

# THE POLITY OF BEASTS

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*Though you drive Nature out with a pitchfork,  
she will still find her way back.*

—Horace

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

I	The Eagle and His Plan.....	1
II	Making Alliances.....	23
III	Fox Becomes a Candidate.....	33
IV	The Ass.....	42
V	A Snake In The Grass.....	51
VI	Politics .....	67
VII	The Blackbird .....	83
VIII	The Great Debate .....	100
IX	Scandal and the Magpies.....	128
X	Damage Control .....	156
XI	Backroom Politics.....	169
XII	Peacocks .....	181
XIII	The Election.....	190
XIV	“Work Builds Character!” .....	196
XV	The Complacent Suicide.....	229
XVI	The Eagle’s Flight.....	291

## 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 looked 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 a representatives of 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 might be able to help you in a way which will ensure your very survival! Isn't that worth a little sacrifice, a little compromise, a little restraint of interspecies suspicion and negativity? Of course it is! In order to get along with one another, we're going to have to learn how to compromise. Compromise!—that's the name of the game. No one's going to get everything he wants; on the other hand, everyone will get something he didn't have before and which he needs, and I'm confident that in the end most of us would benefit from that system. In short, we have to have some kind of government among ourselves."

Just then from among a thicket of briars hopped forth a chubby rabbit. His long ears were sticking almost straight up with anxiety, for he was not used to showing himself so publicly. He placed his forelegs on a thick, fallen oak branch, raised his head, and piped up: "May I say something?"

"Yes, rabbit, you have a comment?" asked the eagle, recognizing him.

"First of all," the rabbit said, "it seems to me that the premier role of any government is to guarantee the safety of its members. But what can you possibly do that would stop the carnivores from eating us? I think I speak for all the rabbits when I say that there's no government you could possibly come up with which would make our lives any better or safer. Or are you trying to tell us that from now on you and the rest of your carnivore friends are going to be decent and peaceful animals, like us rabbits, and live on leaves and berries?"

All of the groundlings squeaked or wheezed or clapped their approval of this protest; indeed, the vegetarians in general seemed to find in this rabbit's

words the exact articulation of their deepest misgivings. The rest of the animals looked at one another with air of satisfied amusement, for the point raised seemed indeed to be thornily insuperable, and they looked forward to the eagle's discomfiture. But the eagle seemed to be unfazed by what he had heard.

"I don't pretend," he said, in a very reasonable tone of voice, "to tell you rabbits or any other small animals that the predators are going to stop eating flesh. That would be absurd—that would be a lie. In fact, it would as absurd in you to expect the carnivores to become vegetarians as it would be in the plants—if they could think—to expect you vegetarians to stop eating them. Carnivores are carnivores, and that's just the way it is. However, even in this matter I believe we can make progress. Perhaps we could convince the predators to do their hunting only during specific times and in specific areas. Or maybe we could go even further and ask the predators to hunt in some other woodland or forest. That would certainly be inconvenient, and in some cases it would require a great effort, but at least it would evince goodwill and promote interspecies harmony here, and after all this is the place where we all have to live together."

"Why do we have to make an effort at all?" asked an owl, who had been sitting in the darkened recess of a nearby pine tree but who now fluttered to an outer branch and came into clear view of all. "You talk about hunting somewhere else, but I can tell you right now that the mice around here taste pretty good."

"You scoundrel!" screamed the mice. "You filthy scoundrel! Why don't you come down here now, where we can get at you! That's right, c'mon down! You like to attack us when we're alone and not expecting you, but why don't you try it now when we're all here and can see you coming? We'd love to get our front teeth

into you and nibble out those bug eyes of yours! Why, you dirty, sonofa—!"

"Mice, mice please!" the eagle said, calming them down; and turning to the owl: "That's just the kind of thing I'm trying to tell you we have to stop! What's wrong with you? You know as well as I do that most of the time you're flying around as hungry as ever. Besides, what about when you get a little older, eh? What about when your eyes get a little weaker, and you don't see so well at night—eh? You know what's going to happen? I'll tell you, because I've seen it happen to a lot of owls: you're going to starve to death, that's what. You're going to sit there in a tree growing weaker and weaker till you keel over like a dried-up pine cone. Is that what you want?"

