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Opening extract from

Mr Aesop's Story Shop

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THE MOUSE AND THE LION

THE SHOPS WERE SHUTTING. THE NOISY CRIES OF THE STALLHOLDERS AND THE CHATTER OF THE CUSTOMERS HAD DIED DOWN AT THE END OF THE DAY. BUT IN ONE CORNER OF THE GREEK MARKETPLACE, UNDER A FADED AWNING, THINGS WERE JUST GETTING STARTED.

A little bald man, with bandy legs and a crooked smile, laid out olives and cheese on a rickety table. And then, in a booming voice that belied his size, he called out to the people as they made their way home.

"My name is Aesop! Once I was a slave. Now I am a free man. I have refreshments to sell and stories to tell. Stop for a moment – and enjoy!"

A little crowd gathered. Men, women, slaves, and children.

"So what kind of stories do you tell?" someone shouted from the back. "Myths? Legends? Adventures?"

"I tell fables," Aesop answered. "Stories with a moral. Stories that make a point."

Then, with a grin and pointing to different people in his audience, the storyteller began.

"You're too small. You're too slow. You're too ugly." And he pulled a silly face that made the children laugh.

"Has anyone ever told *you* that?" he asked. "And then used it to keep you from doing something you really wanted to do?"

Heads nodded. And not just children's heads.

"Well then," Aesop grinned, "perhaps this story is for you.

"Once there was a mouse. A little mouse who lived in the middle of a great big forest.

"One day, the little mouse ran – squeakity squeakity squeak – out of his hole and over a log and under a fallen leaf. He was looking for something to eat.

"But then, suddenly, he stopped. Something big had its paw on the little mouse's tail."

"A cat!" shouted one of the children. "It was a cat."

"It was a kind of cat," said Aesop. "A very big kind of cat."

"A lion!" shouted another child.

"Well done," Aesop nodded. "The lion picked up the little mouse and dangled him over his open mouth.

" 'You're not very big,' he growled, 'but you'll make a lovely little snack.'

" 'Please don't eat me, Big Lion!' the mouse squeaked. 'I promise that if you let me go, I'll… I'll… I'll come back to help you one day!' "

One of the children laughed. "That's silly. A mouse can't help a lion."

"That's exactly what the lion thought," agreed Aesop.

" 'Don't be ridiculous!' the lion roared. 'You're just a little mouse. How could you possibly help me?' The lion paused and then he said, 'But you are small. And you are rather cheeky. So I'll let you go this time. But if you come by here again, I'll gobble you up, I promise!'

" 'All right, Big Lion,' said the little mouse. And – squeakity squeakity squeak – he ran off into the forest.

"The next morning, when the lion woke up, he gave a great big lion yawn. He gave a great big lion stretch. And then, because he was hungry, he gave a great big lion roar."

Then Aesop roared as well – his mouth open so wide that the audience could see all his teeth – well, the ones that were still there!

"And with that," Aesop continued, "the lion leaped from his cave. One lion leap. Two lion leaps. But when he leaped the third time, the lion leaped right into a hunter's trap!

"The ropes wrapped tightly around him. He could hardly move. The more he struggled, the tighter they got. And worse still, he could hear the hunter coming through the forest.

" 'Oh, no!' thought the lion. 'The hunter is going to get me!'

"And then the lion heard something else. Can you guess what that was?" asked Aesop.

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"The mouse!" squeaked one of the children.

"Exactly! There he was, sitting on the lion's nose.

" 'Hello, Big Lion!' he squeaked. 'I said that if you let me go, I would come back to help you one day. And today is the day!'

" 'But how can you help?' said the lion. 'The ropes are wrapped tightly around me. I can hardly move. What can you possibly do?'

" 'You'll see,' said the little mouse. And then, squeakity squeakity squeak, he ran up the lion's face, through his hairy mane, and down onto his strong shoulders. The little mouse put his paws around the rope and he opened his little mouth – and there were two rows of sharp little teeth.

"First the mouse nibbled on the rope. Then he chewed on the rope.



Then he gnawed on the rope. And, finally, he opened wide his little mouse mouth and – snap – bit through the rope!

" 'Done it!' he squeaked.

"And with the rope bitten through, all the lion had to do was to stretch his big muscles and all the ropes fell off. The lion roared and, with the little mouse hanging from his mane, he leaped back through the forest and into his cave.

"When the lion was safely home, he held the mouse in his paw.

" 'Little mouse,' he said, 'you told me that you could help and I did not believe you. But today you saved my life. So now I will let you go, and I promise that you need never worry about me eating you again.'

" 'Thank you, Big Lion,' said the little mouse.

" 'Goodbye, Big Lion,' he added. And then – squeakity squeakity squeak – the little mouse ran off into the forest. The end!"

The crowd clapped. Aesop bowed. And as everyone left, he smiled and said, "Don't let anyone judge you by the way you look. Remember, even the smallest among us can do amazing things."



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