

THE TESTIMONY OF THE ANT

A MORAL FABLE FOR ANIMAL LOVERS

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Ali shifted his big feet uneasily as he stood before the tribunal. He did not recognize the robes he was wearing and was surprised to see that his feet were bare. Though he was worried about the outcome of his case, he was also perplexed; for in recent times, his eyes had grown dim and his hearing poor, yet now he could see and hear everything about him with the unimpaired clarity of youth. He thought that perhaps this was a good sign and that he might yet be successful.

Then he glanced at the scales of justice before him in which the sum of his earthly deeds had been placed, the good in the right pan, the bad in the left. He thought that he had been, on the whole, a good man, a good husband and father—well, perhaps not completely good, but surely not worse than most men—and that he had been scrupulous in his religious duties and honest in his business dealings; at least as honest as men are these days.

But now, looking at the position of the scales, he realized that his prayers had not been untainted with pride and ostentation. His hurrying to prayer to be in the front lines was not solely for nearness to God. His fasting and charity were not unmixed with display. His business dealings could have been fairer. Perhaps he had taken advantage of some people, but not in a serious way. However, the judges had not smiled when he tried to minimize the little harms of so many of his deeds.

There were other sins too, weighing down the left pan of the scales, mostly minor, but minor sins accumulate and become major sins. If only he could return to do and undo... but that, he knew, was no longer possible. I was but an ordinary man, no worse than others, he thought again defensively. What did they expect of me?

Yet now, he knew that his predicament was not an easy one. Flawed deeds and transactions that he had glossed over and put out of his mind now glared back at him in accusation, like polished lumps of coal.

Justice did not neglect the good effects of his deeds and the benefits wrought by his charity and forbearance. The right pan of the scales was also laden with the prayers of his virtuous wife and his children and those he had left behind, for he had been just with them—most of the time.

Still, they were not enough to outweigh the sins of commission and omission—deeds that he ought not to have done and good deeds he could have, but had neglected—with which he was charged, not unjustly, he now knew.

Surely, God will be merciful, he hoped. If only I could see Him, He would have mercy upon me. The left pan of the scales was not *that* much lower than the right! Ali tried to think of something else that he had done to his credit, but he could not. It was all there in the scales before him.

The testimony had been heard. The assembled celestial court was grimly preparing to hand down their decision. They looked at him severely.

The Recording Angel had his ledgers open before him and he was writing busily. Ali trembled. If only there were time to atone and repent... Is it too late?

But I have not finished, Ali thought, there must be something. He racked his brains but could not think of anything. The angel looked at him as though he had heard Ali's thought and waited for him to add something more. In his despair, he could think of nothing.

"I have nothing more to say," he said softly, dropping his shoulders in resignation.

The Recording Angel stood solemnly and began to read the verdict.

He had hardly uttered the first words when a great commotion erupted at the gates of heaven. A loud voice cried: "Wait! I have knowledge of this man. I must have my say! I must add my testimony!"

The entire court thronged with ranked angels and onlookers turned to the gate searching for the speaker of those words. Some of the angels had covered their delicate ears at the racket. From the gate to the tribunal, a path opened among the throng. Though the voice could be heard advancing, the speaker could not be seen, yet the cries were growing louder as their unseen source moved forward:

"I will be heard! I must be heard!"

Then, they all looked down in amazement, for these loud protests were coming from a tiny ant, to whom God had given a great voice for the occasion.

"I demand justice!" cried the ant. "I know this man!"

Bewildered, Ali looked down at the ant in astonishment.

Catching his eye, the ant said accusingly: "Thou dost not remember me, but I remember thee!"

What have I done to the ant? thought Ali fearfully. What calamity does he bring for me? He looked at the angels helplessly, but they were all looking at the ant, waiting for the ant to take his place in the witness box.

Hesitatingly, Ali began to speak to the ant:

"Sir, I do not know..."

"Thou dost not know, but I know," interrupted the ant triumphantly.

The Recording Angel said: "O sir ant! If thou hast some grievance against him, thou shouldst have been present earlier to give thy testimony and it would have been taken into account, but now... this is unusual."

A strange ripple like a gentle gust of wind—but not exactly that—passed through the heavenly court. The Recording Angel seemed to be listening. Then he bowed and said: "Let the ant offer his testimony and it shall be taken into account. What has this man done to thee?"

"Is it not written that if an animal has been mistreated or abused," asked the ant, "he may give evidence on the Day of Judgment and demand justice?"

"Yes, it is so," the angel replied. "Among others, the great scholar al-Ghazzali has so written. Now, what has this man done to thee?"

"In my youth, I was carrying a heavy load—a grain of wheat—to our nest when this man approached me. He towered over me like a mountain. I looked up in fear and saw that he was looking straight ahead and had not seen me. His foot was the size of a ship and it was about to be placed on the very spot where I stood frozen with fear. I thought: He will not see me; even if he does, he will not inconvenience himself to stop for a mere ant. Alas, this is the end of me!

“His huge foot began to descend, its shadow overwhelmed me...”

