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The Melon Story

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Snug had outgrown his baby clothes almost as fast as he'd outgrown his picture books. By the time he was big enough for knickerbockers, he was big enough for mischief too, mostly because he tried to talk and act like an older boy-monkey named Monkey-Pug.

The other monkeys in the neighbourhood shortened his name to Snug, which made him feel very grown-up indeed, much too old for toys.

Snug loved stories where something happened. Long before his first knickerbockers wore out from climbing trees for birds' nests and chasing his ball through bramble bushes, he had started helping to make stories himself. They were lively, all right. They just weren't always as funny as he'd planned.

One of them began when the melons were ripening in a neighbour's field, on the far side of an orchard.

One afternoon Monkey-Pug, who was older and bigger, skipped school and called Snug over to the stone wall at recess. It would be easy, he said, to get one of those melons. All Snug had to do was stay behind after the bell rang.

Snug agreed. He crept into the bushes with Monkey-Pug and hid until everything was quiet. Then the two of them climbed the wall, picked the biggest, ripest honeydew in the patch, and began rolling it toward the wall.

It was a monstrous melon. But Pug said that together they could boost it over, then lie down out of sight and eat it. After a great deal of heaving and tugging, they got it up on top of the wall. Pug climbed over to catch it on the other side.

Just then they heard a voice close by.

"Scoot for the orchard!" Pug whispered. "I'll hide behind the wall."

Snug ran and scrambled up the nearest tree, just in time to be spotted by the owner of the field.

"So, I've caught you stealing my fruit!" said the farmer-monkey, holding a switch in his hand.

"I'm not stealing the fruit," said Snug.



"Then what are you doing up there?"

"Resting a little."

"A likely story. What made you so tired?"

"Running away."

"Away from what?"

"That switch in your hand."

"Been up to mischief, have you? What did you do?"

"Nothing much. I didn't even get halfway," said Snug. He could feel himself getting cornered, but he wanted to put off the switching as long as he could.

"Halfway through *what*?"

Snug hesitated for a moment between the truth and a lie. Then he said honestly, "Trying to steal a melon, sir."

"Well, I like that! Why didn't you lie about it?" said the farmer, less sternly.

"Because I'd rather take the switching now and get it over with than sit up here any longer thinking about it."

"Come down, youngster. I'll snap this switch in half. You won't need it."

"Don't break it!" cried Snug. "Keep it whole and give it to me."

"Why would you want that?"

"Because then I'd know you meant what you said. My mother says no gentleman-monkey ever breaks his word. And I could make a whistle-whip out of that willow."

He scrambled down and stood in front of the farmer, who seemed more pleased than angry. The farmer took him by the hand and led him into the house. There he gave Snug two slices of the sweetest melon Snug had ever tasted, and invited him to come back whenever he was hungry for more.

When Snug got home, his teacher had already reported him missing from school. As punishment he was shut in his room until morning with only bread and water for supper, which wasn't so bad, since the melon had taken the edge off his appetite.

The evening was long and his conscience wasn't easy. Had Monkey-Pug got away with the melon, or left it behind? And Snug thought he should have told the farmer a little more of the truth while he was at it. Before he fell asleep, he

decided to go to the farmer first thing in the morning and take his full share of the blame, not push it all onto Monkey-Pug, who had led him into this.

What Snug didn't know was what had happened to Monkey-Pug.

When Pug told Snug to scoot, the huge melon was perched on the top of the wall. In his hurry to hide, Pug tugged at it, and it rolled off the wall and landed right on top of him, pinning him to the ground.

The weight nearly squeezed the life out of him. He lay there for ages, afraid to call for help.

At last he had an idea. His arms were free, so by twisting and wriggling he managed to fish his jackknife out of his pocket. He began cutting a hole in the rind near his head.

After much gouging and whittling, he had a good-sized opening, and began the pleasant job of eating the sweet, juicy inside. The more he ate, the bigger the hole grew and the lighter the melon pressed on his legs, until at last he could crawl out from under the great shell. Then he crept inside it and finished the whole thing, out of sight and out of the hot afternoon sun.

It was so cozy in there, and his tummy so full of melon, that he soon fell fast asleep.

There's no telling how long Pug would have snoozed in his sweet-smelling round house if the farmer and a neighbour hadn't taken a stroll through the patch and noticed that the biggest, best melon was missing.

The trail led straight to the wall. Looking over, they saw the missing melon with a litter of seeds and rind around its edges. They turned over the hollow shell and found Monkey-Pug rubbing his eyes, looking as if he'd been woken from a bad dream. They hauled him out by the collar.

"What happened to the inside of this melon?" demanded the farmer.

"Had to eat it to get out from under it," Pug muttered.

"Did you eat it all by yourself?"

"Had to. Nobody was here to help me," said the moist and sticky Pug.

"Made himself quite a lunch," said the neighbour.

"Must have been some picnic," said the farmer.

"Nearly a miracle," said the neighbour. "I don't see where he put it all and still had room to fit inside."

"No miracle," said the farmer. "I have a pig that does the same thing. He'll eat

two buckets of meal and milk for breakfast, and when he's done I can drop him in one of the empty buckets and he won't fill it halfway. Some pigs just have a way about them, and this thieving monkey seems to have the same sort of appetite."

Then he took Monkey-Pug by the ear.

"If you don't die of a stomachache tonight, and you want to grow up with all your bones in one piece, you'll keep out of my melon-patch. Now go rinse yourself off in the pool before the bees get at what's still stuck on the outside of you. Be off!"

Away limped Monkey-Pug, swatting at bees, glad to get off so lightly, in spite of the bruises from the melon's fall.

The next morning Snug went to the farmer and told him the whole truth. It was too late to save the melon. The farmer received him kindly but said little, and forgot to offer him any more melon. That didn't really matter. Snug was just glad he'd tried to be honest about the whole business, melon or no melon.

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