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Fables Paraphrased from the Indian and Imitations

Leo Tolstoy

1899

THE HEAD AND TAIL OF THE SERPENT

THE serpent's Tail was disputing with the serpent's Head as to which should go first.

The Head said :

"You cannot go first ; you have no eyes or ears."

The Tail replied :

" But at all events I have the strength to make you go. If I wanted, I could twine around a tree, and you could not stir."

The Head said :

" Let us part company."

And the Tail tore itself away from the Head, and crawled away in its own direction.

But as soon as it had left the Head, it came upon a cranny and fell into it.

II

FINE THREADS

Leo Tolstoy
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A MAN bade a spinner spin fine threads. The spinner spun fine threads ; but the man declared that the threads were not good, and that he wished the very finest of fine threads.

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The spinner said :

” If these are not fine enough for you, then here are some others that will suit you.”

And she pointed to a bare spot. The man declared that he could not see them.

The spinner replied :

” The fact that you cannot see them proves that they are very fine ; I can’t see them myself.”

The fool was rejoiced, and ordered some more of the same thread, and paid down the money for it.

III

THE DIVISION OF THE INHERITANCE

A FATHER had two sons. He said to them :

” I am dying ; divide everything equally.”

When the father was dead, the sons could not make the division without quarreling.

They went to a neighbor to help them decide.

The neighbor asked them what their father had com- manded them to do.

They replied :

” He commanded us to make equal shares of every- thing.”

Then said the neighbor :

” Tear all the raiment in two ; break all the utensils in two ; cut all the live stock in two.”

The brothers took the neighbor’s advice, and at the end neither had anything.

IV

THE MONKEY

A MAN went into the woods. He felled a tree, and began to cut it in pieces. He lifted the end of the tree on the stump, sat astride upon it, and began to saw. Then he drove a wedge into the cleft, and began to saw

farther along ; then he removed the wedge, and put it in the new place.

A monkey was sitting on a tree, watching him.

When the man lay down to sleep, the monkey got astride of the tree and began to saw; but when he took out the wedge, the tree closed together again, and nipped his tail.

He began to struggle and squeal.

The man awoke, knocked the monkey down, and tied him with a rope.

THE MONKEY AND THE PEAS

A MONKEY was carrying two handfuls of peas. One little pea dropped out. He tried to pick it up, and spilled twenty. He tried to pick up the twenty, and spilled them all. Then he lost his temper, scattered the peas in all directions, and ran away.

VI

THE MILCH COW

A MAN had a Cow ; every day she gave a pail of milk. The man invited some guests. In order to get more milk he did not milk the Cow for ten days.

He thought that on the tenth day the Cow would give him ten pails of milk.

But the Cow's milk had dried up, and she gave less milk than ever before.

VII

THE DUCK AND THE MOON

A DUCK was floating down the river ; she had been hunting for a fish, and all day long she had not found one.

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When night came, she saw the Moon in the water, and thought that it was a fish, and she dived down to catch the Moon.

The other ducks saw this, and began to make sport of her.

From that time forth the Duck began to be ashamed and lose courage, so that whenever she saw a fish under the water she would not seize it, and so she died of starvation.

VIII

THE WOLF IN THE DUST

A WOLF was anxious to steal a sheep from the flock, and went to the leeward, so that the dust from the flock might cover him. The Shepherd Dog saw him and said :

” It ’s no use, Wolf, for you to go in the dust ; it will spoil your eyes.”

But the Wolf replied :

” It is very unfortunate, Doggy, 1 my eyes were spoiled long ago, but they say that the dust from a flock of sheep is an excellent remedy for the eyes.”

IX

THE MOUSE UNDER THE GRANARY

A MOUSE lived under a granary. In the granary floor was a little hole and the grain slipped down through the hole. The Mouse’s life was happy, but the desire came ov^er her to make a show of her life.

She gnawed a larger hole, and invited other Mice.

” Come,” said she, ” and have a feast ; there will be food enough for all.”

But after she had brought the Mice, she discovered that there was no hole at all. The farmer had noticed .the big hole in the floor, and closed it up.

1 Sobachenka, diminutive of Sobaka.

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side ; the dog makes a sharp turn after it, and then you dash off in another direction.”

