

The Countryman and the Serpent

by Jean de La Fontaine

A countryman, as Æsop certifies,
A charitable man, but not so wise,
One day in winter found,
Stretch'd on the snowy ground,
A chill'd or frozen snake,
As torpid as a stake,
And, if alive, devoid of sense.
He took him up, and bore him home,
And, thinking not what recompense
For such a charity would come,
Before the fire stretch'd him,
And back to being fetch'd him.
The snake scarce felt the genial heat
Before his heart with native malice beat.
He raised his head, thrust out his forkèd tongue,
Coil'd up, and at his benefactor sprung.
"Ungrateful wretch!" said he, "is this the way
My care and kindness you repay?
Now you shall die." With that his axe he takes,
And with two blows three serpents makes.
Trunk, head, and tail were separate snakes;
And, leaping up with all their might,
They vainly sought to reunite.

*'Tis good and lovely to be kind;
But charity should not be blind;
For as to wretchedness ingrate,
You cannot raise it from its wretched state.*