marsh the whole winter," said the Swallow, "if I was to sleep the whole time, should I be considered then?"

"Well, get a certificate from the Marshwoman that you slept half the time in your own country, and you will be."

"I did really deserve the first prize, not the second," said the Snail. "I know for a fact that the Hare ran purely out of cowardice, whenever he thought there was danger in the offing. I, on the other hand, made my race the task of my life, and have become a cripple in the service. If anyone ought to have the first prize, it is I: but I don't make a fuss about it, I'd scorn to do so," with which he spat.

"I can affirm in the plainest manner that each prize—or at least my vote for it—was given with honest intention," said the old Boundary-post in the wood, who was a member of the deciding body of judges. "I always proceed with method, consideration, and calculation. Seven times I have enjoyed the privilege of taking part in the award, but never before to-day have I managed to get my view accepted: at every prize-giving I have started with a definite principle. I have always gone through the alphabet from the beginning for the first prize and from the end for the second, and will you now be good enough to observe that reckoning from the beginning the eighth letter from A is H—there we have the Hare, so I voted for the Hare for the first prize—and the eighth letter from the end (I don't reckon the modified A, it's an ugly sound, and ugly things I always pass over) is S. I therefore voted for the Snail for the second premium. On the next occasion I will be the first and R the second. There must be order in everything; one must have something to hold fast to."

"I should really have voted for myself had I not been one of the awarders," said the Donkey, who was also on the committee. "Account ought to be taken, not only of the rate of speed in progressing, but of what other qualities the candidate may possess; for instance, what weight he can pull. For my part, however, I should not have raised the point on this occasion—nor again the cleverness of the Hare in his flight—his trick of suddenly leaping to one side to lead people on a wrong track away from his hiding-place: no, there is yet another quality to which many pay attention and which, in fact, deserves not to be neglected. It is what is called the Beautiful. To this I paid heed in this case, and looked at the beautiful, well-grown ears of the Hare—it is a pleasure to see how long they are. I really thought I was looking at myself when I was little, and so I voted for him."

"Buzz," said the Fly, "no—I don't want to talk, I merely want to say a word. I know this, that I have overrun more than one Hare. The other day I broke the hind legs of a young one. I was seated on the locomotive at the head of a train. I often do: it's the best position for observing one's own pace. A young Hare was running in front, not guessing that I was there. At last he was obliged to turn aside—but the engine broke his hind legs, for I was sitting on it. There lay the Hare; I went

rushing on. That, I imagine, is beating him? But I don't press for the prize."

"It does seem to me," thought the Wild Rose (but didn't say it; it isn't her nature to speak out, though it would have been a good thing if she had), "it does seem to me that the Sunbeam ought to have had the first prize and the second too. It flies in an instant all that immense way from the Sun down to us, and comes with such a power in it that all Nature wakens up at it. It has such beauty that all we roses blush and give out sweetness. But the supreme authorities, the judges, don't seem to have noticed it at all. If I were the Sunbeam I should give every one of them a sunstroke—but that would only make them mad, and they're perfectly mad as it is. I shan't say anything," thought the Wild Rose. "Let's have peace in the forest: it's very pleasant to bloom and smell sweet and refresh everyone, and to live in story and song. The Sunbeam will last us all out."

"What is the first prize?" asked the Lob-worm, who had overslept himself, and only now came up.

"A free pass to a cabbage garden," said the Donkey. "It was I who proposed the prize. The Hare was bound to win it, and therefore I, as a thoughtful and practical member, took into careful consideration the best interests of the person who was to have the prize. The Hare is now provided for. The Snail has the privilege of sitting on the stone wall and licking up moss and sunshine, and also is appointed one of the principal judges for the next award for speed. It is a very good thing to have an expert as a member of what mankind call a committee. I must say I hope great things from the future, now that we have made such an excellent beginning."

[End of *The Racers* by Hans Christian Andersen, from *Hans Andersen Forty-Two Stories*, translated by M. R. James]