The Fox laughed, and said :

” We do this, not to deceive the dogs, but we only do it so as to dodge ; when the dogs chase us, and we see that we cannot run straight, we dodge to one side ; and in order that we may dodge to that side, we have to fling our brushes to the other, just as you do the same thing with your hands when you try to turn round when you are running. This is not reason on our part. God Himself thought it out when He made us for this reason, that the dogs might not catch all the foxes.”

THE COW AND THE GOAT

AN old woman had a Cow and a Goat. The Cow and the Goat went to pasture together. The Cow always turned around when they came after her. The old woman brought bread and salt, gave it to the Cow, and said :

” Now stand still, little mother, I na, na, I will bring you some more ; only stand still.”

On the next evening the Goat returned from the pasture before the Cow, spread his legs, and stood before the old woman. The old woman waved her handkerchief at him, but the Goat stood without moving.

He thought that the old woman gave bread to the Cow because she stood still.

The old woman perceived that the Goat did not move away ; she took her stick and beat him.

When the Goat went away, the old woman began to feed the Cow again with grain, and to coax her.

”There is no justice in men,” thought the Goat; ”I stood stiller than the Cow does, but she beat me.”

He ran to one side, hurried back, kicked over the milk-pail, spilled the milk, and knocked over the old woman.

1 Matushka.

XXXII

THE FOX'S BRUSH

A MAN met a Fox, and asked her :

” Who taught you Foxes to deceive dogs with your tails?”

The Fox asked :

” How do you mean deceive ? We do not deceive the dogs, but merely run from them with all our might.”

The man said :

” No ; you deceive them with your brushes. When the dogs chase you, and are about to seize you, you throw your brushes to one

X

THE VERY BEST PEAR

A GENTLEMAN sent his servant to buy the very best pears.

The servant went to the shop, and asked for pears.

The merchant gave them to him; but the servant said :

” No ; give me your very best pears.”

The merchant said :

” Taste one ; you will find that they are delicious.”

”How can I know,” exclaimed the servant, *that* they are all delicious, if I taste only one ? ”

So he bit a little out of each pear, and took them to his master.

Then his master dismissed him.

XI

THE FALCON AND THE COCK

A FALCON became tame, and would fly to his master's hand whenever he called. The Cock was afraid of the master, and screamed when he came near him.

And the Falcon said to the Cock :

” You Cocks have no sense of gratitude ! What a race of slaves you are ! As soon as you are hungry, you go to your master. It is a very different thing with us wild birds ; we are strong and we can fly faster than all others, and we are not afraid of men ; but we go of our own accord and perch on their hands when they call us. We remember that they have given us food.”

And the Cock said :

” You do not run away from men, because you never saw a Falcon roasted ; but many a time have we seen Cocks roasted ! ”

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XII

THE JACKALS AND THE ELEPHANT

THE Jackals had eaten all the carrion in the forest, and there was nothing left for them to devour. Now there was an aged Jackal, and he devised a plan to get food. He went to the Elephant, and said :

” We used to have a czar, but he became spoiled ; he would lay such tasks on us that it was impossible to do them; we wish to elect another czar; and my people have sent me to beg you to become our czar. We live well ; whatever you wish, that we will do, and we will honor you in all respects. Come, let us go to our empire.”

The Elephant consented, and followed the Jackal. The Jackal led him into a bog. When the Elephant began to sink, the Jackal said :

” Now order whatever you desire, and we will do it.”

The Elephant said :

” I command you to pull me out of here.”

The Jackal laughed, and said :

” Seize my tail with your proboscis, and I will instantly pull you out”

The Elephant replied :

” Can you pull me out with your tail ? ”

But the Jackal demanded :

” Why, then, did you order anything that was impos- sible to do ? We drove away our first czar for the very reason that he laid impossible commands on us ! ”

When the Elephant had perished in the swamp, the Jackals came and ate him up.

XIII

THE HERON, THE FISHES, AND THE CRAB

A HERON lived by a pond, and was beginning to grow old. She was no longer strong enough to catch fish. So she began to plan how she might contrive to get a living. And she said to the Fishes :

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” Fishes, you have not the least idea what a misfortune is threaten- ing you. I have heard some men say that they are going to drain the pond, and catch all of you. I happen to know that beyond this

” Creep into the shell again ; when you are in the shell, I will sit on you, as I used to sit on you, and I will take care of you.”

