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WHO IS A BIGGER FOOL
(African Folktales)

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The Donkey's Tail

Once upon a time, in a tiny African village, lived a rich merchant called Elemu. He was kind-hearted and always helped the poor. He was also a wonderful host and took great care of his guests when they came to stay with him. Elemu possessed a lot of gold. But instead of keeping the gold in the bank, he stored it in a wooden box which he kept under his bed. As he stayed all alone, he locked the box when he went out anywhere.

One day, Elemu locked the door of his house, sat on his mule and left on a long journey.
A man from the village noticed that Elemu was away. He broke into Elemu’s house and stole all the gold from the wooden box. When Elemu returned after two days he noticed the lock on his door broken. He instantly realised somebody had been inside the house. He went inside and saw that the lock of the wooden box had also been broken. He opened the box and found that all his gold had gone! He started howling, “Oh! I am finished. All my gold has been stolen.” Poor Elemu was shattered.
He enquired from his neighbours and several villagers but no one could tell him anything about the theft. A dejected Elemu then approached the village headman. He told the headman that he suspects the thief is from his own village.
The headman thought for a while and then assured Elemu that he would catch the thief and get him back his gold.

The headman reached Elemu’s village and pitched a tent there. Inside the tent he tied a donkey. And, when no one was watching, he sprayed the donkey’s tail with a bottle of perfume.
Then he called all the villagers and declared: “Someone has stolen Elemu’s gold. I suspect the thief is from this village. One by one all of you will enter the tent and touch the donkey’s tail. When the thief touches the donkey, he will bray.”

The villagers did just as they were told. All of them went inside the tent, but the donkey did not bray even once. The villagers assumed that the thief must be from some other village. But the headman was not satisfied. He made all the villagers stand in a row and started smelling each one’s palms. Suddenly, he caught hold of a man after smelling his palms and said, “You are the thief.”

The man appeared nervous but soon recovered and said, “No. I am not a thief. The donkey did not bray when I touched his tail.”

The headman said angrily: “You are lying. You did not even touch his tail.”

“I did touch his tail,” the man insisted.

“The donkey’s tail was sprayed with perfume. Had you touched it, your hands would have smelt of the perfume,” said the headman.

Everyone seemed confused. The headman told all the villagers, “Smell your own palms and then smell this man’s palms.” Everyone smelt their own palms and realized they smelt of the perfume. But when they smelt that young man’s palms they had no fragrance.

The thief realized that he had been caught and confessed to his crime. Elemu got back all his gold. A delighted Elemu then treated the headman and the entire village to a generous feast.
Who’s a bigger fool?

In the African town of Addis Ababa lived two men, Joseph and Abebe. Both were fed up with their foolish servants. One day, Joseph and
Abebe met in the market and after talking about the weather and their families, started discussing about their foolish servants.

Joseph said: "My servant is so foolish that he buries chicken bones everyday in the ground, thinking that they would grow into real chicks one day."

Abebe was not impressed. "My servant is even more foolish. He believes that the tears the birds shed cause the rain on earth."

Joseph and Abebe spent the next two hours debating whose servant was more foolish. Neither was ready to admit that the other’s servant was more foolish. Finally, they decided to test their servants in foolishness.

Joseph suggested: "Why don’t you come with your servant to my place at eight in the morning tomorrow. We will give both of them something silly to do. Whoever does it best, will be the bigger fool."

Abebe agreed and the next day took his servant to Joseph’s house.

After reaching Joseph’s house, Abebe told his servant, "Go! Run back to my house and see if I am there or not. I need to talk to myself very urgently." His servant did not think twice and rushed back home.

Now it was the turn of Joseph’s servant. He was handed over a fifty rupee note and instructed by Joseph, "Go and buy a new car for me with this money." The servant took the note and ran to the market.

After two hours the two servants crossed each other on the street. Both were furious with their masters.

Joseph’s servant complained, "My master is so foolish. He sent me to buy a new car,
gave me the money but did not tell me which colour car he wants. What should I buy now?"

Abebe’s servant was also very angry. "My master is a bigger fool. He told me to go home and find out whether he is there or not. Can’t he just telephone and find out?" he grumbled.
After some time both the servants returned to Joseph’s house. And both Joseph and Abebe agreed that each one’s servant was a bigger fool.
The Smart Tortoise

Once upon a time, a tortoise lived with his son in a tiny hut. The tortoise was very lazy and didn’t do any work all day. A few yards away from his house was the monkey’s farm. The monkey worked hard in the fields for a good crop. He was proud of his farm which produced tasty vegetables and fruits.

The lazy tortoise often borrowed food from the monkey’s farm and never bothered to pay. When the monkey asked for his money, the tortoise would come up with some excuse or the other. Besides, even if he wanted to pay, the tortoise never seemed to have any money.
Often the tortoise would send his son to the monkey’s farm to borrow corn, ground-nuts and potatoes saying, “Go, get all these from your monkey uncle.”

The monkey would lend the food trusting that the tortoise would pay him back soon. But when the tortoise did not pay for a long time, the monkey one day headed towards his house to claim the money. As soon as the tortoise spotted the monkey coming, he told his son, “Tell him that I have gone to see the relatives and will not be back before three-four days.”

The child did as was instructed. The monkey believed his tale and told the tortoise’s son, “Tell your father to send the money soon.”
The tortoise obviously did not pay him soon. The monkey too did not stop lending, fearing that he would go and borrow somewhere else. This would mean heavy losses to the monkey.

But after some days, an angry monkey again headed towards the tortoise’s hut. Seeing him come, the tortoise stretched out on the bed pretending he was very ill. His son came out of the house crying and said, “Uncle, your brother is very ill.”

The monkey peeped inside the house and found the tortoise lying on the bed with his head down. The tortoise saw the monkey and started panting. With a feeble voice he said, “My dear brother, I sunk all my money in the doctor but I have not improved. If I survive, I promise I will pay back your money.”

The monkey assured him that things will improve and wishing him speedy recovery, left his home. As soon as he left, the tortoise and his son burst out laughing. They had again tricked the monkey.

Like this, for a long time the monkey continued to be tricked. One day the monkey gave the tortoise a surprise visit. He knocked at the door and declared, “Dear brother, you must give me the money today.”

As soon as he heard the monkey’s voice, the tortoise immediately turned over and lay on his back. His son told the monkey that his father was out.

But the monkey would not take a no for an answer and entered the house. He said, “Today I will take my money.” He looked at the overturned tortoise and asked, “What is this?”

The tortoise’s son replied, “This is our spice grinder.”

The monkey picked up the spice grinder and threw it across the trees outside the
tortoise’s hut. Then he sat outside the hut waiting for the tortoise to return. The tortoise was flung far away from his home. He was a bit hurt but quickly got up and started racing home. He had a new trick up his sleeve.

When he saw the monkey waiting outside, the tortoise appeared happy and said, “Dear brother! You have come at a good time. I have the money today. I will just bring it.” Then he called out for his son, “Son, get me my spice grinder. Your uncle needs to be paid. He has waited for very long.”
The son replied, “But uncle has thrown the spice grinder over the trees.” The tortoise cried out, “Oh! I am ruined. All my money was in that spice grinder.”

The monkey felt very sorry for the tortoise. He decided to go and fetch the spice grinder. He left the tortoise’s hut and started climbing the trees looking for the spice grinder.

Since then all monkeys have been searching the treetops for the spice grinder.