The owl made no answer; she merely shrugged; she was a stolid owl.

"Do you see what I mean?" called out the rabbit, with an air of vindication.

"I do, yes," the eagle replied. "However, the owl and those who think like her don't realize that they have a lot more to gain by not eating you than otherwise. Did it ever occur to you, owl," the eagle said, again turning to that creature, "that the mice could be of great service to you? After all, you're not without your enemies either. If I'm not mistaken, your nests are often raided by the snakes. But what if the mice could set up an outpost at the base of your tree in order to warn you about any snake which happens to come by?"

The owl leaned back somewhat and hesitated to answer, so favorably surprised was she with the idea. She was about to say something when a hissing voice called out:

"Now wait one minute!"

The animals looked about in order to see the

source of this objection. There was a shudder of leaves and loam around the base of a tree only twenty feet away from the one in which the owl was sitting, and then up popped the head of a snake. She was certainly a pretty creature, if one could be objective enough to regard merely her scaly coat, for this was by turns coppery and blue, with specks of red and gold, and shimmered iridescently. Her ruby-red eyes sparkled with a strangely attractive force. When she oozed up out of the ground and slithered forth, the mice, though quite a distance away from her, could not help pulling back instinctively, as did the frogs and rats. Even the owl flinched and seemed to maintain her perch only by a conscious act of will, only because she did not want to seem cowardly before her peers.

"You wanted to say something, snake?" the eagle asked, in what the other animals recognized as an admirable show of goodwill, for it was well known that snakes were frequent raiders of eagles' nests.

"I certainly would!" the snake said, raising up the forepart of her body in what was, given the general air of fear and hostility toward her, a magnificent show of bravado. "If the idea of setting up a government among us animals is only to set up little warning systems against each other's instinctual behaviors, then you can count us snakes out, since every little animal in the forest will be out to thwart our attempts to feed ourselves and raise our kids. We know that most of you don't like us snakes and that, given half the chance, you'd drive us out of the forest altogether. But we live here too; we have as much a right to be here as any of you! And you mice," the snake said, turning toward that group, "should realize that if you didn't have us to contend with, you'd still have the owls and even the eagles to worry about, not to

mention the weasels and the raccoons."

"But you don't have to come after my eggs!" shouted one of the hawks, who had been listening with rising impatience.

"Or us mice!" squeaked the mouse.

"Or us frogs!" burped that species.

And a raccoon yelled out: "One of you bit my sister!"

"Oh-ho!" the snake returned, knowingly, contemptuously, and looked up to the eagle with especial defiance. "See what I mean? I'm not supposed to eat anybody that I can eat, is that it? Well, my friend, let me tell you that if that's your idea of a government, I, for one, don't intend to join in. I'm a snake—I can't help being what I am!"

The snake gave an angry hiss, and seemed about to slither away in a huff, when another voice, this time smooth and silky, came from a distant quarter of the gathering, saying:

"One moment, please! One moment, please!"

The voice had come from behind a bank of thick brush, which now began to shudder and shake as the creature who had been hiding behind it made his way through it. Everyone waited to see who it was, and a rumor of amazement went up when it turned out to be a fox. The boars and all of the rodents seemed especially disturbed and nervous, for most of them knew firsthand how dangerous a fox could be. And yet, at the moment anyway, his demeanor was not that of the sly and watchful predator, but rather that of an outgoing, perkily naive fellow creature who just wanted to give his opinion. He trotted forthrightly toward the center of the clearing, the animals making a way for him as he did so. He stopped just under the tree in which the eagle was perched.

Few of the animals had ever seen this fox so

closely and clearly before, and they could not help being impressed with him. He had a beautiful, compact body, held high off the ground with well-proportioned hind legs and straight, tapering forelegs. His fur was a rich chestnut color, with darker markings on his breast and along his back; and his bushy tail, which made up nearly a third of his length, was of fur so fine and silky that the merest puff of air made it sway. His head was marvelously triangular, with two large, upraised ears on either side. His snout, jutting forth with sharp pride, sprouted dashing and somewhat impertinent whiskers, and ended in a severely proper black dot of a nose. Most engaging of all perhaps were his eyes: sparkling, wide-open, intelligent: they seemed to look right through you.