“And he stepped upon thee?” asked the angel to end the ant’s verbosity. “But surely this cannot be counted against him, unless it was deliberate. Such is the way of men and ants. Men have their daily risks and ants have theirs.”

“Does not the poet Ferdawsi say that life is sweet even for an ant?” demanded the ant. “No, what he did was deliberate! At the last moment, he looked down and saw me!”

“Then this cruel deed shall be counted against him and add even more weight to the left pan of his scales, O learned ant. Thou shalt have thy justice.”

There was a murmur of assent among the heavenly host.

“No, no!” protested the ant. “Thou dost not yet understand. Upon seeing me, he shot his foot away from me and spared me for a long, happy life as ants count happiness. Moreover, I have heard from other ants that this was his habit, to spare them when he encountered them. That is my testimony, milords. Surely, his compassion for us must count for something in his favor, though I be but an ant!”

Once again, the air rippled as though with a gentle breeze and the angels seemed to listen while looking at Ali. He remembered now how he had avoided stepping on ants and hurting other creatures, for he too had read Ferdawsi. However, he had not thought that this would count for much before the august heavenly court of judgment.

The Recording Angel turned to the ant to speak, but before he could, another voice, gasping with effort, spoke first.

“I know him too,” the voice said. Once again, the heavenly court looked down to see the newcomer, a black beetle, larger and therefore easier to spot. He had just finished laboring to the tribunal and was a little out of breath.

“I heard what brother ant said, and I too was spared when he saw me...”

The beetle was not able to finish, for he was interrupted by a flurry of wings as a flock of birds flew in, chirping noisily. They bustled about for a few moments, then the leader of the flock spoke. “And he put out food for us in the cold of winter when times were hard and there was little to be found...”

The bird also did not get a chance to finish his testimony, for a donkey trotted up braying raucously. Ali recognized the animal as his own, now returned to the full strength and beauty of its youth.

“Hee-haw! Hee-haw! I would be heard!” brayed the donkey. “This man was my master,” he continued in a gruff voice. “He fed me well and made sure that I had water to drink. In the evening and the morning, he would look to my comfort. He patted me much and gave me sweets which I liked very much. It is true that he struck me some times, but lightly, and only when the matter was urgent and I had to move quickly for some purpose. Why now is he standing here and not in paradise? Does his good treatment of me count for nothing? The ant speaks the truth. He was a good...”

And the donkey broke off, choked with emotion.

Forgetting his peril for a moment, Ali rushed to his faithful old donkey and embraced him, overjoyed to see him again. The flock of birds was swirling around him chirping noisily, while the voices of the ant and beetle could still be heard in the general confusion.

The Recording Angel cleared his throat.

“Order! Order in the heavenly court!”

Then, in a gentler voice, he said to the ant, the donkey, and the other animals: “Yes, indeed it does. For just as small bad deeds add up to a great sin, so small good deeds add up to a great virtue.”

He gave a sign and another angel came forward carrying a large, radiant pearl, glowing brightly with the accumulated merit of Ali’s simple acts of kindness to the small and defenseless of God’s creation. Ali stared at it in a daze.

“I never thought...”

The angel placed it carefully upon the pan of his good deeds. Immediately the scales tilted heavily in his favor, the good now much outweighing the bad. The witnessing animals and the whole court of heaven rejoiced while Ali wept.

Ali felt a change throughout his whole being. His sins were falling away from him like dead leaves and he was being purified of all unsuitable things. The court itself began to glow with a brilliant light, so blindingly bright that Ali felt he could hardly endure it, and yet he could not stop himself from peering into it, drawn to it as a moth is to a burning lamp.

Then, he knew that despite all of his human failings and weaknesses, he stood in the Presence of his God, the One God, the Creator of all things, Who is Ever-Attendant to the workings of His Perfect Justice.

His hearing now keener than it ever had been in his earthly life, Ali heard a murmuring that gradually became the welcoming voices of his mother and father and others of his friends and relatives who had preceded him. He was filled with the urge to go them. They beckoned to him to move forward and upward—towards the light, towards something unfolding before him so wonderful that his earthbound mind could never have imagined the truth of it.

Ali knew he was meant to proceed towards it, but he paused to thank the animals and to look down gratefully at the ant whose efforts had begun his salvation. Ali extended his hand to take him up.

“Wilt thou not accompany me to paradise?”

The ant shook his head.

“Not now, my friend,” he said softly. “I shall come to thee later, God willing. Now, I must wait to give my testimony against the man who deliberately stepped upon me and ended the happiness that thou didst preserve for me.”

And so, after giving a gesture of thanks to the court and to his animal defenders, Ali stepped forward, drawn inexorably to the wondrous light and that which awaited him there.

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Writes Ghazzali in *The Alchemy of Happiness* (Great Books of the Islamic World, Crook translation, Second Pillar, 7, “The Rules of Conduct on a Journey, p. 384): “Any animal that is beaten without cause or is laden with a heavy burden will demand justice at the Resurrection. Abu Darda, may God be pleased with him, had a camel that died. He said: ‘O camel! Take care! Do not complain about me to God. Thou knowest that I loaded thee in accordance with thy strength.’”