The Chickens obeyed their mother, tried to creep into the shell ; but they found it perfectly impossible to get into it again, and they only broke their wings.

Then one of the Chickens said to his mother :

” If we were to remain always in the shell, it would have been better if you had not let us out of it.”

XXX

THE QUAIL AND HIS MATE

A QUAIL had been late in building his nest in a meadow; and when haying-time came, his Mate was still sitting on her eggs.

Early in the morning the peasants came to the meadow, took off their caftans, whetted their scythes, and went, one after the other, cutting the grass and lay- ing it in windrows.

The Quail flew up to see what the mowers were doing. When he saw that one peasant was swinging his scythe and had just cut a snake in two, he was rejoiced, flew back to his Mate, and said :

” Don’t be afraid of the peasants ; they have come out to kill our snakes ; for a long time there has been no living on account of them.”

But his Mate said :

” The peasants are cutting grass ; and with the grass they cut everything that comes in their way, either a

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snake or a quail’s nest. I am sick at heart, for I can- not either carry away my eggs, or leave my nest lest they get cold.” ’

When the mowers reached the quail’s nest, one peas- ant swung his scythe and cut off the mother-bird’s head ; but he put the eggs in his pocket, and gave them to his children to play with.

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” That is not the reason that I bark ; I bark simply because I get scent of you ; I become excited, or else glad because I am going to catch you immediately ; and I myself know not why, but I cannot help barking.”

XXVIII

THE OAK AND THE HAZEL BUSH

AN ancient Oak let drop an acorn on a Hazel Bush. The Hazel Bush said to the Oak :

” Have you, then, so little room under your branches? You might drop your acorns on a clear space. Here I myself have scarcely room for my branches ; I don’t throw my nuts away, though, but I give them to men.”

”I live two hundred years,” replied the Oak; ”and the little oak that will come up from the acorn will live as many more.”

Then the Hazel Bush grew angry, and said :

” Then I will choke off your little oak, and it will not live three days.”

The Oak made no reply to this, but told his little son to come forth from the acorn.

The acorn grew moist, burst open, and the rootlet caught hold of the earth with its little hooks, and another sprout was sent up above.

The Hazel Bush tried to choke it, and would not give it the sun. But the little Oak stretched up into the air, and waxed strong in the Hazel Bush’s shadow.

A hundred years passed away. The Hazel Bush had long ago died away ; and the Oak had grown from the acorn as high as heaven, and spread its tent on every side.

XXIX

THE SETTING HEN AND THE CHICKENS

A BROOD HEN hatched out some Chickens, and did not know how to take care of them. And so she said to them :

mountain is a nice little pond. I would help you to get there ; but I am now in years ; it is hard for me to fly.”

The Fishes began to beseech the Heron to help them.

The Heron replied :

” I will do my best for you, I will carry you over ; but I cannot do it all at once, only one at a time.”

And so the Fishes were delighted ; they all said :

” Carry me ! carry me ! ”

And the Heron began to carry them ; she would take up one at a time, carry him off to a field, and feast on him. In this way she ate up many fishes.

Now there lived in the pond an aged Crab. When the Heron began to carry off the Fishes, he suspected the true state of affairs ; and he said :

” Well, now, Heron, take me also to your new settle- ment.”

The Heron seized the Crab, and flew off with him. As soon as she reached the field, she was going to drop the Crab. But the Crab, seeing the bones of the Fishes on the field, clasped his claws around the Heron’s neck, and strangled her; and then he crawled back to the pond and told the Fishes.

XIV

THE WATER-SPRITE AND THE PEARL

A MAN was sailing in a boat, and dropped a precious pearl into the sea. The man returned to land, and took a pail, and began to scoop up the water and pour it on the shore.

For three days unweariedly he scooped and poured.

On the fourth day a Water-sprite came up out of the water, and asked :

” Why art thou scooping ? ”

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The man replied :

” I am scooping because I have lost a pearl.”

The Water-sprite asked :

” Are you going to stop before long ? ”

The man replied :

”When I have scooped the sea dry, then I shall stop.”

Then the Water-sprite returned into the depths, and brought up the very same pearl, and gave it to the man.