With his head erect and his tail stretched forth like a banner, he looked this way and that with a grand air of approval, as though he himself had only now become aware of how pleased he was to see his fellow animals. It was a magnificent show of self-possession, a fine example of how a relatively small animal could make himself appear to be larger than he was. When he spoke, his words came out with an easy yet perfect enunciation, and the tone of his voice was bell-like.

"My fellow animals!" he began, "may I address you just for a few moments? First of all, allow me to say what an extraordinary day this is for all of us. Never before in the history of us animals have we come together even this far. In a real sense, we've already made progress, and I think we ought to congratulate the eagle here"—he looked up deferentially to the eagle and gave something of a bow—"for having accomplished this. He's come up with a pretty good idea, in my opinion: indeed, it's brilliant. And yet, as

our friend the snake has pointed out"—with a nod of recognition toward that creature—"no matter what form of government we dare to propose for ourselves, there are bound to be arrangements which will be unacceptable to some of us. Now, what does that mean? It means that we will never get anywhere so long as we try to formulate the finer points of our government in a group such as this one. Any attempt to do so can only result in squabbling and recrimination, in hostile partisanship which would obstruct all progress toward some generally beneficial result. What we need is a strong, impartial central authority: someone who will regard the needs of every species dispassionately and fairly, and pass rules we can all adhere to. In short, we're going to have to elect a Head Animal—a Leader—a President, if you will."

"A President?" asked many voices. Animal looked to animal, as though for clarification of this concept. Many animals took a step forward as though to better hear what the fox meant by this strange proposition.

"Yes, a President. Someone who really cares about all of us animals. Someone who will take into consideration the needs of every group, and arrive at the best decisions for all concerned. Someone who won't play favorites."

"And who is going to be this President?" croaked one of the frogs.

"Why don't we all take turns?" asked one of the raccoons.

"Good idea," said one of the deer. "We'll start with a deer."

"I say we start with a rabbit!" exclaimed one of the rabbits.

"No, no—we start with a hawk!" said one of the hawks; and, as though to show his impartiality, the hawk added: "We can change every other month."

"I'm afraid that won't work, hawk," said the fox, shaking his head. "If we have a different animal every month, we'd have new rules just as often, and pretty soon nobody would follow the rules at all. Besides, let's be realistic: a lot of animals would just use the power to suit their own ends. No, we need a President who is truly impartial and has the best interests of all the animals in mind."

"And which animal is that supposed to be?" asked the eagle; and if there was an edge of sarcasm in his voice, it was because he had anticipated the fox as nominating himself for that high office.

"There's only one way to find out," replied the fox. "We'll hold an election. Any animal who wants to run for the office will have a chance to do so; he'll present himself and his ideas to all the animals, and they'll decide if they want to elect him or not."

The eagle nodded to himself. "That's not a bad idea, fox," he said.

"Thank you," the fox said.

"I have a better idea!" a grunting voice called out. It was one of the boars. He was a middle-aged boar, and his expression and manner were that of stern determination. He stood up on his plump hind legs and, through sheer force of will or dire enthusiasm, balanced himself thereupon as he shouted at the top of his lungs. "What we really need in this forest," he said, "is a little more faith in Big Boar! If we would only listen to the instructions of Big Boar, we could all live happily ever after!"

Big Boar? What on earth was Big Boar? The other animals murmured the question among themselves. But the boar was about to give everyone the answer.

"As you all should know," the boar continued, speaking now with a voice which commanded attention by the authority of its tone, "in the

beginning, there was nothing in the whole world but a Big Boar. He made everything we see: the trees, the grass, the water, the sky—everything. Big Boar put us boars here to use whatever we needed and do whatever we wanted. He told us to eat all we wanted and to raise up all the litters we could. He gave us laws about how to conduct ourselves. We boars have been trying to teach you other animals these lessons for years, but you never listened to us. But the fact is that no government an animal can set up is ever going to be as good as the government which was handed down to us by Big Boar. Only through Big Boar can one ever get to the Great Berry Fields."

"Great Berry Fields?" the other animals asked one another, shaking their heads and shrugging their shoulders. "What's that crazy boar talking about?"

"Look," one of the frogs said, "if you boars want to believe in a Big Boar—well, that's your business, but that doesn't give you the right to force your opinions on the rest of us. Us frogs happen to think you're all out of your minds, since, if anything, the world was made by a Big Frog, not a Big Boar!"

