

I

The Eagle and His Plan

Once upon a time, in a place far, far away, in a forest which was one of many, there was an eagle who liked to fly about for the sake of doing so. That in itself pretty much cast him into suspicion with his own kind, who of course never flew but for reasons they regarded as legitimate, such as hunting, looking for a mate, or gathering nesting materials. Whenever the other eagles asked him the reason for his peculiar behavior (and they never asked but in disapproving tones), he would only shrug his shoulders and embarrassedly look away.

Yet he had not always been so reticent about his motives. There had been a time when he had answered the question forthrightly and to the best of his ability; when, articulate eagle that he was, he had even answered at length and with pride; but whenever he had done so, it had become apparent that his auditors really didn't understand him. They would regard him with tilted heads, unblinking eyes, and contracted brows, and he could see that his attempts to explain were only confirming their worst suspicions about him, whatever those suspicions happened to be. And so he had quite given up on explaining. But if he had been willing to explain himself again, this is what he would have said: That while flying very high, and so no longer distracted by

the goings on of the forest, he was able to think and feel more clearly and intensely. Up there, above all the clouds and close, it seemed, to the very sun, his mind clarified and he seemed endowed with a purer consciousness, so that he was able to see into the depths of matters previously obscure, or would see the importance of subjects which had before never occurred to him. And sometimes he soared aloft simply for the sake of witnessing the beautiful. It never ceased to puzzle him why the other birds, much less the other eagles, never took it into their heads to rise up to those great heights where so much beauty was. For nothing could be lovelier than when rain clouds came thick and low over the land, and one rose above them and flew in that enchanted space carpeted below by an expanse of puffy white and vaulted above by the purest, most crystalline blue. To be within such an ensorcelled place—so quiet, so clear, so bright—was breathtaking, and his eagle eyes would open wide as though to take in every bit of its magnificence. But whenever he had tried to relate the wonder of this experience to the other eagles, they had only looked at him with a blank expression, obviously regarding such escapades as pointless and so many proofs of his good-for-nothingness. Better to be running down a squirrel, they told him. Of one thing there was no doubt: while on his highest flights—those in which he had strained his wings and panted for breath—he had been able to see the forest as it really was, that is to say, as a whole, as a definite, circumscribed topographical entity, surrounded by quite different and in some instances hostile terrain. That was something which the other animals never seemed to understand. So far as they knew or cared, the forest went on forever and ever, could never change, and would be till the end of time an

inexhaustible reservoir of life.

It happened that during one such exalted flight the eagle, in looking down, seeing the forest, and considering in their totality the lives of the animals who lived there, was struck by the complete symbiosis of their existence. The life of every species was intertwined with that of every other. And from an even more distant, more objective view, he saw that their lives, however different in particulars, shared certain fundamental aspects. Foremost among these was the struggle for survival. They all spent their days scrounging for food, looking for and competing over mates, or expending enormous amounts of time looking for building materials for their lairs or dens or nests. They shivered for the cold in winter, panted for the heat in summer, or were swept away altogether by natural disasters; and all that was in addition to the peril of human hunters, who not infrequently showed up and took pot shots at everyone. As though all this weren't bad enough, the animals made things worse by their constant bickering, skirmishing, and mutual fears and hatreds. They were always engaged in territorial disputes; always fighting over who was going to eat this or that fruit, or drink at this or that space on the river bank; and at least half of them spent all their time trying to kill the other half for supper. Well, perhaps there was nothing to be done about the age-old cycle of predator and prey, but the eagle could not help feeling that there must be a way to make the general existence a little easier. What if some kind of rule could be established—some kind of law and order which would nurture what was best and repress what was worst? What if the strength of every species could be used for the benefit of every other—if the weak could help the strong, the keen-sighted the purblind, the acute of hearing the nearly deaf? What

if every mole could help every fox, every hawk help every squirrel, and every frog and mouse and bat help every deer and snake and rat? Why, even in the matter of predatory instinct it was perhaps possible to make arrangements which would, with only a little inconvenience to certain species, make this one forest a haven of safety and a model of happy existence. And then at least one small section of the earth would be a place in which life was not merely series of wants to be satisfied, but a joy to be thankful for.