XV

THE BLIND MAN AND THE MILK

ONE blind from birth asked a man who could see :

”What color is milk?”

The man who could see replied :

” The color of milk is like white paper.”

The blind man asked :

” This color, then, rustles in the hands like paper ? ”

The man who could see replied :

” No ; it is white, like white flour.”

The blind man asked :

” Then it is soft and friable like flour, is it ? ”

The man who could see replied :

” No ; it is simply white, like a rabbit.”

The blind man asked :

” Then it is downy and soft like a rabbit, is it ? ”

The man who could see replied :

” No ; white is a color exactly like snow.”

The blind man asked :

” Then it is cold like snow, is it ? ”

And in spite of all the comparisons which the man who could see made, still the blind man was wholly un- able to comprehend what the color of milk really was.

XVI

THE WOLF AND THE BOW

” Don’t be in haste to quarrel ; the ax does not chop, and the saw does not cut. Sharpen your ax and file your saw, and then quarrel as much as you wish.”

The two peasants, however, became even more angry with each other than before, because the one had a blunted ax, the other had an ill-set saw ; and they fell to blows.

XXVI

THE DOGS AND THE COOK

A COOK was preparing dinner ; some dogs were lying at the kitchen door. The cook killed a calf, and threw the insides into the yard.

The dogs seized them, ate them up, and said : ” The cook is good ; he knows how to cook well.” After a little while the cook began to clean tur- nips and onions, and he threw away the outsides. The dogs ran up to them, turned up their noses, and said :

” Our cook is spoiled ; he used to make good things, but now he is worthless.”

But the cook did not hear the dogs, and cooked the dinner in his usual way. The people of the house, however, ate up the dinner and praised it, if the dogs did not.

XXVII

THE HARE AND THE HOUND

A HARE once asked a Hound :

” Why do you bark when you chase us ? You would be much more likely to catch us, if you ran without barking. But when you bark, you only drive us into the huntsman’s hands ; he hears where we are running,

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and he hastens up, shoots us with his gun, kills us, and does not give you anything.”

The Dog replied :

ter for both of us if we had stayed at home in the first place. He would have sat on the oven, 1 and I should have been eating oats.”

XXIV

THE TWO HORSES

Two Horses were carrying two loads. The front Horse went well, but the rear Horse was lazy. The men began to pile the rear Horse’s load on the front Horse ; when they had transferred it all, the rear Horse found it easy going, and he said to the front Horse : -

” Toil and sweat ! The more you try, the more you have to suffer.”

When they reached the tavern, the owner said :

” Why should I fodder two horses when I carry all on one ? I had better give the one all the food it wants, and cut the throat of the other ; at least I shall have the hide.”

And so he did.

XXV

THE AX AND THE SAW

Two peasants were going to the forest after wood. One had an ax and the other had a saw. After they had selected a tree they began to dispute.

One said it was better to chop down the tree, and the other said it ought to be sawed.

A third peasant said :

” I will settle the question for you in a moment : if the ax is sharp, then it is better to chop; but if the saw is sharper, then it is better to saw.”

He took the ax and began to chop the tree. But the ax was dull, so that it was impossible for him to cut.

1 In Russian huts the oven is made of earth; and, as it is never very hot, the peasants use it for a bed and lounge.

He took the saw ; the saw was wretched, and would not cut at all. Then he said :

A HUNTSMAN with his bow and arrows went out to hunt ; he killed a goat, flung it over his shoulders, and was carrying it home.

On the way he saw a wild boar.

The Huntsman dropped the goat, shot the boar, and wounded him.

The boar rushed upon the Huntsman, gored him to death with his tusks, and then himself died.

A Wolf smelled the blood, and came to the place where were lying the goat, the boar, the man and his bow.

The Wolf was overjoyed, and said to himself, ” Now I shall have enough to eat for a long time ; but I am not going to eat it all up at once ; I will eat a little at a time, so that none of it may be wasted. First I will eat the hardest part, and then I will feast on the softest and daintiest.”

The Wolf sniffed the goat, the boar, and the man, and he said :

” This food is soft, I will eat this afterwards ; but first of all I will eat the tendon on this bow.”

