

A selection of Macedonian fables.
From the book

SMALL

TALES

GREAT

WISDOM

Selected and Translated by
Jim Thomev

**Macedonian Australian Welfare
Association of Sydney Inc.**



Acknowledgements

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This booklet has been developed for the use of staff at Nursing Homes and other aged care services within Sydney. It forms part of the Macedonian Cultural kit developed by MAWA's Community Aged Worker.

It is aimed that this booklet will give staff a better understanding of the Macedonian culture and traditions. Nursing Home staff are encouraged to read these stories to their residents to assist them in maintaining their cultural heritage.

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**Macedonian Australian Welfare Association of
Sydney Inc.**

I don't like Falsehood, but where is Truth to be found?

An evil man was travelling from one town to another, when he came across another man who was going the same way.

After politely greeting each other, they decided to travel together.

Their conversation flowed, and before they knew it, they spoke of serious matters which were troubling the times, such as the prevailing violence and immorality, and the general chaos and disorder.

In reality, the first man was Falsehood in human form, and the second was Truth in person. However, neither had recognised the other.

As they conversed about the problem of living in such terrible times, Truth began to complain that he ate bread once every three days because of the hard times he had fallen upon.

"Be patient, friend," Falsehood said by way of comforting him. "Since God has thrown your lot in with mine now, I will make sure you have all the food and wine your heart desires."

When Truth heard this, he was delighted that he had found a companion who was both wealthy and generous.

That evening, when they had arrived at their destination, they checked in at the most expensive hotel they could find in town.

For days on end, they wined and dined to their hearts' content.

Alas, the time had come to settle the account, which according to the prompt calculations of the hotelkeeper, had come to around \$1,000, which sum he gaily announced to the two guests.

"That's all very well," said Falsehood when he heard this, looking at the hotelkeeper directly in the eye. "But what about the cheque for \$1,500 I have already given you? All that remains is for you to give me back \$500 by way of cheque.

When the astounded Truth heard this, such was his embarrassment that he immediately hid behind the door.

Tempers flared, and there followed a dreadful altercation between Falsehood and the hotelkeeper. Their angry shouting could be heard for miles around.

Falsehood had staged such a performance with his angry accusations, shouting that the hotelkeeper was trying to rob him of \$500, that a huge crowd from the surrounding neighbourhood had gathered. This will come as no surprise to anyone, as human beings welcome anything that will break up the dreary monotony of their lives.

Naturally, the crowd immediately lent its support to the very noisy accuser.

In frustration, the deeply mortified hotelkeeper handed over the \$500, crying in his despair, "O Truth, Truth, where are you?"

Truth's heart was wrung by this cry, so he finally emerged from his hiding place. "Here I am behind the door, my poor man; but what can I possibly do, since I ate at the same table as Falsehood!"

From that day on, Truth and Falsehood went their separate ways for all eternity.

A jealous rich man does not accept advice from a poor man.

A rich merchant, who had the reputation as someone who was “not all there”, loaded his huge bags of money on one side of the saddle and sat and rode his horse on the other side.

As he travelled, he came by a spring. He stopped to water the horse, and then rest in a nearby shade.

There happened to be a poor man already at that place, and the rich man called on him to help dismount.

After taking his rest, the rich man called on the other man to help again, this time to mount.

Noticing how ridiculous it was for the money bags to be on one side of the saddle, with the merchant sitting on the other, the poor man said: “Good sir, why do you make it so hard for yourself to ride the horse by loading all the bags of money on only one side of the saddle?”

“Well, how should I load them?” cried the irritated merchant.

“You should tie the tops of the bags and have them slung over both sides of the saddle in even weight. That way you can sit astride the horse in the normal way, and be much more comfortable.”

“Good thinking, my dear fellow! An excellent idea!” Exclaimed the merchant now genuinely pleased. He then made the poor man load up the horse in exactly the way he had suggested.

The merchant mounted and set off on his way.

As he travelled along, it occurred to him that such advice about handling money could not have come from an ordinary run-of-the-mill poor man.

“I think I should go back and see that man,” thought the merchant. “Who knows how rich he might be, because the intelligence he showed in loading money is only found among wealthy people. Poor people never get to handle so much money, and would know nothing about things of that sort.”

