

The Folk- and Fairy-Tales of Ludwig Bechstein: **The Eagles and the Ravens**

In a large mountain range, two wide forests lay as neighbours opposite each other, far away from the regions inhabited by man, and in one of these forests only eagles had made their eyries, while in the other nothing but ravens had their nests, and each of these species of birds was subordinate to a King of the same line, who ruled over his subjects as an autocrat.

Then it happened that ancient hatred of the ravens stirred anew among the eagles, and one night the King of the Eagles rose with a company of his followers, flew over to the forest of the ravens and fell on them while they were asleep and not expecting any hostile attack, and killed a great number of them, without the King of the Ravens learning anything of this raid until the next morning when he awoke and rose from his nest. Then he heard with grave distress of the injury done to, and the great loss of, his subjects, and he assembled all his counsellors, intending to discuss with them how this faithless deed on the part of the eagles could and should best be avenged. Ravens being, as natural history teaches us, noticeably good speakers, their King also was not lacking in true eloquence, and he spoke to his assembled council as follows:

“My dear, trusty followers! It has been made known to you how, without prior notice and declaration of war, contrary to all international laws, the eagles, our neighbours, secretly invaded us in the watches of the night and murdered many of our number, without our having been able to learn, as of yet, why they committed such an act. If we countenance this and let it pass without reprisal, it will happen many more times, therefore let us deliberate as to the ways in which we shall do what is best for us and for our State. Do not be overhasty with your counsel, but consider it well, for

the weal or woe of all of us depends on whether we find a wise or an unwise expedient. Let each one of you ponder a good while over the outrageous attack which disturbs the prosperity our Kingdom has hitherto enjoyed, indeed, threatens it with annihilation if we do not find means to stay the hostile conduct of the eagles.”



This speech of the King was followed by a secret sitting behind closed doors, at which only the five Privy Counsellors to the King were present, with the King at their head. These ravens were for the most part quite grey with age; some even had feathers that had turned white, many a one had a completely bald head, and almost every one of them walked along bowed under the burden of his years, which, when added up, came to a considerable sum. The King was far younger than all of them. Now when the King had opened the council, the foremost among them, the Chairman of the Privy Council, spoke first as Minister-President, saying, “Great and mighty Lord and King! The wise men of old pronounced that which I make so bold as to advise: If an enemy is superior to you in power,

and you are not able to resist him, then yield to him, and do not presume to fight him with a vain and proud heart, or you will incur yet more harm from him than you have already suffered.”

The King grasped the meaning of this speech perfectly well but did not express his opinion, turning instead to his second Privy Counsellor and asking, “What say you?”

“Most gracious Lord and King!” replied the questionee, “in my inconsequential opinion, I cannot concur with the intention of my honoured friend who has just spoken. Would it be well done if we declared ourselves vanquished just like that, and surrendered our homeland without the slightest attempt at defence? No, let us be united and ready for manful resistance, armed to defend ourselves, and everywhere vigilant. Let us send out watchers and scouts who will apprise us of all they observe of the eagles’ schemes; and if they return as enemies on the attack, then let us bravely advance to meet them with all our might. They will perhaps flee when they perceive that we are ready to pay them back in their own coin. We would be disgraced were we to flee with our wives and children, abandoning this forest and domicile of ours which was hallowed by our forefathers. Let us assert our right to it and defend it with our lives; there will be time yet for humiliating flight should we suffer defeat in battle.”

The King listened to this advice in silence also and then gave the third of his Privy Counsellors the floor. This one raised his solemnly bowed head with dignity and opened his beak deliberately. “Most gracious Lord and King! The Honourable previous speakers have certainly spoken according to their individual, albeit opposing, convictions. It seems to me to

be difficult to fight against the eagles with any hope of victory, for they are clearly stronger, more warlike, and more powerful, but I also do not advise disgraceful flight and voluntary exile. Send, O King, a wise, eloquent man who enjoys your trust over to the eagles to ask their King in your name, as your envoy, if he had knowledge of the attack, what the reason for it was, and what we had done to deserve it. Perhaps what occurred will be mutually agreed to have been a mere misunderstanding and amicably settled by means of negotiations. Perhaps peace with the eagles can be *bought* by our side, so that we may remain in peace and quiet in the bosom of our homeland; for in the words of the wise men of old: Peace is better than war, and it is no disgrace to pay tribute to an invincible enemy!”