And he began to gnaw at the tendon on the bow. When he had bitten through the bowstring, the bow sprang and hit the Wolf in the belly. And the Wolf also perished, and the other wolves came and ate up the man, and the goat, and the boar, and the Wolf.

XVII

THE BIRDS IN THE SNARE

A HUNTSMAN set a snare by a lake. Many birds were caught in it. The birds were large; they seized the snare, and flew off with it.

The Huntsman began to run after the birds. A peasant saw him running after them, and he said :

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” Where are you going? Can you catch birds on foot ? ”

The Huntsman replied:

” If there were only one bird, I should not catch him ; but as it is, I shall bag my game.”

And so it proved.

When evening came, the birds each tried to fly off in his own direction; one to the forest, another to the swamp, a third to the field, and all fell with the net to the ground, and the Huntsman captured them.

XVIII

THE CZAR AND THE FALCON

A CZAR, while out hunting, unleashed his favorite Falcon at a hare, and galloped after it.

The Falcon caught the hare. The Czar took away the hare, and started to seek for some water to quench his thirst. The Czar found the water on a hillside. But it trickled out, a drop at a time. So the Czar drew his cup from the holster, and placed it under the water.

The water trickled into the cup, and when the cup was full, the Czar put it to his mouth, and was about to drink. Suddenly the Falcon fluttered down upon the Czar's hand, flapped his wings, and spilled the water.

Again the Czar placed the cup under the spring. He waited long, until it was filled brimming full, and again, when he lifted it to his lips, the Falcon flew upon his wrist and spilled the water.

When for the third time the Czar managed to get his cup filled, and was lifting it to his lips, the Falcon again spilled it.

The Czar grew wroth, and struck the Falcon with all his might with a stone, and killed him.

Then came the Czar's servants, and one of them ran up to the spring in order to find a more plentiful supply of water and come back quickly with a full cup.

But the servant brought no water back ; he returned with an empty cup, and said :

" The water is not fit to drink ; there is a serpent in the spring, and it has poisoned all the water. It is a good thing that the Falcon spilled it. If you had drunk of the water, you would have perished.

Thus for a long time they disputed. A third peasant saw it, and said :

" If you are in such a hurry, then each of you give way a little." 1

XXIII

THE PEASANT AND THE HORSE

A PEASANT went to town to get oats for his Horse. As soon as he got out of the village, the Horse wanted to return home. The Peasant lashed the Horse with his whip.

The horse started up, but in regard to the Peasant it thought :

" The fool ! Where is he driving me ? We should be better off at home."

Before they reached the city the Peasant noticed that the mud made the going hard for the Horse, so he turned him upon the wood-block pavement ; but the Horse re- fuzed to go upon the pavement.

The Peasant lashed the Horse again, and twitched at the reins. The animal turned off upon the pavement, and said to himself :

" Why did he turn me off upon the pavement ; it only breaks my hoofs. It is hard here under my feet."

The Peasant drove up to the shop, bought his oats, and went home. When he reached home he gave the Horse the oats. The Horse began to eat, and said to himself :

"What stupid things men are! They only love to show their mastery over us, but their intelligence is less than ours. Why did he take so much trouble to-day ? Where did he go and drive me ? We had no sooner got there than we returned home. It would have been bet-

1 This appears in a slightly different form in Count Tolstofs " No- vaya Azbuka." There the one who is in the greatest haste is advised to give in.

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fly with all our might. Another' time a hare runs by or a bird flutters, or a dry twig crackles, and we think it is a wild beast, and in running away we really run into danger. And again we are running from a dog, and we come upon a man. Oftentimes we are frightened and start to flee, we don't know whither, and we roll over a precipice and perish. And we have to sleep with one eye open, with one ear alert, and we are always in alarm. There is no peace. All evil comes from fear."

Then the Hermit said:

"Not from hunger, nor from love, nor from ill-temper, nor from fear come all our troubles ; but all the evil that is in the world is due to our different natures. Hence come hunger and love, ill-temper and fear."

XXI

THE WOLF AND THE HUNTSMEN

A WOLF was eating up a sheep. The Huntsmen discovered him, and began to beat him.

The Wolf said:

"It is not right for you to beat me. It is not my fault that I am a wild beast; God made me so."

But the Huntsmen replied :

"We do not beat wolves because they are wild beasts, but because they eat the sheep."

