

The Folk- and Fairy-Tales of Ludwig Bechstein: **The Life-Story of Sambar the Mouse**



“I was born in the house of a devout hermit; there were many of us siblings, and apart from my dear, departed parents, there also lived in this house their brothers and sisters, aunts and cousins and their children, all together. We never wanted for any kind of foodstuff, for every day the charitable people in the neighbourhood brought the hermit bread, flour, cheese, eggs,

butter, fruit and vegetables, far more than he needed, so that he would pray for them. Whether he did pray for them, and whether that helped them in any way, I do not know. Now the hermit was not willing for me and my relatives to help ourselves to everything, and so he hung a basket up in the middle of his kitchen, out of our reach. But as I had already, as a young mouse, shown myself to advantage through courage coupled with wiliness and caution, so I leapt from the near wall into the basket, in spite of all, ate till my appetite was sated, and threw what remained down to my relatives, who celebrated that day as a veritable feast-day. When the hermit walked in and saw what had happened, he took the measure of hanging the basket even higher. Now he was visited by a pilgrim, whom he entertained according to his means, and when they had eaten and drunk together the hermit put the leftovers in the basket and hung it in its new place, intending to keep a watchful eye on it to see if the mouse could reach even



there. Meanwhile his guest began to talk, relating his travels by land and by sea, and the adventures he had experienced and passed through, but he perceived that his host was listening to him with only half an ear all the while, his body and eyes permanently half-turned towards the basket. Then the pilgrim became indignant and said: "I am recounting the finest adventures to you, but you are not paying attention, and seem to take no pleasure in them." – "Not at all," replied the hermit, "I am listening to your words with great pleasure, but I must keep watch to see if the mice get into the food-basket again, for these vermin eat up all of my food, leaving scarcely anything for me; and there is one in particular who leaps into the

basket for all the others.” By this he meant me, little Sambar. Thereupon the pilgrim said, “Your words bring to my remembrance the fable of a woman who told her friend: “This woman is not giving winnowed wheat for unwinnowed wheat without a reason.” “How so? What was that?” asked the hermit, and the pilgrim said: “Let me tell you. Once, on my travels, I lodged with a worthy man, and in the night I heard him – I was in bed in the next room – saying to his wife: “Wife, tomorrow I shall invite several friends over to be my guests.” The woman replied: “You cannot invite guests and do business every day; you’ll fritter away everything we have, and in the end we’ll have nothing to call our own in our house and home.” Then the husband said: “Housewife, do not be displeased with my will, especially in such matters as this! I’m telling you, he who stints everywhere and always takes in and scrapes together but never gives back out, and has no proper enjoyment of what is his, will come to the same end as the wolf.”

“And what end did the wolf meet with?” the wife asked, and her husband related: “Once upon a time, so they say, there was a hunter who went into the forest with his gun, crossbow, and arrows, and he encountered a roebuck which he shot and loaded onto his shoulders to carry home.

However, he then encountered a bear which rushed towards him, and to fend it off the hunter hurriedly cocked his crossbow and loaded a bolt, but he was not able to take aim because the roebuck hampered him; and quickly laying down his crossbow, he drew his hunting knife and began to fight the bear, and he ran his knife through its body in the same moment that the bear clasped him in its arms and squeezed him to death. Feeling

the pain of its severe wound, the bear roared and, in its fury, tore the wound further open, and so soon bled to death. That evening, a wolf passed by, and he found a dead roebuck, a dead bear, and a dead hunter. He was heartily delighted at this, and he said to himself: Everything that I find here, everything shall be *mine*, I can live on it for a long time. My brothers shall receive none of it. Provisions make the master, as the proverb says. Today I shall save it and not touch anything, so my treasure will last long, even though my hunger is great. But a crossbow lies there whose string I could gnaw. And as the wolf began to busy himself with the cocked crossbow, the spring snapped, and the loaded quarrel or arrow shot through the middle of his heart! – You see, wife,” continued the man to whom I was listening,” said the pilgrim to the hermit, about whom Sambar the Mouse was telling his friends, the raven and the turtle: “You see, wife, there you have an example of its not always being a good thing to collect and not want to have your true friends share your enjoyment of what you have collected.” And his wife said, “You may be right.” Now when morning came, she got up, took some husked wheat, washed it, spread it out to dry, and sat her child down to watch over it, and then she moved on to attend to the rest of her tasks. But the child did as children do: he played and did not keep an eye on the wheat, and then the sow came along and gobbled some up, fouling the wheat it did not devour. When later the woman came and saw what had happened, the leftover wheat revolted her, so she gathered it up and took it to market, where she offered it in exchange for an equal measure of unhusked wheat. Then I heard one of her female neighbours, who had observed her doing this, mockingly remark to a third woman: “Look how the