The speaker fell silent, and the King silently gave the fourth counsellor the floor. This one, not as greatly advanced in years as the previous speakers, raised his head with a bold motion and spoke with manly force. “Not one of the Honourable Counsellors has spoken of that which may truly avail us! I vote against the total surrender and abandonment of our native domicile, I vote against the unequal fight which would end only with our ignominious defeat and subjugation, I vote against negotiating with those despicable eagles, and, above all, I vote against a tribute, which would, as it were, subordinate us to them. My advice – which I but tender – is to retreat *for a time*, win ourselves confederates outside, and then suddenly return with a great host to do to the eagles as they did to us, and win back our domicile for ourselves. The wise men of old said: ‘The man who makes himself submissive to his enemy helps him against himself.’”

The King slowly and thoughtfully shook his head; he grasped and weighed in his mind the sense of all the words he had heard, and signalled to the fifth of his counsellors to speak. This one began: "According to my opinion, none of all the counsels given up to now will entirely avail us. I likewise can by no means vote for fighting against an enemy that is our superior. I fear the lords of the skies. No one should hold his enemy in all too little regard! However, I also cannot advise disgraceful flight, just as little as I can disgraceful tribute, and even less would I like to see the eagles done the honour of a legation on our part, for they would surely hold any such up to ridicule. The wise men of old give the advice: Let no one approach his enemy unless he perceive his own advantage thereby. My advice and recommendation is that we wait with cunning and caution to see what will be further undertaken against us on the part of the eagles, and that we show no fear, but also give no provocation, and show no signs of humiliation, nor of arrogance. A wise man foresees his harm and protects himself from it before it comes near him. For disaster, once it has come nigh us, is irrevocable. With the gentle force of ruse and reasoning, we will perhaps avoid war and subjugation."

Now the King spoke, questioning, "What do you mean by that? Which ruse will you employ against the eagles? Tell us what you have in mind, and leave nothing out."

The speaker replied, "Listen to me, my Lord and King! When a King consults his counsellors, whom he knows to be wise men, and who possess knowledge of all things, then his Kingdom will endure and his power will be augmented and fortified. However, if a King scorns the

counsel of his sages and follows only his own will and intention, even if he is not personally lacking in intelligence and insight, he will seldom see a happy end to his decisions, and his kingdom will not come into full flower. Let us consider and sagely think through our every suggestion for as long as we need to find what is best for one and all. My advice is this: First of all, that we rid ourselves of the impression that the shock of the unexpected hostile attack poured into our hearts, and make resolutions with fortified courage of mind. Secondly, that we become completely clear in our minds about the cause of the attack and the hostility of the eagles towards us, a cause which has its roots in historical ground. Without our knowing and carefully considering this cause, a decision made on our part in accordance with reason is not possible.”

“But how are we to discover this cause?” asked the King.

“It is discovered; I know it, my King,” replied the speaker.

“Then tell it!” the King commanded.

“It is a *secret*, my royal master!” the sagacious adviser replied. The wise men of old fashioned the fine riddle: What is too little for *one*, sufficient for *two*, and too much for *three*? A secret – and what I have to say to you is suitable only for two tongues and for four ears. However wise many a ruler may be, he cannot know everything; the ruler’s confidential counsellors are called Privy for the very reason that he confides his secret matters to them and they in turn communicate to him that which not everyone else needs to know.”

At these words the King dismissed the sitting of his Privy Council members and bid the wise counsellor follow him to an isolated apartment,

where he asked him: “What do you know about the cause of the eagles’ hatred for us, which has now manifested itself?”

“The whole cause has its roots in a *speech*, my King, which a raven once made,” the Privy Counsellor replied.

“Sit down and tell me about it!” said the King, and he likewise seated himself, to listen attentively; and the counsellor began his tale.

Next: *Of the Hare and the Elephant-King*