



## Thomas More

### Countryfold Stories and Animal Fables (*modernized selections*)

#### “The Fond Tale of Mother Maud: The Confessions of an Ass and a Wolf” [From Dialogue of Comfort Against Tribulation (Scepter, 1998)]

1 When I was a little boy, there was a good old woman who helped my mother take care of us children. We called her Mother Maud-I believe you’ve heard of her?

Vincent: Oh, yes, I’ve heard a lot about her.

5 Anthony: Well, she used to sit by the fire with us children and tell us many childish stories. But as Pliny says that there is almost no book so bad that one cannot find in it something good, so I think there is almost no story so silly that it cannot, in one way or another, serve some serious purpose. Among the many silly stories she told us, I particularly remember one about an ass and a wolf that once upon a time went to confession to a fox. The poor ass, it seems, went to confession during  
10 Shrovetide, a day or two before Ash Wednesday, but the wolf would not go to confession till he first saw Palm Sunday pass by, and then he found some excuse not to do it till Good Friday.

15 Before the ass said “Bless me, Father,” the fox asked him why he had come for confession so soon, before Lent had even started. The poor beast answered him that it was for fear of mortal sin-he did not want to lose his share in any of those special prayers that the priest says during Shrovetide for those who have already made their confession.

20 Then, in his confession, he mentioned this astonishing scruple that he had on his conscience. He had, one morning, given his master cause for anger. Before it was time for his master to rise, he had,

1 with his rude roaring, roused him from his sleep and thus robbed him of his rest. With that fault the  
fox, good and prudent confessor that he was, dealt as follows. He instructed the ass to do this no  
more, but, instead, to lie there quietly and go back to sleep like a good son, as it were, until his  
master was up and ready to go to work. Thus he could be sure not to wake him up anymore.

5 To tell you the poor ass's entire confession would be a long work, for everything he did was mortal  
sin to him, the poor soul was so scrupulous. His wise and wily confessor, however, regarded all these  
things as the trifles that they were. And afterward he swore to the badger that he'd gotten so worn  
out from sitting so long and listening to this ass that, were it not for the sake of appearances, he  
10 would rather have spent that whole time sitting at breakfast with a good fat goose. But when it came  
to the giving of the penance, the fox found that the most serious sin the ass had confessed was  
gluttony. And therefore he prudently gave him as his penance that he should never out of greediness  
for food either harm or hinder any other beast in any way—that he should just eat his own food and  
not look for more.

15 Now, as good Mother Maud told it to us, when the wolf went on Good Friday to confess to Father  
Reynard (for that was, she said, the fox's name), this confessor shook at him his big rosary beads  
(which were almost as big as bowling balls) and asked him why he had come so late. "Indeed, Father  
Reynard," he said, "I must tell you the truth—for I have come, as you well know, to do just that. I  
20 didn't dare come any sooner for fear that you would have given me, for my gluttony, the penance of  
fasting for some part of this Lent."

"Oh, no," said Father Fox, "I'd never be that unreasonable, especially since I myself don't fast for  
any of it. For I may say to you, son, here in confession, just between the two of us, that it is no  
25 commandment of God, this fasting—it's only a human invention. The priests make people fast, they  
make them worry about the moonlight in the water, they make complete fools out of people, but I  
guarantee you, son, they'll make no such fool out of me. For I myself have eaten meat all through  
this Lent. However, because I certainly wouldn't want to cause any scandal, I've eaten it secretly, in  
my bedroom, out of the sight of all those foolish brethren whose weak, scrupulous consciences  
30 would be offended by it. And so would I counsel you to do."

"Indeed, Father Fox," said the wolf, "I already do this as best I can, thanks be to God. For when I go  
to my meat, I take with me no companions except such sure-footed brethren as are of my own  
nature. Their consciences are not weak, I can assure you—their stomachs are, in fact, as strong as  
35 mine."

1 “Well, then, no problem,” said Father Fox.

5 But after that, the wolf confessed to being such a great plunderer that he sometimes devoured as much meat at one time, and thus in effect spent as much for one meal, as might well have bought enough food to last some poor man, along with his wife and children, almost a whole week. And the fox prudently reproved that point in him. He preached to him a sermon on his own practice of temperance, which included, he said, never spending more than sixpence for a meal—actually, not even that much. “For when I bring home a goose,” he said, “I don’t get it from the butcher’s shop, where folk can find them with their feathers already plucked off and can see which is the fattest and then for sixpence choose and buy the best one. No, I get it at the housewife’s house, firsthand—she can, you know, afford to sell them at a somewhat cheaper price than the butcher can. True, I don’t have the opportunity to see them already plucked, or to stand there and choose them in the light of day; I have to go there at night and just pick one at random, and when I get home I have to do myself all the work of plucking it. But for all that, even it turns out to be just skin and bones and not worth, I think, even fourpence, it sometimes still makes both my lunch and my supper.”

20 “Now, then, as for your living off of plundering, I can find no fault with that. You have lived this way for so long that I don’t think you could do any different. I therefore think it would be foolish of me to forbid you to go on plundering. To tell the truth, that would even go against my conscience. For I know perfectly well that you’ve got to live, and that you know no other way to do so. It therefore stands to reason that you must live by plundering. Still, you know, too much is too much. Moderation, or a happy medium, is a rule that I gather, from what you’ve confessed, you’ve never learned to observe. Your penance, therefore, is precisely this: For the rest of this year you shall never eat a meal that is worth more than sixpence, as nearly as your conscience can guess the price.”