woman gives husked wheat away so cheaply, for unhusked! Nothing happens without a reason.” – This is also the case with the mouse, who you say leaps into the basket for all the other mice – there must also be a reason for that. Give me a pick, and I’ll dig into the mousehole, and I don’t doubt I’ll find the reason.” “I listened to these words,” Sambar continued his narration, “in the small mouse-hole of one of my female playmates; in my hole, a thousand golden florins lay hidden, without my or the hermit’s knowing who had placed them there, and I would amuse myself by playing with them every day. The pilgrim dug and soon found the gold, which he took, saying: “You see, the power of the gold has given the mouse the strength to leap up so boldly into the high basket. It will now no longer be able to do this.” It pained me to hear these words, and sadly I soon found them to be true. When day dawned, the other mice all came to me so I would feed them as usual, and they were hungrier than ever; however, I was not able to leap into the basket, as I previously could and did, for the strength had left me; and I saw myself forthwith treated with utter disdain by the other mice, my closest friends and relatives; indeed, they worried that they would end up having to give me something, and feed me, and so every one of them went his separate way and none of them would now spare me a glance, as if I had insulted them in the bitterest way.

So, sick at heart, I said to myself the following words: “Our friends in time of need are floaty stuff indeed; Should our hard state persist, they dissipate like mist. Who has no possessions, has no brothers; who has no brothers, has no relatives; who has no



relatives, has no friends; and who has no friends is forgotten. Poverty is a hard condition; poverty sickens life. No wound stings as severely as poverty. Much praise goes the way of the rich man, but when he becomes poor, he receives twice and three times the censure: if he was gentle and hospitable, he has been a spendthrift; if he was noble and liberal, he is now called proud and quarrelsome; if he is silent and reserved, he is called melancholy; if he is talkative, he is called a chatterer. Death is less harsh than poverty. The poor man will sooner find help sticking his hand into the open jaws of a poisonous snake than by craving help of a miser.”

I then saw that the pilgrim and the hermit divided the found golden florins between themselves half and half, and took a joyful leave of one another; and the hermit placed his money under the pillow he slept on. Now I proposed to appropriate some of it to restore my lost strength, but the slight noise I made awoke the hermit, who gave me such a blow that I did not know whether I was coming or going, nor how I found my way back to my hole. Nevertheless my greed for the gold gave me no rest, and I made a second attempt, when the hermit hit me once again, so hard that I escaped to my hole bloodied and wounded nigh to death. That was enough for me, and the thought of gold and money now filled me with horror; and in my pains and in my sadness I recited to myself four sayings: Nothing shows better sense than to look contentedly upon one’s own possessions and not strive after others’. No one without morals can be noble. There is no better wealth than sufficiency. Wise is he who does not strive after that which is out of his reach. So I resolved to persevere in poverty and nobility of mind, and leaving the hermit’s house I wandered into the wasteland. There I

made myself a home and made the acquaintance of the peaceable doves, who sought my help, which was the cause of your joining me, Friend Raven, who told me much about his friendship with you, Turtle Corax, so that I harboured a great longing to make your acquaintance, for there is nothing finer in the world than the company of true friends, and there is nothing more distressing than to be lonely and friendless.”

Thus did Sambar the Clever Mouse end the tale of his life, and the turtle spoke, very gently and amiably: “I thank you warmly for your most instructive story; you have experienced much, and wisdom, which is worth more than gold, has become your treasure. Now, here with us, forget your sufferings and your loss, and reflect that a noble disposition is honoured even when unaccompanied by earthly possessions. The lion, whether asleep or awake, remains feared; and wherever he goes, his strength goes with him. The wise man likes to change his abode that he may learn the ways of foreign lands, and for his companion he chooses not gold, no – but reason.”

