

The Fable of the Cicada and the Ant

The child is essentially conservative. Custom and traditions become indestructible once they are confided to the archives of his memory. We owe to him the celebrity of the Cicada, whose woes he stammered in his first attempts at recitation. He preserves for us the glaring absurdities that are part and parcel of the fable: the Cicada will always be hungry when the cold comes, though there are no Cicadæ left in the winter; she will always beg for the alms of a few grains of wheat, a food quite out of keeping with her delicate sucker; the suppliant is supposed to hunt for Flies and grubs, she who never eats!

Whom are we to hold responsible for these curious blunders? La Fontaine,¹ who charms us in most of his fables with his exquisite delicacy of observation, is very ill-inspired in this case. He knows thoroughly his common subjects, the Fox, the Wolf, the Cat, the Goat, the Crow, the Rat, the Weasel and many others, whose sayings and doings he describes to us with delightful precision of detail. They are local characters, neighbours, housemates of his. Their

¹ Jean de La Fontaine (1621-1695), the author of the world-famous *Fables*.—*Translator's Note*.