

From the Elephant Pit

A hunter once dug a pit to catch and trap wild elephants. One day, a man who was being chased by a lion fell into the pit, and then the lion followed a second later. Before they had time to pick themselves up, down came a mouse, closely followed by a snake who had been chasing it, and he, in turn, was followed by a falcon who had been trying to catch him.

So there they were -- all five of them -- caught in the elephant pit and unable to get out. Each as he picked himself up tried to get away as far as possible from the others, for none knew what harm might come to him.

The man thought, "I must kill the lion or he will eat me."

The lion thought, "I must eat the man or he will kill me."

The falcon thought, "I must kill the snake or it may bite me."

The mouse thought, "Oh my! how I wish I could get away from all these big creatures!"

Thus they all sat silent, each one afraid to move lest some one or another pounce upon him and kill him.

In time the lion spoke: "Oh, honored ones," said he, "we are all comrades in misfortune. Let us promise not to hurt each other. Let each abide where he now is, while we plan a way to get out of this pit."

"Agreed!" cried all the others in haste, and especially pleased was the mouse.

Thus they all sat apart trying to think of a plan to escape, when the elephant hunter came to the pit.

"Why, what is all this?" the hunter cried, looking down.

"Oh, hunter, good hunter, kind hunter, please help us out!" cried the animals. "You see that we are not elephants."

"No, no, good hunter, I am not an elephant, I am not an elephant," squealed the mouse.

The hunter laughed. "No, you don't look much like an elephant, my little friend," he said. "I think I must help you all to escape."

The first animal that the hunter drew up was the lion. "Oh, hunter," said the lion, "I and the other animals will prove grateful to you and will help you for your kindness to us, so rescue them. But leave the man in the pit, for I warn you he will forget your kindness and do you harm."

The hunter, however, would not listen to the lion's advice, and rescued everyone.

A short time after this, the hunter fell ill of a great fever. He could not go into the woods to hunt for game, and he and his wife would have died but for the kindness of the lion. Every day the lion brought fresh meat and left it at the hunter's door.

One day while flying through the forest, the falcon saw something bright and glistening lying on the ground. He swooped down and found some beautiful gems. He carried the gems to the hunter's house and dropped them in his lap. Thus he, too, tried to repay the hunter for saving his life.

Now the gems found by the falcon belonged to the queen. She had lost them one day while passing through the wood. As she did not miss them until the next day, she thought they must have been stolen during the night, and told the king so.

The king at once sent out a man to find the gems, and the man he sent out was the very man who had fallen into the elephant pit and had been rescued by the hunter. In his search he came to the home of the sick hunter.

"Have you seen anything of such and such gems?" asked the man.

"Yes," answered the hunter, and brought them and spread them on the table.

"Where did you get these?" asked the man.

"The falcon whom I rescued from the pit brought them to me," said the hunter.

Now when the man looked on the gems, he craved them, and he said to the hunter, "These gems belong to the queen. She thinks someone has stolen them. I have been sent to find them. Unless I tell, nobody will ever know where they are. So, my friend, let us divide them. You keep half, and give half to me. Thus shall we both gain wealth and no one be the wiser."

"What!" cried the hunter. "Do you take me for a thief? No! No, I say! The gems shall be returned to our good queen."

"Then, my honest fellow," sneered the man, "you shall go to the palace as my prisoner."

He clapped his hands, and two soldiers rushed in. "Bind him and carry him to the king! It is he who has stolen the queen's jewels!"

The poor hunter, still weak from fever and illness, was carried bound to the palace. The king, believing the false man's story, would not listen to the poor hunter, but had him chained in a deep, dark dungeon.

The poor man was now in a pitiable state.

"Alas!" he said, "the lion spoke but the truth. Because of the man that I rescued from my elephant pit I am now in this loathsome dungeon with none to pity me or to deliver me."

"Say not so, good friend," said the mouse, coming out of a corner. "I pity you, and it may be I who can deliver you. Keep up your courage. I will go now to find help."

The mouse ran off and soon returned with the snake. "Now I am glad," said the snake, "to have a chance to show my gratitude. Here is a little box of cream. Hide it in your chest. Today when the king walks in the garden, I will sting him on the heel. The cream in that little box alone can save his life. I urge you, use it."

True to his word, the snake bit the king as he walked in the garden.

"He will die! He will die!" wailed all the people. "None of our doctors know a cure for the bite of that snake."

As the queen sat weeping by the king's side, the mouse drew near and spoke to her. "O queen, there is one who can cure the king -- the hunter who lies in the lowest dungeon. Send for him quickly, lest it be too late."

Hastily the queen gave the order, and the hunter was brought to the king's side. Taking the box of cream from his chest, he put some on the wound. At once the swelling went down, the pain disappeared, and the king was well again.

"What reward shall I give you?" said the king. "Ask what you will, my deliverer."

"O king," replied the hunter, "I ask only of your one great favor, that you listen to my story."

He then told the king the whole story. When he had ended, the king said, "The lion was right. Would that you had left the ungrateful man in the pit. Ho, soldiers, bring him to me and I will see that he is fitly punished."

But though the soldiers searched everywhere for the man, they could not find him.

"I am glad he has escaped," said the hunter, "for I like not to see anybody suffer."

"Good," said the king, "it is noble thus to forgive an enemy. And now, my friend, I have need of a brave man like you in my palace. You shall live here as my chief hunter."

Thus, through the gratitude of the beasts, the hunter rose to high position and honor in the court of his king.