When the raven heard this speech, he took heartfelt pleasure in the union of his friends and spoke cordial words to them; meanwhile, a stag came running along, and when the faithful beasts heard it they fled, the turtle into the water, the mouse into a small hole, the raven onto a tree. And when the stag came to the water, the raven flew up into the air to see if perhaps a hunter was tracking it; but as he saw no one, he called to his friends and they came back out. The turtle saw the stag standing with outstretched neck at the water, apparently afraid to drink, and called to him: “Noble sir, if you are thirsty, then drink; you need fear nobody here!” Then

the stag bent his head, greeted the turtle, and approached her; and she asked whence he came. He replied, "I have been in the wild wood for a long time, where I have seen the snakes moving from one end to the other, and seized with the fear that hunters might surround the wood, I have retreated here." The turtle spoke: "No hunter has ever yet come hither, so have no fear. And if you wish to live here, you may become one of our company; there is good pasture all around." The stag was pleased to hear this and did indeed stay there, and the animals chose a spot under the boughs of an umbrageous tree, and every day they would all come together and tell one another the course of the world and delightful fairy-tales besides.

Now one day the three animal friends came together, the raven, the mouse, and the turtle, but the stag failed to appear. They were worried about him – perhaps something had befallen him because of a hunter – and the raven was sent out to search for the stag and bring back tidings. After a while he saw him in the forest, at no great distance from their abode, lying captured in a net, then he returned and informed his dear companions. As soon as the mouse heard this, she asked the raven to take her to the stag, and there she said to him: "Brother, who could have overcome you like this? Why, you are praised for being one of the sagest animals!" Thereupon the stag sighed and said: "Oh, dear sister! Intelligence is no safeguard against the judgement that falls on us from above. Neither the speed of the runner nor the power of the wrestler can tear the net called Fate."

While these two were talking the turtle came along, having crept as quickly as she could; the stag turned to her and said, "Oh dear sister, why have you come here to us? And what benefit does your presence bring us?"

Only the mouse is able to set me free, and if the hunter comes near, I shall escape very easily, the raven will fly hence, and the mouse will slip away. But you, whom nature made to be unhurried, not swift of step, nor skilled in flight, you face the threat of ignominious captivity.” The turtle replied: “A true friend, who is endowed with understanding, will not deem himself worthy of life if he loses his friends. And if it is not granted him to be able to help, he may at least give comfort to the best of his powers. A true friend will pull the heart from his breast and offer it to his true friend.” Before the turtle had finished speaking – the mouse having by this time assiduously gnawed through the net – the animals heard the hunter approaching, so the stag ran away, the raven flew away, and the mouse slipped away. The hunter, finding his net gnawed through, gave a start, looked around, and found no one but the turtle. He took her, while the raven and mouse looked on with regret, and bound her tightly with a shred of the net. The mouse cried to the raven, “Alas! Alas! When a stroke of good fortune comes, the next one is slow to follow; but when a stroke of misfortune falls, a second one comes hot on its heels. Did I not have sorrow enough to bear with the loss of my gold? And now I am devoid of the sister I had come to hold dear, she whom I had taken to my heart before all others. Woe, woe is me, I who run from one net of affliction into another, on whom nothing is bestowed save only adversity.”

Then the raven and the stag spoke to the mouse: “O clever friend, do not lament so much; it is not lamentation that will profit our friend, and your and our sorrow will not release her from her bonds. Let us devise some ruse so we may set her free!”

And Sambar the Clever mouse pondered awhile, then she said: "I have it. You, stag, quickly reach the road the hunter has taken and fall down close by its edge as if half-dead, and you, raven, stand on the stag as if you were eating of him. When the hunter sees that, he will lay down what he is carrying: then do you, friend stag, leisurely drag yourself somewhat deeper into the forest, so he will pursue you, and in the meantime I shall gnaw through the net and liberate our dear sister."

This piece of advice was quickly executed. The stag and the raven took a by-way and hurried ahead of the hunter, then they did as the mouse had advised. The hunter, coveting the stag, threw down everything he was carrying; the stag crept into the thicket, the raven flew after him, and the hunter ran after him; and the mouse gnawed through the turtle's net and went home with her, and they found the raven and the stag already there, these latter having very soon escaped from the hunter's sight. When the hunter returned to the place where he had thrown down his things, which he had to spend a good while looking for, he found the net gnawed through, and his surprise knew no bounds. "That must be the work of the devil, no good spirit could have done it!" he cursed, thinking that evil spirits and wizards must dwell in this region which, in the forms of animals, made fools of hunters; and he went back home in fear and never hunted in that forest again. And there the animal friends now lived together in peace, harmony, and bliss, and from time to time the dove came into this beautiful seclusion and visited Sambar the Clever Mouse, her dear friend, bringing news from the wide world and all kinds of delightful stories which gave joy to one and all.