



The Language of Beasts

Andrew Lang's Fairy Books

Bulgarian

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Once upon a time a man had a shepherd who served him many years faithfully and honestly. One day, whilst herding his flock, this shepherd heard a hissing sound, coming out of the forest near by, which he could not account for. So he went into the wood in the direction of the noise to try to discover the cause. When he approached the place he found that the dry grass and leaves were on fire, and on a tree, surrounded by flames, a snake was coiled, hissing with terror.

The shepherd stood wondering how the poor snake could escape, for the wind was blowing the flames that way, and soon that tree would be burning like the rest. Suddenly the snake cried: 'O shepherd! for the love of heaven save me from this fire!'

Then the shepherd stretched his staff out over the flames and the snake wound itself round the staff and up to his hand, and from his hand it crept up his arm, and twined itself about his neck. The shepherd trembled with fright, expecting every instant to be stung to death, and said: 'What an unlucky man I am! Did I rescue you only to be destroyed myself?' But the snake answered: 'Have no fear; only carry me home to my father who is the King of the Snakes.' The shepherd, however, was much too frightened to listen, and said that he could not go away and leave his flock alone; but the snake said: 'You need not be afraid to leave your flock, no evil shall befall them; but make all the haste you can.'

So he set off through the wood carrying the snake, and after a time he came to a great gateway, made entirely

of snakes intertwined one with another. The shepherd stood still with surprise, but the snake round his neck whistled, and immediately all the arch unwound itself.

‘When we are come to my father’s house,’ said his own snake to him, ‘he will reward you with anything you like to ask—silver, gold, jewels, or whatever on this earth is most precious; but take none of all these things, ask rather to understand the language of beasts. He will refuse it to you a long time, but in the end he will grant it to you.’

Soon after that they arrived at the house of the King of the Snakes, who burst into tears of joy at the sight of his daughter, as he had given her up for dead. ‘Where have you been all this time?’ he asked, directly he could speak, and she told him that she had been caught in a forest fire, and had been rescued from the flames by the shepherd. The King of the Snakes, then turning to the shepherd, said to him: ‘What reward will you choose for saving my child?’

‘Make me to know the language of beasts,’ answered the shepherd, ‘that is all I desire.’

The king replied: ‘Such knowledge would be of no benefit to you, for if I granted it to you and you told any one of it, you would immediately die; ask me rather for whatever else you would most like to possess, and it shall be yours.’

But the shepherd answered him: ‘Sir, if you wish to reward me for saving your daughter, grant me, I pray you, to know the language of beasts. I desire nothing else’; and he turned as if to depart.

Then the king called him back, saying: ‘If nothing else will satisfy you, open your mouth.’ The man obeyed, and the king spat into it, and said: ‘Now spit into my mouth.’ The shepherd did as he was told, then the King of the Snakes spat again into the shepherd’s mouth. When they had spat into each other’s mouths three times, the king said:

‘Now you know the language of beasts, go in peace; but, if you value your life, beware lest you tell any one of it, else you will immediately die.’

So the shepherd set out for home, and on his way through the wood he heard and understood all that was said by the birds, and by every living creature. When he got back to his sheep he found the flock grazing peacefully, and as he was very tired he laid himself down by them to rest a little. Hardly had he done so when two ravens flew down and perched on a tree near by, and began to talk to each other in their own language: ‘If that

shepherd only knew that there is a vault full of gold and silver beneath where that lamb is lying, what would he not do?' When the shepherd heard these words he went straight to his master and told him, and the master at once took a waggon, and broke open the door of the vault, and they carried off the treasure. But instead of keeping it for himself, the master, who was an honourable man, gave it all up to the shepherd, saying: 'Take it, it is yours. The gods have given it to you.' So the shepherd took the treasure and built himself a house. He married a wife, and they lived in great peace and happiness, and he was acknowledged to be the richest man, not only of his native village, but of all the country-side. He had flocks of sheep, and cattle, and horses without end, as well as beautiful clothes and jewels.

One day, just before Christmas, he said to his wife: 'Prepare everything for a great feast, to-morrow we will take things with us to the farm that the shepherds there may make merry.' The wife obeyed, and all was prepared as he desired. Next day they both went to the farm, and in the evening the master said to the shepherds: 'Now come, all of you, eat, drink, and make merry. I will watch the flocks myself to-night in your stead.' Then he went out to spend the night with the flocks.

When midnight struck the wolves howled and the dogs barked, and the wolves spoke in their own tongue, saying:

'Shall we come in and work havoc, and you too shall eat flesh?' And the dogs answered in their tongue: 'Come in, and for once we shall have enough to eat.'

Now amongst the dogs there was one so old that he had only two teeth left in his head, and he spoke to the wolves, saying: 'So long as I have my two teeth still in my head, I will let no harm be done to my master.'

All this the master heard and understood, and as soon as morning dawned he ordered all the dogs to be killed excepting the old dog. The farm servants wondered at this order, and exclaimed: 'But surely, sir, that would be a pity?'

The master answered: 'Do as I bid you'; and made ready to return home with his wife, and they mounted their horses, her steed being a mare. As they went on their way, it happened that the husband rode on ahead, while the wife was a little way behind. The husband's horse, seeing this, neighed, and said to the mare: 'Come along, make haste; why are you so slow?' And the mare answered: 'It is very easy for you, you carry only your master, who is a thin man, but I carry my mistress, who is so fat that she weights as much as three.' When the husband heard that he looked back and laughed, which the wife perceiving, she urged on the mare till she caught up

with her husband, and asked him why he laughed. 'For nothing at all,' he answered; 'just because it came into my head.' She would not be satisfied with this answer, and urged him more and more to tell her why he had laughed. But he controlled himself and said: 'Let me be, wife; what ails you? I do not know myself why I laughed.' But the more he put her off, the more she tormented him to tell her the cause of his laughter. At length he said to her: 'Know, then, that if I tell it you I shall immediately and surely die.' But even this did not quiet her; she only besought him the more to tell her.

Meanwhile they had reached home, and before getting down from his horse the man called for a coffin to be brought; and when it was there he placed it in front of the house, and said to his wife:

'See, I will lay myself down in this coffin, and will then tell you why I laughed, for as soon as I have told you I shall surely die.' So he lay down in the coffin, and while he took a last look around him, his old dog came out from the farm and sat down by him, and whined. When the master saw this, he called to his wife: 'Bring a piece of bread to give to the dog.' The wife brought some bread and threw it to the dog, but he would not look at it. Then the farm cock came and pecked at the bread; but the dog said to it: 'Wretched glutton, you can eat like that when you see that your master is dying?' The cock answered: 'Let him die, if he is so stupid. I have a hundred wives, which I call together when I find a grain of corn, and as soon as they are there I swallow it myself; should one of them dare to be angry, I would give her a lesson with my beak. He has only one wife, and he cannot keep her in order.'

As soon as the man understood this, he got up out of the coffin, seized a stick, and called his wife into the room, saying: 'Come, and I will tell you what you so much want to know'; and then he began to beat her with the stick, saying with each blow: 'It is that, wife, it is that!' And in this way he taught her never again to ask why he had laughed.

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