So thinking, he went back to where the poor man was still to be found.

“My good fellow,” he said respectfully. “You must indeed be a rich man to be capable of teaching me the lesson you did about how to load my money bags.”

The poor man laughed loud and long. “God is rich, my good sir, “ he said through his laughter. “But we are poor working people!”

“So you really are poor, you wretch!” Yelled the merchant angrily, and quickly dismounted. “Come over here and help me unload! To hell with you! I never take the advice of a poor man!”

The poor man calmly went over to the horse, and unloaded the money. He then put all the money bags on one side of the saddle exactly as they had been loaded previously by the merchant.

Then without a single word passing between the two, the merchant mounted on the side of his horse, and set out on his journey.

And to look at him, you would have thought that he resembled those German ladies of bygone times, who used to ride horses by sitting on one side of the saddle.

A woman can make anything she likes out of her husband; she can even make a bishop out of him, if she so wishes.

There was once a man and his wife who were extremely poor. They left no stone unturned to find a way out of their misery.

At last, the woman hit on a marvellous plan. She bought a priest's robe, clad her husband with it, and then did the round of the villages hoping to find a vacancy for a priest in one of the churches.

As luck would have it, such a village was found. The wife installed her husband as the local priest, even though he was completely illiterate.

So there they were, as the village priest and his worthy wife, eating and drinking to their hearts' content. Things had really turned out as they had wished.

Much water had flowed under the bridge, and the bishop of this particular diocese decided to find out how Christians were managing in the village he had assumed did not as yet have a priest.

On arriving in the village, the bishop called on all his flock to gather in the church. All the new born babies were to be brought for christening, everybody had to prepare for holy communion, and a list of the dead had to be brought for prayers to be offered for their souls.

"We'll certainly come to church, Your Eminence," the villages told him. "But as for the babies, the dead, and holy communion, they've all been taken care of by our own priest."

The bishop was amazed to hear this, and wondered where they could have found a priest to perform the necessary sacraments.

So he called for the priest that he might question him. The priest appeared, humbled himself before his superior, and kissed his right hand.

"Where are you from, my worthy man?" the bishop asked. "And who ordained you as a priest?"

The priest told him the name of his village, and then added, "and my wife ordained me as a priest."

The bishop could not believe his ears. It was the first time that he had heard of a wife ordaining her husband as a priest. So he immediately called on the lady herself for an explanation.

When the wife had confirmed her husband's words that it was she who had performed the wonder by making a priest out of an illiterate man, the bishop could no longer contain himself, and burst out, "How can a mere foolish woman like you make a priest out of your husband!"

"He is my husband, Your Eminence," responded the lady, not in the slightest put out by the bishop's bad temper. "And that is why I can make him into a priest. And if I really wanted to, I can even make a bishop out of him!"

When the bishop heard all this, he was left utterly speechless. He took comfort in thinking, "In a village of blind people, the one-eyed person leads!"

**When there are too many people cooking, they either
undersalt or oversalt the food.**

In a village, during the winter, the head of the household had kindly given a tailor room to do his sewing by the fireside.

Now in this particular house, there were seven women. They had put a pot of beans on the fire that was to serve as lunch.

The pot was cheerfully boiling away, when the time came for the salt to be added.

The first woman came and added a handful of salt to the pot. After a short time, a second woman came, and she too added exactly the same amount. And so it happened, that one by one, all of the women of the household came through and salted the pot of beans.

When the tailor noticed that there wasn't much order in that household, he went to the pot and put a handful of salt in it as well.

Lunch was set, and as soon as the old patriarch at the head of the table had tasted the bean soup, he quickly surmised that each of the women had added salt without consulting one another.

"My dear ladies," he began in mocking tones. "It would appear that this soup isn't sufficiently salted. I'm quite sure it's because the tailor here didn't do his bit and pitch in as well!"

"But I did, my good sir," protested the tailor. "Believing that it was a custom for everybody in this household to put salt in the pot, I did exactly the same!"

When the women heard this, they nearly died of shame. They were particularly distressed as they knew what a frightful gossip the tailor was. He was sure to make fools of them by telling the whole world about their blunder.