"Not a Big Boar or a Big Frog," a turtle called out. "It was a Big Turtle! With a bright yellow shell!"

"Big Turtle? That's a laugh! It was a Big Rat!" Of course, it was one of the more pious rats who had spoken.

"Rat?" asked one of the quails. "You rats must be as crazy as the boars! Everyone knows it was a Big Quail—a big gray quail with beautiful speckled tail feathers, and when he said 'Woooo Woooo Woooo' in his beautiful voice all the flowers dropped their seeds, and every plant bent low their branches laden with fruit, and the bumblebees sang."

—At which not a few of the animals simply laughed in the quail's face.

In a few more seconds, each species was loudly shouting out its spiritual beliefs so that the assembly had once again degenerated into a cawing, squealing, wheezing, mewling, growling multitude of animals who were growing angrier by the moment. Aspersions, insults, sarcasms, and vitriol of all kinds flew hither and yon, and in some places individuals got physical and scratched and nipped at one another. But the volume of these accumulated arguments had no sooner reached a climax than it started to lessen: for one by one the animals realized that they were all spouting basically the same belief, only with such variations as would make their species seem superior to every other. Even those who had been most fanatically vociferating their belief began falling silent and casting their eyes down, having suddenly realized the ubiquity of the Big Animal theme, and of how self-serving their own version of it was.

The eagle, shaking his head, looked about with exasperation. "I think it ought to be clear," he said, "that we're never going to get anywhere by taking that tack. Our personal beliefs are only good for ourselves and we can no more expect other species to agree to them than they can expect us to agree to theirs. So let's just leave off with all that talk about Big Boar, and Big Rat, and Big Whatever Else. But it seems to me that the fox might have come up with a good idea. Perhaps we really do need a strong central authority, a President. It's only a question of selecting candidates and voting for one of them."

Just then the boars grunted: "Let one of the candidates be a boar!"

And the skunks snorted: "Let one of them be a skunk!"

And the raccoons squealed: "Let one of them be a raccoon!"

And the deer yelled: "But one of them must be a deer!"

And the turtles whispered (for turtles have very low voices): "There absolutely must be a turtle!"

And on and on, till every species was clamoring that one of its own be a candidate; and once again the squawking and squealing and piping and mewling grew to such a pitch that the whole clearing was engulfed in an indecipherable, unintelligible rumor. The fox stood up on his hind legs and called for order, and when this didn't work, the eagle, in order to help out the fox, flew up into the sky and dive-bombed toward each part of the congregation, screeching, as he came close to the animals, "Shut up! Shut up! Shut up!"—till once more (but this time begrudgingly and tentatively) the assembly had quieted down.

The fox raised his face to the eagle, who resumed his perch with an air of frustration, and loudly thanked him. It was remarkable how he had seemed to take away from the eagle a great deal of authority over these proceedings, and of how willing the eagle had been to relinquish it.

"My fellow animals," the fox announced, "I propose that we do the following: Let us spend the next few days deciding what candidates will run for the office of President. Once the candidates have been announced, then the process of electing one of them can begin. They can campaign and make their case presidency. Is that fair enough?"

All of the animals expressed their approval, mostly by nods and low murmurs.

"Good," said the fox. "And before I go, I would personally like to thank you all for having heard me out. I would only like to add that before I came out here to address you I made a point of hiding behind those bushes because I didn't want to startle anybody."



Contrary to what some of you might think, I've always been conscientious about the sensibilities of my fellow animals. The last thing I wanted to do was just pop right out and give anyone a scare. Let me also say that it's been a great pleasure to me finally to meet many of you face to face, as it were. Your graciousness has touched me. I will never forget it! Thank you all!"

The fox strode away to the accompaniment of various approving murmurs and nods. A few animals even clapped. His charming, respectful manner had aroused admiration even in those species who had a legitimate reason to think the worst of him. He trotted away from the clearing with, again, his head and bushy tail held high, as though in pride at having nothing to hide. He made a line straight for the weasels, stopping before one of them and saying quickly and confidentially:

"I need to speak with you."

"About what?"