25 Thus I have related to you, as Mother Maud related them to us, the confessions of the ass and the wolf. But what now concerns us is the consciences of them both in the actual performing of their penances.

30 The poor ass, right after his confession, during which he had gotten very hungry, saw a sow lying with her pigs, all well covered up in new straw. He drew near, thinking he might eat some of the straw, but then his scrupulous conscience began to torment him on that matter. His penance being that he should not, out of greediness for food, do any kind of harm to any other beast, he thought he must not eat even one straw there, lest for lack of that straw some of those pigs might happen to die from the cold. So he stayed hungry until someone brought him some food. But then, when he was

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1 about to fall to it, he fell into yet another scruple. The thought came into his mind that he couldn't  
eat that food, either, without breaking his penance, since his spiritual father had commanded him  
that he should not, in getting food for himself, hinder in any way any other beast. For if he did not  
eat that food, he thought, then some other beast might happen to get it, and so by eating it he would  
5 perhaps be hindering another. So he just stood there, still fasting, until, after he told someone the  
reason, his spiritual father came and taught him better. He then cast off that scruple and properly fell  
to his food, and was a right honest ass for many a good day after.

10 The wolf, on the other hand, when he came out from confession clean absolved of his sins,  
proceeded to do something similar to what a certain nagging wife, when she came home from  
confession one day, told her husband she was going to do. "Cheer up, man," she said, "for today,  
thanks be to God, I made a very good confession and got thoroughly absolved. So now I intend to  
stop all my old nagging, and start over afresh!"

15 Vincent: Oh, now, Uncle, is it fair to tell it that way? I myself heard her say that, but she said it as a  
joke, to make her husband laugh.

20 Anthony: Actually, she did seem to mean it halfway as a joke. For when she said she would stop all  
her old nagging, there I think she was joking. But what she said about beginning it all afresh, that,  
I'm afraid, her husband found to be meant in all seriousness.

Vincent: Well, I'm going to tell her what you said, I promise you.

25 Anthony: And then you'll find that I've told you the truth! But whatever she did, this is what the  
wolf, at least, did do after he cast out in confession all his old plundering. Hunger then prodded him  
to go forth and, as that nagging wife said, begin it all afresh. Yet a prodding of conscience pulled and  
held him back, for he did not want to break his penance by taking for his meal any prey that could  
be sold for over sixpence.

30 Well, it so happened that as he went prowling for some sustenance, he came to a place where, a few  
days before, a man had gotten rid of two old horses that were lean and lame. They were, in fact, so  
sick that there was hardly any flesh left on them. One of them, by the time the wolf came by, could  
hardly stand on his legs, and the other was already dead, and his skin ripped off and carried away.  
When the wolf suddenly came upon them, he at first was going to feed upon them and whet his  
35 teeth on their bones. But then he looked around and caught sight of a fair cow in an enclosed field,

1 walking with a young calf by her side, and as soon as he saw them, his conscience began to trouble  
him about both of those two horses. He sighed and said to himself, “Alas, wicked wretch that I am, I  
almost broke my penance without even realizing it! For yonder dead horse—I’ve never seen a dead  
horse sold in the market, and so I could not guess, to save my life or my sinful soul, what price I  
5 should set on him. But in my conscience I set him far above sixpence, and therefore I dare not  
meddle with him.

“Now, then, yonder live horse is in all likelihood worth a great deal of money. For in this country,  
horses are expensive, especially such gentle amblers. I see by his pace that he does not trot; in fact, he  
10 can barely shift a foot. And therefore I may not meddle with him, for he very far exceeds my  
sixpence.

“Of cows, however, this country has plenty, while of money it has very little. Considering, therefore,  
the abundance of cattle and the scarcity of money, yonder piddling cow seems to me, in my  
15 conscience, worth no more than fourpence, if even that much. And her calf, now, cannot be worth  
more than half as much as she is. Since, therefore, the cow is in my conscience worth but fourpence,  
my conscience cannot allow me—on pain of sin—to price her calf above twopence. And so the both  
of them together don’t add up to more than sixpence, and therefore I can eat them both at this one  
meal without breaking my penance at all.” And thereupon he did so, without any scruple of  
20 conscience.

If such beasts could speak now, as Mother Maud said they could then, some of them would, I dare  
say, tell a tale that makes almost as much sense as this one! Actually, if it would not have lessened the  
impact of old Mother Maud’s tale, a shorter version would have sufficed. But as preposterous as this  
25 parable is, our purpose is served by the point that it makes: namely, that the “terror of the night” of a  
somewhat scrupulous conscience, though it is quite troublesome and painful to the one who has it  
(as it was to this poor ass here), is nevertheless not as harmful as a conscience that is overly  
permissive, that one can adjust to suit one’s own fancy, sometimes pulling it tight and sometimes  
stretching it out, like a belt, to serve on every side for one’s own convenience (as did here the wily  
30 wolf).