The Ant and The Grasshopper – Pre-Intermediate Level Story

When I was a very small boy I was made to learn by heart certain fables. Their morals were always carefully explained to me. Among these was 'The Ant and the Grasshopper'. This was written to teach children that hard work is rewarded and laziness is punished. In the story the ant spends a busy summer carrying food back to her nest to keep for the winter. As she does this, the grasshopper sits under a tree all day singing. Winter comes and the ant has more than enough food. However, the grasshopper has none. The grasshopper goes to the ant and asks for something to eat. Then the ant gives him her well-known answer:

"What were you doing all summer?"

"I sang. I was busy singing."

"You sang. Well, then go and dance."

I did not normally disagree with what my parents told me. However, I could never quite accept the message of this fable. Maybe I found it hard to understand what was right and what was wrong. I felt sad for the grasshopper. For some time, whenever I saw an ant, I put my foot on it. This was my way of showing that I did not believe that it was right to think so much about the future and plan so carefully for it.

I could not help thinking of this story the other day.

I saw George Ramsay having lunch by himself in a restaurant. He was looking into space as though the problems of the whole world sat on his shoulders. I don't think I have ever seen anyone looking so sad. I felt sorry for him and thought at once that his brother must have been causing trouble again. I went up to George and held out my hand.

"How are you?" I asked.

"I'm not feeling very happy at the moment," he answered.

"Is it Tom again?"

"Yes, it's Tom again," he answered sadly.

"Why don't you stop trying to help him?" I said. "You've done everything in the world for him. You must know by now that he is quite hopeless."

It is possible that every family has someone like Tom in it. He had been causing problems for George for twenty years. Tom had begun life well enough. He started his own business, got married and had two children. There was every reason to think that he would have a useful and honourable future. But one day he surprised his family and friends by telling them that he didn't like work and that he wasn't suited for marriage. He wanted to enjoy himself. He would not listen to any arguments. He left his wife and his business. He had a little money and he spent two happy years in the different parts of Europe.

Stories about Tom's life in Europe reached his family from time to time. These greatly upset them. They thought he was being foolish and wondered what would happen when he had spent all of his

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money. They soon found out. He borrowed.

Tom was charming and had no morals. I have never met anyone to whom it was more difficult to say 'no' to when he wanted to borrow money. He found it easy to get money from his friends, and he made friends easily. But he always said that the money you spent on things that you needed was boring. The money that was the most enjoyable to spend was the money you spent on things that you didn't really need.

For this, Tom tried to get money from his brother George. He did not try to charm George, who was a serious man and not likely to be fooled in this way. But, once or twice, George believed Tom's promises that he would change his ways. He gave him large amounts of money to help him start a new life. Tom used these to buy a new car and expensive jewellery.

When George finally came to understand that his brother would never change, he said that he would no longer help him. Tom, without any thought that it was wrong, began to make George look bad in the eyes of his friends. It was not very nice for a well-known lawyer to find his brother working behind he bar of his favourite restaurant or to see him waiting in the driver's seat of a taxi outside his club. Tom said that to work in a bar or to drive a taxi was a very good job. However, if George could help him with two hundred pounds, he didn't mind giving it up for the honour of the family. George paid.

Once Tom nearly went to prison. George was terribly upset, and told me all about it. Tom had really gone too far. He had been wild, thoughtless and selfish before this. However, he had never done anything against the law. If Tom were taken to court, he would certainly have spent time in prison. But you cannot allow this to happen to your brother. The man Tom had cheated, a man called Cronshaw, said that Tom was dishonest and should be punished. It caused George a lot of trouble and cost him five hundred pounds to stop Cronshaw going to the police. I have never seen George as angry as when he heard that Tom and Cronshaw had gone off together to Monte Carlo the moment they got the money. They spent a happy month there.

For twenty years Tom raced and gambled, made love with the prettiest girls, danced, ate in the most expensive restaurants, and dressed well. He was forty-six, but looking at him you never would have thought he was more than thirty-five. And even though you knew he had no money, he was fun to be with. He was always cheerful and very charming. I was never unhappy about the money he was always asking me for. I never lent him fifty pounds without feeling as if I should have given him more. Tom Ramsay knew everyone and everyone knew Tom Ramsay. You may not like some of the things he did, but you could not help liking him.

Poor George, only a year older than Tom, looked sixty. He had never taken more than two week's holiday in any of the last twenty-five years. He was in his office every morning at nine-thirty and never left it before six. He was honest, hard working and respectable. He had a good wife, and had never even thought of wanting to be with another woman. He had four daughters to whom he was the best of fathers. He made a point of saving as much money as he could. His plan was to stop working at the age of fifty-five and move to a little house in the country where he would work in the garden and play golf. He had never done anything bad in his life.

George was happy that he was growing old because Tom was growing old too. "It was all very well when Tom was young and good-looking," he once said to me, "but he's only a year younger than I am. In four years he'll be fifty. He won't find life so easy then. I shall have thirty thousand pounds by the time I'm fifty. For twenty-five years I have said that Tom would end his life poor and homeless. And we shall see how he likes that. We shall see if it is best to work hard all your life as I
have done, or spend your life doing nothing like Tom."

Poor George! I felt sorry for him. I wondered now as I sat down beside him what terrible thing Tom had done. George seemed to be very upset.

"Do you know what's happened now?" he asked me.

I was prepared for the worst. I wondered if the police had finally caught Tom doing something bad. I could see that George found it hard to talk about the problem.

"I hope you will agree that I have worked hard all my life and always been honourable and honest. When I stop work, I should be able to live quite well for the rest of my days on the money that I have saved."

"True."

"And you can't disagree that most of his life Tom has been lazy, dishonourable and dishonest. If there were any fairness in the world, he should be locked up for not paying back all the money he has borrowed."

"True."

George Ramsay beat his hand loudly on the table.

"It's not fair, I tell you. It's not fair!"

I could not help it. I gave out a shout of laughter as I looked at George's angry face. I rolled in my chair. I very nearly fell on the floor. George never forgave me. But Tom often asked me to excellent dinners in his charming house in Mayfair. And if he sometimes borrows a little money from me, that is simply from force of habit. It is never more than a pound.