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opening extract from

One voice, please

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INTRODUCTION

Your Collector of Stories remembers stopping to eat in southern Ireland, years ago.

The place was a family pub, full of people relaxing around a turf fire and – so it seemed – all talking at once. Suddenly the landlord called out "One voice, please. One voice only, please."

A hush fell over the company as a small man sitting in the chimney corner cleared his throat. He wore a battered hat and had huge red ears. And then, fixing his eyes on a thatch peg in the roof, he began to tell a story.

That was the moment when this collection began. I've been collecting stories which have been told down the ages ever since. These are some of my favourites. You and I are present in these tales of truth and trickery.

So, hush: one voice only, please...

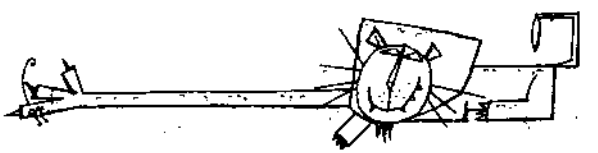
CONTENTS

Dinner Outside 10
Witnesses 12
The Running Hare 14



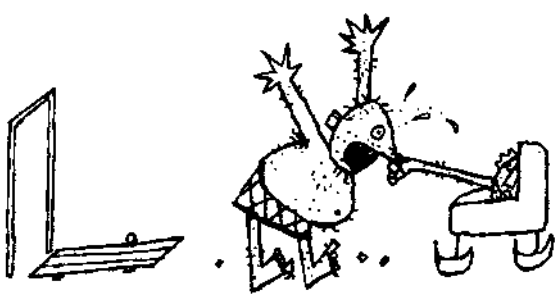
Daydreaming 16
Gentle Persuasion 18
The Second Shoe 21
In Someone Else's Shoes 24
Lost While Fishing 27
Many Littles Make a Lot 30
Peace is Declared 34
The Bully at the Door 36
The Good Samaritan 39
The Mice Hold a Meeting 41
The Ratcatcher 44

Not Speaking 50
Things Could Be Worse 53
Fine Words 56
King of the Air 59
Big Squeezer & Little Tough Guys 61
The Golden Touch 65
The Stick of Truth 68
The Money-Hat 71
Making the Journey 74
Divided We Fall 78
The Lion & the Mouse 80

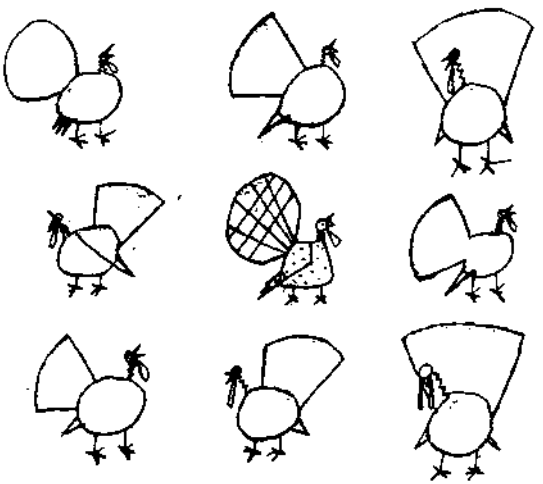


One Time Wise 82
The Second Bag of Gold 84
A Fine Balance 88
Fair Warning 90
Appointment in Samarkand 93

Trust 95
Saving a Swan. 98
Language & the Pursuit of Truth 100
The Power of Secrets 102
Duke Richard 107
Consequences 111
The Wisdom of Solomon 113
Intelligence Meets Luck 115
Riches in the Soil 119
History & Swimming 122
A Small Voice Rising 124
Get me Down! 126
The Very Expensive Cat 129
The Shadow of the Mule 131
Doctor Jack Powers 133



The Big Baby 137
A Free Spirit 141
Is it Fair? 144



Talking Turkey 149
Asking Permission 153
Twisting the Truth 155
The Elephant 158
A Lesson Worth Learning 160
Saying Grace 164
The Soup Stone 166
Experience 169

People are full of rage nowadays, you must have seen this for yourself. But is there anything new about road rage and supermarket trolley rage? Not a bit of it; rage is as old as the human race.

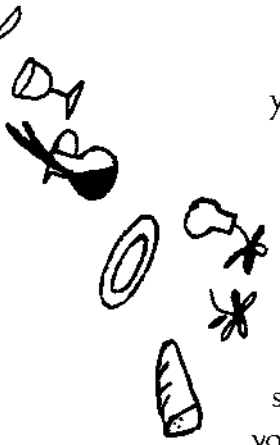
DINNER OUTSIDE

A SERVANT had a short-tempered master who came down to Sunday dinner in a bad mood.

"The soup is too hot!" he raged, and thumped the table.

Well, if the soup hadn't been too hot it would have been too cold, for no soup could have pleased him that day. He would have picked a fight with the perfect bowl of soup. Lifting the dish, he pitched it, soup and all, out of the open window into the yard below.

The good servant who had brought the soup did not hesitate for a moment. He threw the meat he was bringing to the table straight out of the window. Then the bread. And after the bread went the jug of wine. As a matter of fact he threw the tablecloth and every item on it out of the window and into the yard, too. There was a terrible tinkling of falling cutlery and breaking glass.



"What the devil do you think you're doing?" cried the master, rising to his feet.

The good servant looked at him out of marvellously innocent eyes. "Have I misunderstood your intentions? Pardon me, Master, but when I saw the soup leave the room I thought you wanted to eat outside today. After all, the weather is warm, the sky is blue ... and behold the bees are buzzing around the apple blossom!"

It was a fine lesson in how to deal with bad manners. One hopes that the master had the character to learn from it, and that the soup never flew out of the window again.



Money gives everybody trouble at one time or another.

WITNESSES

THERE was once a man - neither the first nor the last - who had a problem with a loan. This is how he explained the problem to his friends at the inn.

"I lent ten silver crowns to a cousin of mine, who shows no sign of paying them back. And now I need the money. He just laughs when I ask him and I'm beginning to wonder if I'll ever see my ten crowns again. If only I had witnesses! But I gave him the money in private, so I can't prove it. The fellow could deny everything."

His friends, all too familiar with the horrors of borrowing and lending money, made sympathetic noises.

Then the innkeeper spoke. "If it's a witness you're after, I can help you there."

"How?"

"Ask your cousin to come here tomorrow night.

Remind him quietly in front of us all that he still owes you a hundred silver crowns."

"But I only lent him ten!"

"Aye, that's what he'll say too," said the innkeeper. "And you shall have your witnesses."