The eagle felt that he had hit upon an excitingly original idea. He even emitted a great joyous screech and he thrilled at the prospect of delivering his message to his fellow animals. Oh, how happy they would be when they heard about his plan! They would thank him for ever and ever! Banking to the left, he drew in his wings, pointed his head downward, and fell back toward earth with such speed that he kept his eyes squinted against the tremendous rush of air. In only a few minutes he was sweeping over the treetops at great speed, calling out that he had an announcement to make and wanted everyone to assemble in a certain large clearing located in the center of the forest. Everyone must come and hear what he had to say, he announced—it was important, important! As he broadcast this unprecedented message, the animals on the ground or in the trees looked up at him and wondered what on earth he was making such a ruckus about. Nearly all the groundlings even considered him impertinent: after all, what could an eagle possibly have to say to a mouse or a squirrel? Ridiculous! Furthermore they all knew about the questionable reputation of this eagle. More than once had they heard rumors of his odd behavior and so were further inclined to pass off his rather hysterical calls as a fit of the brain-fever

everyone had expected him to be one day affected with. However much the animals shook their heads with disdain or mumbled some brusque imprecation against him, it happened that in just a few hours hundreds of animals had shown up at the designated place. Perhaps they came out of curiosity, or because their more adventurous friends had dragged them along; perhaps they had come in order to mock, or to see others mock; or perhaps they had come, quite simply, because their lives had become so routine that they were unable to resist the temptation of novelty. Even if the eagle had finally flipped his lid and was going to say something crazy—well, even that might be amusing and at least would be something to talk about afterwards. Thus it was that the clearing, on that late afternoon day, was crowded with animals from most of the species in the forest.

The eagle himself arrived late and somewhat flustered; he was exhausted from the exertion of making his announcement, and his feathers were ruffled from all the flying he had done. He perched atop a birch tree in the middle of the assembly and sighed with relief. But the relief soon turned to bewilderment when he looked about him, for even now the animals were anything but polite and peaceable. Each species had huddled into its own little group and regarded the other with suspicion, loathing, or, at best, the coolest tolerance. The mice leered at the weasels; the rats stuck up their noses at the mice; the hawks and owls stared murderously at the squirrels; the beavers were already tiffing with the skunks, and the raccoons were baring their teeth at the opossums. The frogs, who composed a little green mass beside a rotting bole, began hopping about furiously merely at the sight of the snakes, who, however, thankfully, were some yards away and separated by a contingent

of porcupines and box turtles. The only animals who seemed to be composed at all were the wild boars and the deer, and even they, where they met, gave one another little kicks and butts. And so from the clearing there arose a rumor of conflicting animal voices: a discord of grunts, groans, wheezes, squeals, squawks, screeches, and shrill whistles. As he stood in the middle of it all, the eagle could not help feeling a shudder of hopelessness at such universal, essential, indefatigable conflict. Nevertheless he raised up his wings and held them high above his head: held them up there as he screeched as loudly as his somewhat hoarse voice would allow: getting, little by little, the attention of the animals, who, one by one, group by group, left off their disputes; till silence, as though in concentric, ever-widening rings, reached the outermost limit of the congregation, and in a few minutes all was an expectant hush.

“Good afternoon!” the eagle began, bowing this way and that by way of introduction, and trying to seem at ease, though in fact he was rather nervous and his mouth was a little dry. “I’m glad so many of you were kind enough to attend! I called you all here today because I wanted to discuss our forest with you. Perhaps I should start by saying that I was doing some flying this morning, as I usually do, and got up especially high. You animals who don’t fly may not know this, but if you get up high enough you can see that our forest has definite boundaries. I don’t know exactly how many miles across it is at any one point, but I do know that it doesn’t go on forever as some of you seem to think. It really does end, and there are little patches of woods and human farms around it, and beyond those are still greater stretches of land: for instance, to the south lies a hot, barren, region where there’s hardly any water or trees; to the east

are arid savannas stretching for endless miles; to the west there are hilly regions where the only plant life consists of tall, spiny cacti; and as for the north, it's generally cold up there and in the winter everything turns to snow and ice and hardly anything can live. Of course these areas don't go on forever either, and beyond them there are probably forests as big as this one, and I hope one day to fly far enough to see a few of them. (A few of the eagles rolled their eyes, and thought: "What a lunatic!") Anyway, while flying around this morning I started thinking about how we animals live and how we're all basically the same and suffer from the same problems. For instance, a lot of us are hungry in the winter, or lack a good water supply, or have to run for our lives when human hunters show up, or have border disputes with one another—things like that. It occurred to me this morning that there's no reason why we have to live that way. We could probably solve most of our problems if each species would use its talents and abilities to help others. For instance, take the moles," the eagle said, turning to that section of the clearing where the moles were just sticking their heads up from the ground in order to hear the proceedings. "Everyone knows that sometimes it's hard to find water in the winter when the river freezes, right? But if the moles would be willing to dig a tunnel from the stream bed to some place which could be sheltered from the icy air—well, then we would have a steady supply of drinkable water. We could have the beavers," he said, turning to that species, "construct a shelter over the artificial watering hole. While they're building it, and in return for their services, the other animals could help provide them with food. And take another problem: hunters. Every one of you groundlings has to worry about them, especially in the

autumn. But what if the magpies and crows could be organized into a lookout network which would warn you about any hunters when they enter the forest, and where? That would give you all plenty of time to hide. We could have the same kind of warning system for traps. The smaller animals could go on patrols in order to find out where they are and inform the larger animals about their location. For instance, the mice and the snakes might form trap-patrols—”

