

The Folk- and Fairy-Tales of Ludwig Bechstein: **Of the Hare and the Elephant-King**

“Once upon a time all the species of birds came together to commonly elect a new King, for their previous sovereign had died, and they had already agreed to choose the eagle as King. The election was about to ensue and be confirmed when the assembly saw, in the distance, the raven, who was late, flying towards them, and then some of those assembled said: ‘It is good that the raven joins us, so we may hear his counsel as well.’ And when the raven alighted, they said to him, ‘It is proper that you come to exercise your right to vote, as each of us is authorized and appointed to do; we shall be pleased to hear your opinion, yet most votes are for the eagle to be our future King.’ Thereupon the raven replied, ‘If the election is already decided, then I remain in the minority and am outvoted from the outset; nonetheless, I give my Nay to this decision of yours. And even if there were no longer any noble species among us birds, no king vultures, peregrine falcons, herons or sacred ibises, swans or birds of paradise but only pigeons, sparrows, night-owls and bitterns and the like, I would nevertheless not vote for the eagle to be our common leader, for he is a slave to bad habits, his colour is an undecided, spotted and striped brown, he carries his tongue all awry in his mouth, and he is utterly unable to make the eloquent speeches we wise ravens do – and yet it matters, so terribly much, that a sovereign know how to speak well and make fine speeches. The eagle is half a fool – in all his behaviour and his every gesture there is no nobility, none of what we call a noble port. He possesses absolutely no understanding, and so is all the more given to wrath and cruelty, sudden anger, and merciless, pitiless tyranny. His entire race has always been notorious; has constantly plotted wicked acts and turned its cunning,

malicious hearts to thoughts of injuring others – it is so full of iniquity that I am utterly incapable of putting its wickedness into words. Therefore I say to you, choose no eagle for your King, but seek yourselves another, even though he be less clever and clear-sighted; a disposition of noble simplicity is better than quick, all-outwitting intelligence. For when one becomes King who is of rather limited understanding, if he at any rate have wise ministers and pious counsellors and citizens, his Kingdom will endure, as we see from the example of the King of the Hares. He was not particularly clever or wise, but he followed wise advice and benefitted as a result.'

"At these words all the birds, who had been listening just as attentively as you now are to me, my most gracious King and Master," the wise adviser continued his narration, "asked what the King of the Hares had done and designed. Whereupon the raven answered, 'Once upon a time there was a year of excessive dearth, and it was so dry withal that the fruits of the earth withered and all the well-springs ran dry; all beasts found this very hard to bear, but it was hardest for those ones who require a great quantity of plant-food, consequently the larger and the largest ones – namely, the elephants. They assembled and poured out their great distress to their King, saying, 'We lack ever more water and pasture by the day. If it were agreeable to you, we would like to send out messengers to search for another habitation, that we may keep ourselves alive.' – 'I have no objection to that – do as you advise and please!' replied the Elephant-King. After that, the elephants appointed a committee and sent out its members to scout around in search of where a better place for living and pasture, one abounding in water, might be available. Several of them reached the

Kingdom of the Hares; it was a pleasant place, with a fountain that was sacred to the moon, just as hares were sacred to the moon in ancient times. There, around the fountain, were the subterranean caves of the hares. The place and the situation were all too pleasing to the scouts on their mission; they returned home and rendered an account of the new abode. They had not perceived the existence of the hares, for the small animal fears the large one, and the sages assert that it is best for the small not to tangle with the mighty. At this good news the whole elephant race, together with their King, set out and trampled the poor hares' dwellings, caves, and residences into the ground, together with a number of the timid animals. Then there was lamentation without end, and the hares ran in droves to their King and poured out their heartache to him, and wanted counsel and help from him. But it was a grievous extremity, and help was far to be found, for what can the weak hare do against the mighty elephant? But the King of the Hares summoned his counsellors nonetheless and said to them, 'I am well aware that I am not wise enough to help my trampled Kingdom, and so you must advise me what it becomes us to do, honestly and faithfully, for the greater good of me and you and the whole of harekind.' Then there spoke an old hare, who was wise and learned and held in high esteem: 'If it so please you, then send me, my King, and another one of your faithful followers, who will hear my supplication and report on it to you, to the Elephant-King.'