"About choosing a President. But I can't talk here. Come to my lair later on. I'll be waiting for you." And he added, with a strange emphasis: "Don't worry, it isn't a trick. I won't hurt you. Come and see me. It's important."

And with that, the fox trotted off into the brush.

## II Making Alliances

If the weasel considered a long time before actually venturing to visit the fox, it was because he could not but consider such an invitation with suspicion. He knew the fox somewhat from having occasionally run into him while on hunting expeditions, and these rare meetings had not been friendly. On the contrary, at such times the weasel had felt it necessary to watch his back lest the fox pounce upon him and tear him to shreds for dinner. Who knew but that the invitation to come to his lair was some kind of trick? On the other hand, the weasel could not help recalling the fox's demeanor, which had been not so cunning as confiding: less that of a potential killer than of a hopeful accomplice. Thus, the weasel decided to give the fox the benefit of the doubt, telling himself, however, that he would be very careful.

It was nightfall when the weasel arrived at the fox's lair, which was built into one of the vine-clad embankments along the forest's stream. The fox welcomed his visitor inside and bade him make himself comfortable. The weasel tried to appear calm as, in the dimness of the place, he sat on his rump with his forelegs legs stretched out before him. He was however careful to remain beside the entrance in case he should have to run for his life.

But the fox was all smiles and warm invitation, and, as though he sensed the weasel's discomfort, he kept as far away from his visitor as space would allow. Lying on his belly, he had delicately crossed his forepaws and had drawn up his bushy tail close to his left side, now and then curling the dark-pointed tip of it.

"Well, I'm glad you decided to come by!" the fox said. And he really was delighted, for he had anticipated the weasel's uncertainty about accepting the invitation. "Hope you found my lair alright?"

"Oh, yes, no problem at all," the weasel replied; and added, "We all know where you live."

There seemed to be a tacit insult in that, but the fox let it pass without remark. He had more important things on his mind. In a mild and cheerful vein, he continued, "Good, glad you found it. And tell me, how is everything by you? How's the family?"

The weasel frowned: this friendliness act was getting to be a bit much. In a strained voice, which sufficiently conveyed his impatient skepticism of this meeting, he said:

"Fine, fox, fine."

"Good. Glad to hear it. Well, I wanted to talk to you about that little gathering all of us animals had today. What did you think about the eagle's idea about a government and electing a President?"

"As I recall," the weasel said, dryly, "the idea of electing a President was your idea."

"Ah, yes, so it was. Well, but the eagle started me thinking about it, so I'm just giving credit where credit is due. Anyway, you'd have to be pretty dumb not to see that such a government has a lot of poten-

tial for us all. Only—and as I think you might understand—it's not going to be so easy as all that to elect a President. There are just too many factions: too many species, too many animosities. Why, did you hear the way those animals were fighting about which Big Animal has put them in this forest? I'm telling you, several times I almost broke out laughing, it was so ridiculous! Big Boars, Big Rats, Big Turtles! What imbeciles! You know, I always knew the other animals were a little slow upstairs, but I never realized till today just how stupid they really are. Anyway," the fox continued, shrugging his shoulders, "that's not the reason why I called you in here. What I really wanted to talk to you about was the campaign for President."

"I'm listening," said the weasel politely.

"I'll get right to the point. Are you weasels intending to put up a candidate?"

"Well," the weasel temporized, "that depends on various circumstances within the weasel community."

The fox pulled back his upper lip and showed his tiny front teeth in a smile. "Various circumstances!" Oh, that's good—very good—very cautious: spoken like a true weasel! But you know, you're not talking to a rabbit or a crow right now: you're talking to a fox: and I know a snow job when I hear one. Look, I'm going to be very frank with you, because you and I have a lot more in common than you might think. Here's the deal: I reckon that you weasels already have a candidate picked out, and I'd wager that after the assembly this afternoon you all huddled together in your dens and started planning how to win the election. Am I right? I can see by your hesitation that I am. Don't even bother deny-



ing it. Besides, it's really immaterial. What isn't immaterial—and as you weasels know very well—is the importance of who becomes the President. We both know that no other animal has ever had that kind of power in the forest before. It's unprecedented; it's epoch-making. I've never had much respect for the eagles, and for that eagle in particular, but I have to admit that he came up with a doozy this time. Why, I don't think he himself realizes just how much his idea can change life in this forest. The other animals, the boars and the frogs and the turtles—they might not realize what's at stake here; but I do, and I know that you weasels do too. Therefore, on behalf of the fox community, I would like to make a deal with you weasels."