“Now wait just one minute!” a little voice called out. The voice came from the cluster of mice sitting up on their hind legs at the edge of the clearing. From among them one little, skinny, nervous-looking mouse had jumped forward, his pink nose twitching with excitement. “If you think any of us are going on any patrols with a snake, then you must really be nuts! If you really want to help us, why don’t you and a few hawks and owls get together and clear out those filthy snakes once and for all!”

“It doesn’t have to be a mouse and snake patrol,” the eagle returned with some exasperation. “I only used it as an example of helping one another. It could be any combination of animals. In fact, it doesn’t even have to be a combination—it could be just the mice, or just the snakes, or just the frogs—or anybody. The point is not who does it, but that it gets done and helps a species which isn’t able to help itself.”

“Look who’s talking about helping!” This too was a rather high, squeaky voice, and all eyes turned in amazement to the gathering of squirrels, from among whom stepped forth a young female. Her bushy tail was quivering with anger and she had even balled up one of her delicate little paws into a fist, which she held up high and shook. “It was one of you eagles who ate one of my babies! You swooped right down in my nest and tore it apart and grabbed up my precious

darling in your big ugly hooked beaks! You're filthy slime, all of you! You ought to be ashamed of yourselves!—ashamed and disgusted! You're all horrible, ugly, ruthless, mean, despicable monsters!"

There was some applause at the end of this outburst—nearly all of it from the squirrels, mice, rats, frogs, and other tiny creatures who had, at one time or another, seen their kind set upon by a bird of prey. The weasels, hawks, owls, and other predators remained disdainfully silent.

"My dear, dear squirrel," the eagle said, shaking his head and speaking in a becalming, reasonable tone of voice, "I sympathize with your loss. I agree, it must have been terrible. But I was not the eagle who took your baby. It just so happens that I've been a vegetarian now for almost a year. You can't imagine how difficult the adjustment has been for me, and I won't say that I haven't been tempted by a few chipmunks now and then, but I haven't—I swear to you—so much as tasted anything other than berries and nuts since last summer." (At this disclosure the other eagles, and the hawks and owls too, shook their heads and frowned.) "An eagle ate your baby? Well, I'm sorry. What else do you want me to say? You know as well as I do that the eagle who did it probably had her own hatchlings to feed or was herself hungry. What would you expect her to do? That's just the way it is. If you had been in her place, you would have done the same thing; you wouldn't have been able to help yourself. We all," the eagle said, looking up at the animals in general, "we all have to try to understand one another. We have to stop being so subjective about things. It seems to me that half the problems in the forest could be solved at once if we would only put ourselves into other animals' places. If we make an attempt to get to know one another, to

help one another, then maybe we wouldn't be so eager to eat one another! What we need is to stop looking at our lives in the same old circumscribed way."

The animals cast long glances at one another, each species doubtfully wondering if the others could be so large-minded as the eagle had proposed.

"Just take a look at yourselves!" the eagle continued, speaking now in a tone of voice which was half disdainful, half pitiful. "You're all no better off now than your ancestors were a thousand years ago. Hasn't that ever occurred to any of you? Haven't you ever asked yourselves how your lives are any different from those of your parents, and their parents, and theirs? Haven't you ever wondered why things have never gotten any better? We're doing the same things they did—have the same problems they had—and unless we want our children, and our children's children, to inherit our problems, we have to make a change. Now," the eagle said, with a definitive shake of his head, for he saw by the way that some of the animals looked down thoughtfully that his reasoning had made an impression on them, "you can go on spending all your lives struggling to survive from day to day like a bunch of rats—no offense to the rat community!—or you can finally take hold of matters and try to make them better. But it's not going to happen by itself, and it's not going to happen so long as your only concern is yourselves and trying to take advantage of another species. It's also, I might add, not going to happen unless you make a few sacrifices. None of us likes to make sacrifices. I understand that; it's only animal nature. But sometimes a sacrifice is just the inverse face of an advantage you can't yet see: for instance giving up your time for the welfare of other animals, even when you don't happen to like those other animals. But in return one day they