The King replied to these words: 'It seems to me that you are sufficiently faithful and wise, I have no suspicion of you whatsoever, and I trust you to go on your own. Carry out the mission and report what you have achieved. Also present my compliments to the Elephant-King, and say

in addition whatever you think to be good, for a messenger must know how to conduct himself, and must observe everything, and employ whatever appears to him to be useful.’ – Hereupon the old hare set out on a bright night, when a full moon was shining, and went to the fountain of the moon, yet he prudently reflected that his body and limbs were of a delicate constitution, and he thought of the old proverbs: “Who wilfully exposes himself to danger will perish therein,” and, “Who walks with the wild beasts will be devoured by them. I shall climb this mountain and hold communion with the Elephant-King.”

The old hare did as he had said he would, and came before the Elephant-King, and said to him, ‘To you, most puissant Lord and King, I am sent by my master the Moon, ruler of the night. In your wisdom, listen to the embassy he sends through me and do not make me pay for any part of it that may displease you, for an envoy is but a tool.’

The Elephant-King said, ‘Pray tell me what it is that the Moon wishes and commands,’ and the old hare replied:

‘The Moon sends word to you through my mouth as follows: The mighty lord who has trust in his might is easily moved by it to fight against one who is even mightier and stronger, and his pugnacity soon becomes a rope around his feet. You, O King, do not let yourself be satisfied with being the mightiest and greatest of all beasts, no, you have undertaken a campaign against my poor people, the hares; you and your people have crushed underfoot their and their innocent little children’s meadow, and my and their fountain. Do this no more, get you and your people gone from here, go elsewhere, or I will blear your eyes – so speaks the Moon – and

make you depart hence through my furious wrath. – And should you, O King, not believe my words, then I am to show you the Moon's wrathful countenance.'



The Elephant-King was alarmed and went with the hare to the Fountain of the Moon, and the latter bade him look into the water and said: 'Touch down there with your long nose, and you will touch the Moon.' The elephant plunged his trunk into the Fountain of the Moon, and straight away the water was troubled and the reflected clear countenance of the moon became contorted. 'You see – O mighty King!' cried the hare, 'how wrathfully the Moon looks at you, how his expression announces to you the fullness of his fury at the evil you have done to him and to his people!'

And the Elephant-King said, 'O Lord Moon! Never again will I, or shall one of mine, trespass against you and yours! We shall willingly retire from your sanctuary.' And he did this, withdrawing with his people far away from the Fountain of the Moon, and the hares took back possession and built their dwellings anew, and they live there in peace to this day.

‘This,” said the raven who was addressing the congregation of birds, ‘have I told you as a warning, that you may choose a King who has understanding, who, like that King of the Hares, pays heed to sensible advice, and does not always wish to be an autocrat above all others like the eagle, persisting in the fallacies of a clever head; or who, because he lacks wisdom like the Elephant-King, is easy to outwit. Additionally, it is entirely against the Constitution of the entire Kingdom of Birds for *everyone* to have one common leader. May the eagles choose an eagle for King, there is nothing to be said against that; the vultures their Vulture-King, and the pied bush chats their kinglet – each to his own, that is why the species differ. What is the point – to give you only one example – of the race of pigeons having an eagle as King? He will bathe his claws in their blood and devour them. Truly, a race which selects a foreign master for itself and places trust in a false stranger will meet the just fate of the hare and the bird, who chose one unknown to them to be judge of their dispute.’ ‘What was that?’ asked the birds. ‘I shall, with your permission, recite the tale to you,’ replied the raven, the speaker in the feathered National Assembly.”

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