The weasel let out a long breath. Upon first stepping into the fox's lair he had felt threatened; during the first few minutes of his visit his muscles had been, of themselves, instinctively, flexing and twitching, as though at any moment he would have to flee; but by this time he had become, if not exactly comfortable, then at least sure of his safety, and he allowed himself the pleasure of stretching out his forepaws and even, with his little nails, digging into the earthy bottom of the lair, just as he would do if we were at home. Also, he could not help thinking to himself just how astute this fox really was. He had been exactly right in saying the weasels had discussed the matter of putting up a candidate for President; indeed, they had already settled on one or two among them who might run. He told himself that in the future there wouldn't be much of a point in trying to deceive such an insightful character as the fox. "What kind of deal?" the weasel asked.

"A partnership—in the candidacy. A kind of pledge of support."

"Support for whom? Us or you?"

"Well ... me, of course."

"What do you mean, 'of course'? A weasel can be President just as well as a fox, and we'd certainly be more interested in electing one of our own. And second of all, you know as well as I do that there aren't too many weasels in this forest. There are more opossums than us. Why bother with us at all? It seems to me it would make a lot more sense for you to court their vote."

"Ahhh, once more allow me to commend you on your perspicacity! There's no question about it: you weasels are pretty smart. I always knew it. That's why I approached you first—I need smart animals behind me. And it's because you're so smart that I know you'll take what I'm about to say in stride and not regard it as an insult. You ask me why I don't think a weasel can run for President? He could—he could—very easily: the question is, Would he win? And the answer to that is, No, he wouldn't. He wouldn't because, as you know very well, most of the small groundlings don't trust you weasels. True, they don't trust us foxes either; but the difference is that they trust you guys a lot less because there are more of you and, let's face it, you like to prey on the littlest of them, who are also among the most populous species in the forest. Every animal in this forest knows about that mouse massacre you guys went on last year—how five of you went on a rampage in the mouse community and devoured a whole slew of nests, parents and babies and all! Between you and me, I can't say I blame you; there really is nothing

tastier than a nice plump mouse—but you have to admit that you guys did overdo it a little. To this day the vegetarians talk about it with horror, and there are a lot of vegetarians in this forest. If a weasel were to run for President, don't you think the mice would bring up the matter of that massacre and hold it against your candidate?—and get all their ridiculous leaf-nibbling friends to be against you too? Of course they would; it would be their revenge. They'd stir up the whole vegetarian community against you and you wouldn't have a chance.

"Now, it's also true," the fox continued, "that I'm not especially well-liked in this forest. But I don't have a massacre on my record to deal with. The dislike of me is just the general dislike of vegetarians for carnivores, and I'm confident I can get over that hurdle pretty easily, so long as I get a fair hearing. I've always prided myself on having a way with words, not to mention the fact that I'm rather good at charming the ladies, some of whom are sure to influence their mates. The point is, I have to begin building my base now, and I felt I might as well start where it was likely to be strongest: among you weasels. We're different in a lot of ways, but we're also the same in a lot of ways. Also, through you I could court the raccoon vote. From what I understand you weasels get on fairly well with them?"

"We've never had any problems."

"Good. Then you could persuade them to join our alliance. And through the raccoons we could win over the opossums, since those two species are rather friendly. And so forth and so on. In short, I'm looking toward a coalition of carnivores, since that's the only way we're going to win this forest."

"But you're forgetting one thing," the weasel said. "There's a vegetarian candidate—the eagle."

"Oh?"

"I just heard about it. He's going to run."

"Figures. But, weasel, who's going to vote for him? Aside from this one good idea of his, he's a crackpot. Everyone knows he's not normal. Even the other eagles don't like him. Did you ever hear of a bird who goes flying about for no reason? Who seems to have no interest in settling down with a mate and building a nest and raising a brood? C'mon, now! He's got so many marks against him that he doesn't have a chance of winning the election."

"Well, what if a boar runs? There are a lot of boars in this forest."