**Whatever you wish on your neighbour, God
will make happen to you.**

When Saint John was on his way to petition God on behalf of some poor people, he chanced across a poor man on the wayside.

Noticing that Saint John was on his way to the Almighty, the poor man begged the good saint to ask God to give him a cow so that he could feed his children with dairy produce, just as his neighbour did who owned a cow.

When Saint John finally stood before God after his long journey, he petitioned Him on behalf of all people. The plea of the poor man on the wayside had not fallen on deaf ears, and so the saint had not forgotten to ask the Lord about the cow.

“Ask the poor man who wants the cow,” said the Good Lord, “to pray for an additional cow to be granted to his neighbour, and then I shall oblige him.”

When Saint John returned to earth he went to the poor man and told him all that the Lord had said.

“What! He wants me to pray for another cow for my neighbour? Even if I don’t have a cow for three hundred years, I will do no such thing! I pray day and night so that that man’s cow will catch some disease and die, yet God wants me to pray for another cow for him, so that he can have two! Tell God that’s what I think of that idea, next time you see Him!”

Hearing these malicious and spiteful words, Saint John reflected in astonishment: “It is obvious why God has never given this man a cow, and never will.”

**Even when the poor man speaks sensibly,
no one takes any notice.**

A poor man was sitting near some rich merchants and was listening to their conversation. The subject discussed was the enormous number of mice that were infesting the town at that time.

The fattest merchant in the company was saying that the mice had even gnawed away at the metal products he was selling in his shop, while all the others nodded and expressed how terrible the times had become.

“Yes, it’s all true gentlemen,” said the poor man. “There are indeed a lot of mice around. I had a little flour and they ate it all up.”

The fat merchant didn’t like what he heard and said: “Stop lying, little man, because we all know mice don’t eat flour! Now if you said it was grain that they ate, you’re more likely to be closer to the mark. Isn’t that true, gentlemen?” he said solemnly, turning to his fellow merchants.

All these nodded vigorously, showing their assent to the words of their fat colleague.

“Goodness gracious me,” thought the poor man as he walked away from that worthy company. “I told the simple truth that the mice had eaten what little flour I had, and the merchants just sat there saying nothing. Their fat friend told them that mice eat metal – something completely unheard of – and they all agreed with him! Curse this damned poverty which gains no one’s respect!”

And from that day forth, our poor man always avoided the company of merchants.

**A person can never be sure what
will happen next.**

A king was promenading through the market place when he came across a philosopher he recognised.

“And where are you off to, my dear philosopher, walking through the market place on a glorious day like this,” the king asked him.

“I don’t even know myself, Your Highness,” the philosopher replied, not without smiling.

“Seize the philosopher and detain him in jail until I return,” said the king to his retainers. “We shall soon see how he dares not tell us where he is heading!”

They dragged the philosopher off to prison.

When the king had returned from his walk, he had the philosopher brought before him and began to question him: “Now my dear philosopher, why didn’t you tell us exactly where you were going when we met you earlier today?”

“How was I to know Your Majesty, that you would put me in prison, so that I could correctly answer you by saying: “I am off to prison, Your Majesty!”

When the king heard this reply he was truly astonished. Indeed, he was so pleased with it, that he gave the philosopher a magnificent gift.

“What you say is so true, my dear philosopher,” the king reflected. “A person does not know where they are going, and neither do they know what they will be doing from one minute to the next. A man may have plans, but they often miscarry. We all stand in God’s great hands.

Friendship is stronger than death.

There once were two good friends who were closer than brothers. However, this strong brotherly love incurred the envy and malice of many people. So there were those who wanted to destroy the friendship.

And sure enough, word got around alleging that one of the friends had abused the king publicly. A spiteful man bore witness, two other malicious ruffians confirmed it, and the king decreed that the accused man would go to prison from where he would be taken after three days to a scaffold, and hanged.

Although the man had been condemned to death, his best friend did not at all lose faith or abandon him.

So the three days before the falsely accused man was to die, his good friend petitioned the king to give the prisoner three days respite in which to set his affairs in order. The friend had pleaded before the king that the wife and children of the condemned man had to be provided for, as well as his ageing parents, and the business sold.