XXII

TWO PEASANTS

ONCE upon a time two peasants attempted to pass each other, and their sledges became entangled. One cried :

"Give me room ; I must get to town as quickly as possible ;" and the other said : -

"You give me room ; I must get home as quickly as possible."

The Czar said :

"Fouly have I recompensed the Falcon ; he saved my life, and I killed him for it."

XIX

THE CZAR AND THE ELEPHANTS

AN Indian Czar commanded to gather together all the blind men, and when they were collected, he commanded to show them his Elephants. The blind men went to the stables, and began to feel of the Elephants.

One felt of the leg ; another, of the tail ; a third, of the rump ; a fourth, of the belly ; a fifth, of the back ; a sixth, of the ears ; a seventh, of the tusks ; an eighth, of the proboscis.

Then the Czar called the blind men to him, and asked them :

"What are my Elephants like ?"

And one blind man said :

"Thy Elephants are like pillars."

This blind man had felt of the legs.

The second blind man said :

"They are like brooms."

This one had felt of the tail.

The third said :

"They are like wood."

This one had felt of the rump.

The one who had felt of the belly said :

"Elephants are like lumps of earth."

The one who had felt of the side said :

"They are a wall."

The one who had felt of the back said :

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"They are like a hill."

The one who had felt of the ears said :

"They are like a handkerchief."

The one who had felt of the head said :
" They are like a mortar."
The one who had felt of the tusks said :
"They are like horns."
The one who had felt of the proboscis said : -
" They are like a stout rope."
And all the blind men began to dispute and quarrel.

XX

WHY THERE IS EVIL IN THE WORLD

A HERMIT lived in the forest, and the animals were not afraid of him. He and the wild animals used to talk together, and they understood one another.

Once the Hermit lay down under a tree, and a Raven, a Dove, a Stag, and a Snake came to the same place to sleep.

The animals began to reason why evil should exist in the world.

The Raven said :

"It is all owing to hunger that there is evil in the world. When we have as much as we wish to eat, we sit by ourselves on the bough and caw, and everything is good and gay, and we are in every respect well off ; but some other day we are famished, and everything is quite the opposite, so that we can see no brightness in God's world, and we feel full of unrest ; we fly about from place to place, and there is no rest for us. And even if we see some meat afar off, then it becomes still worse ; for if we fly down to get it, either sticks and stones are thrown at us, or wolves and dogs chase us, and we are absolutely destroyed. How much trouble comes upon us from hunger ! All evil is caused by it."

The Dove said :

" In my opinion, evil does not arise from hunger, but

it all comes from love. If we only lived alone, we should have little trouble. Wretchedness shared makes one doubly wretched. And so we always live in pairs. And if we love our mates there is no

peace for us at all. We are always thinking, * Has she had enough to eat ? is she warm ? ' And when our mate is away from us anywhere, then we are wholly lost ; we cannot help worrying all the time, ' If only the hawk does not carry her off, or men make way with her ; ' and we ourselves fly off in pursuit of her, and perhaps find the poor thing either in the hawk's claws or in the snare. And if our mate is lost, then there is no more comfort for us. We cannot eat, we cannot drink ; we can only fly about and mourn. How many of us have perished in this way ! No ; evil comes not from hunger, but from love."

The Snake said :

" No ; evil arises neither from hunger nor from love, but from ill-temper. If we lived peacefully, we should not do so much harm ; everything would be delightful for us. But now if anything is done to us, we fall into a rage, and then there is nothing gentle about us ; we only think how we can avenge the wrong on some one. We lose control of ourselves and hiss, and try to bite some one. We would not have pity on any one, we would bite our own father and mother ! It seems as if we could eat our own selves. The moment we begin to lose our temper we are undone. All the evil in the world arises from ill-temper."

The Stag said :

" No ; not from ill-temper, and not from love, and not from hunger arises all the evil that is in the world, but evil arises from fear. If it were possible for us to live without fear, all would be well with us. We are swift-footed, and have great strength. With our antlers we can defend ourselves from little animals ; and we can run from the large ones. But it is impossible to escape fear. If it is only the twigs creaking in the forest, or the leaves rustling, we are all of a tremble with fear, our heart beats, we instinctively start to run, and

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