

Speedwalkers

A prize was appointed, and even two, one large, the other small, for the greatest speed—not in a competition, but altogether over the course of an entire year.

"I received the first prize!" said the hare. "In my opinion, one may expect justice if the judges are your close friends and relatives. However, to award the second prize to the snail? That is even offensive to me!"

"But one must also take into account diligence and good will, as the highly esteemed judges rightly reasoned, and I fully share their opinion!" remarked the fence post, who had been a witness to the awarding of the prizes. "It took the snail half a year to crawl across the threshold, yet nevertheless she hurried conscientiously and even broke her femur in the rush! She devoted herself soul and body to her task, and moreover dragged her house on her back! Such diligence deserves every encouragement; that is why she was awarded the second prize."

"One might have taken me into consideration, it seems!" said the swallow. "Faster than me in flight, I dare think, there is no one! Where have I not been! Everywhere, everywhere!"

"That is precisely the trouble," said the post. "You roam about far too much! You are forever rushing off to foreign lands as soon as a chill blows our way. You are no patriot, and therefore you do not count."

"And if I had slept all winter in the marsh, would attention then have been paid to me?" asked the swallow.

"Bring a certificate from the marsh-witch herself stating that you slept in your homeland for at least half a year, and then we shall see!"

"I deserved the first prize, not the second!" remarked the snail. "For I know that the hare runs only when he thinks he is being chased—in short, out of cowardice! Whereas I regarded movement as my life's task and suffered injury in the line of duty! And if anyone ought to have been awarded the first prize, it was me! But I do not like making a fuss; I cannot stand it!"

And she spat.

"I can testify that every prize was awarded justly!" declared the boundary stake. "I generally adhere to order, measure, and calculation. This is the eighth time I have had the honor of participating in the awarding of prizes, but only this time did I

insist on my own way. The fact is, I always award prizes alphabetically: for the first prize I take a letter from the beginning, for the second—from the end. Kindly now pay attention to my count: the eighth letter from the beginning is 'h' [in Russian, 'з'], and for the first prize I cast my vote for the hare [zayats], while the eighth letter from the end is 's' [in Russian, 'y'], and for the second prize I cast my vote for the snail [ulitka]. Next time I shall assign the first prize to the letter 'i' and the second to the letter 's'. The main thing is order! Otherwise, there is nothing to lean upon.

"Were I not myself among the judges, I would have voted for myself!" said the donkey. "One must take into account not only speed, but other qualities—for example, load. On this occasion, however, I did not wish to insist on these circumstances, nor on the hare's intelligence or the cunning with which he confuses his tracks when escaping pursuit. But there is a circumstance which people generally consider and which by no means can be overlooked—this is beauty. I looked at the hare's wonderful, well-developed ears—one could truly admire them—and it seemed to me that I saw myself in childhood! Thus I cast my vote for the hare."

"Bzz-zzz!" buzzed the fly. "I do not intend to make a speech; I only wish to say a few words. I am certainly nimbler than any hare; that I know for sure. Recently I even injured a young hare's hind leg. I was sitting on the locomotive; I often do this—it is the best way to monitor one's own speed. The hare ran long ahead of the train; he did not suspect my presence. Finally he had to turn aside, and just then the locomotive struck his hind leg, while I sat on the locomotive. The hare remained behind, while I sped onward. Who, then, was the victor? I believe—it was I! Only I have little need for this prize!"

"In my opinion," thought the wild rose; aloud she said nothing, for it was not in her character, though it would have been better had she spoken—"in my opinion, both the first and the second prize deserve the sunbeam! In an instant it traverses the immense space from the sun to the earth and awakens all nature from sleep. Its kisses bestow beauty—we roses blush and grow fragrant because of them. Yet the high judges seem not to have noticed it at all! Were I a sunbeam, I would repay them with sunstroke... No, that would deprive them of their last wits, and they are not rich in those anyway. Better to remain silent. In the forest there is peace and quiet! How good it is to bloom, to be fragrant, to drink in the light and live in tales and songs! But the sunbeam will outlive us all!"

"And what is the first prize?" asked the earthworm. He had slept through the event and had only just arrived at the assembly point.

"Free entry into the cabbage garden!" answered the donkey. "I myself appointed the prizes! The first prize was meant for the hare, and I, as a thinking and active member of the judging commission, paid due attention to the hare's needs and necessities. Now he is provided for. As for the snail, we have granted her the right to sit on a roadside stone, bask in the sun, and feast on moss. Moreover, she has been elected one of the chief judges in running competitions. It is good indeed to have a specialist on the commission, as people call it. And, to speak plainly, judging by such an excellent beginning, we may expect much in the future!