The king was astonished by the proposal of the man to take the place of his doomed friend. The king marvelled even more when the true friend said: "Your Majesty, if he does not return after three days to take his place back, you can hang me in his stead.

The astounded king gave his consent to the arrangement.

After three days, the condemned man had set his affairs in order and returned to prison three hours before he was due to be hanged. He took back his place from the loyal friend.

When the king realised that here was a friendship stronger than death, he was moved beyond tears. He begged the two friends to make him their friend as well.

And so it happened. The king took the friends and their families into the palace to live with him, and he would never do anything or go anywhere without their company.

All the people who heard about this marvellous event would say: "It was rightly been said by our ancestors, that truth and faith really move mountains."

Give to priests, but don't ask for anything.

As a drunken priest reeled along a cobblestone path, he staggered and fell into the muddy ditch beside it. All his efforts to lift himself up and out of the ditch were futile, as he was drunk beyond all decency.

Now every person who came by that ditch took pity on the priest, and would extend a helping hand to get him out of the mud, saying: "Give me your hand, Father, so I can help you out of the mud."

"Get away with you!" the priest would snarl angrily. "How dare you suggest I give you my hand! Who do you think you are?"

Soon, a crowd gathered to watch the priest wallow in the mud.

Others, who were friends of the priest, came and tried to help. But their biggest problem was that the priest absolutely refused to give his hand. To actually enter the ditch themselves and help him up, was asking too much of anyone, so they comforted themselves by saying it was his fault anyway, for not giving his hand.

There came the local village wag who hit upon a marvellous idea. He knew exactly what had to be said to the priest.

"Here is my hand, Father," said the wit. "Take it please, and pull yourself out of the muck, because you are disgracing yourself before everybody."

For all that he was blind drunk, when the priest heard these words especially the word "take", he pricked up his ears, and extended his hand to take what was on offer. His hand was grabbed, and he was thus pulled out of the ditch.

The people watching, all marvelled, and said: "And so that is how one should talk to priests! One should never say 'give me your hand' to them, but rather one should say 'take my hand'!"

Everyone left the scene much wiser than before, as they now knew that priests are always takers rather than givers. Or rather, if priests do give you their hand, it will always be empty and you need to fill it with something, or kiss it.

**The son who is a drunkard can be
the death of his father.***

There was a family that was so poor, that the father decided to send the eldest son to a foreign land. In other words, the boy was to become a peckalbar. When he earned enough money, he was to return to the village, so that his family's lot would be removed.

After a few months in Australia, which was the very distant foreign land we have mentioned, rumours were rife about the son. According to concerned relatives who wrote back to the father in the village, the son had started gambling. He was particularly addicted to the crazy local tradition in Australia of placing bets on horses. He also played cards for money with other irresponsible Macedonian pechalbars.

The father thanked the Lord that his son was safe and well. "As for the gambling," he said philosophically, "he'll come to his senses when he loses his money."

Again, some time later, more bad news came from the concerned relatives about the wayward son.

This time they wrote that the young man, who had been a model of decency back in the village, had now taken to visiting women for whose charms he gave money.

On receiving this piece of news, the father thanked the Lord again that his son was alive and in good health. To his informants, he simply wrote back: "He will come to his senses soon enough, when he catches some disease or other, as men usually do from such women." And it turned out exactly as the father had predicted.

But a few months later, a third letter arrived in the village. The poor father was informed in no uncertain terms, that his eldest son and heir apparent, was now a chronic drinker, an incurable drunkard. The father's heart could not bear such heavy news; it broke the instant he read the letter, and he fell dead on the spot as if struck by lightning.

* The somewhat tragic version of this traditional moral tale is the one I heard from my own father when I was a young man, and he had deemed it appropriate that I should be warned against the evils of drunkenness. In the version that Marko Tsepenkov gives from the 19th Century, the father does not die but rather regards having a drunkard for a son as bad as a death in the family. The story vividly illustrates the extreme horror with which problem drinking was viewed. Wine and brandy drinking are an important part of social custom and ritual. It is drinking in excess that can destroy family life which receives the most sever social castigation. (See Sayings of this collection for a confirmation) .J.T