"A boar? No way. A boar won't run presidency, and if he does he won't get very far. You know as well as I do that the boars are stupid—stupid, stupid, stupid! Even if they were to find out the brightest boar among them and put him up as a candidate, he'd be blown away in a few minutes' argument with a fox or a weasel or even a raccoon. Besides, boars aren't inherently political. They're followers, not leaders. The same is true of the rabbits, the deer, and most of the birds. Even if they come up with some good ideas for the forest, it won't mean anything. In order to impress oneself in the minds of animals one has to have a certain inborn flair and ability."

"But there are a lot of them," the weasel retorted, "and they're primarily vegetarian. Do you really think they'd vote for you so long as there's a vegetarian candidate?"

"As I said," the fox responded, "there is no viable vegetarian candidate. Nobody trusts the eagle, and the boars are all dopes."

"Well, I hate to burst your little bubble, fox," the weasel said, shaking his head, "but the race isn't going to be just between you and the eagle or a boar. The skunks are going to put up a candidate."

"Them too, eh?"

The weasel nodded.

The fox shrugged; the information didn't faze him much. "No matter. I can out-campaign a skunk any day. Besides, the only support they're sure to get is from themselves and maybe the weasels—if, that is to say, you don't support me instead."

"What about the raccoons? They'd vote for him."

"Whatever," the fox said, giving another nonchalant shrug, as though certain that even this additional support for a skunk candidate would be insufficient for him to win an election. "At any rate, I'm sure you'd rather support a fox than an eagle or a skunk, even though you and the skunks are supposed to be related in some way. So, what do you say? Will you help me?"

The weasel did not have to consider long. Everything the fox had said had struck him as logical and in the interest of the weasels. But of course he had to be sure of something.

"And what's going to be in it for us?" he asked.

"A lot of things. As I said, whoever gets to be President is going to have a lot of power in this forest. He'll be able to do things and get things that we can't even imagine right now. If you weasels support me, and then win over the raccoons and opossums, I promise you that if I win I will take es-

pecially good care of your species and do whatever I can to make your lives easier."

"Fair enough," the weasel said. "I'll talk it over with the rest of the weasels and let you know."

"There is one other thing I'm going to need besides your votes," the fox added.

He had spoken in an off-hand tone of voice, which the weasel rightly intuited as meant to camouflage an important point he had been withholding till the last possible moment.

"Which is?" the weasel asked.

"Food."

"Food?"

"Yes, food. As long as I'm campaigning for President, I'm not going to be able to go hunting. And even if I did find the time for it, it wouldn't be a good idea for me to be promising the animals goodies one minute only to be tearing them apart the next. The conflict of interest is obvious. Therefore, if you weasels and your friends could arrange to put something before my lair at the end of each day—just enough to keep me going till I'm elected—it would help me tremendously."

"Anything else?"

"No, I can't really think of anything just now."

The weasel got up on all four legs and seemed about to leave, but he hesitated, turned his attention to the fox, and said, "You know, even if we decide to help you, I can't promise you that we can get you food every night: there are going to have to be some nights when you go hungry, if only because there are some days when we don't get anything ourselves."

"No problem, my friend. It wouldn't be the first time I've gone hungry for a few days."

The fox stood up in order to show out his visitor. For some time he peered out after the weasel, not entirely confident that he had gotten what he wanted.

### III

#### Fox Becomes a Candidate

In only a few days it became known which animals were running presidency: the eagle, the fox, and a skunk. Though several other animals announced themselves as candidates, they were from the first not taken seriously. For instance, one of the frogs hopped about from morning till night proclaiming his candidacy, yet he might not have said a word for all the attention he got; his own community merely staring at him goggle-eyed and indifferent. So, too, one of the boars tried to drum up attention in himself—all to no avail; his fellow boars grunting impatiently and trotting off in all directions the moment he began to make his appeal. Undoubtedly the fox had been correct in his assumption that there really were some animals who, no matter how worthy their ideas or how thoroughgoing their sincerity, did not have the all-important talent of impressing themselves on the consciousness of others.

Assured of the support of the weasel community, and through them of the support of the raccoons and at least some of the opossums, the fox began campaigning for President. He was confident that he would out-campaign his opponents, the skunk and the eagle, for the latter had the almost impossible task of overcoming his image as a strange bird,