

The Little Hare

Andrew Lang's Fairy Books

African

Intermediate

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A long, long way off, in a land where water is very scarce, there lived a man and his wife and several children. One day the wife said to her husband, 'I am pining to have the liver of a nyamatsane for my dinner. If you love me as much as you say you do, you will go out and hunt for a nyamatsane, and will kill it and get its liver. If not, I shall know that your love is not worth having.'

'Bake some bread,' was all her husband answered, 'then take the crust and put it in this little bag.'

The wife did as she was told, and when she had finished she said to her husband, 'The bag is all ready and quite full.'

'Very well,' said he, 'and now good-bye; I am going after the nyamatsane.'

But the nyamatsane was not so easy to find as the woman had hoped. The husband walked on and on and on without ever seeing one, and every now and then he felt so hungry that he was obliged to eat one of the crusts of bread out of his bag. At last, when he was ready to drop from fatigue, he found himself on the edge of a great marsh, which bordered on one side the country of the nyamatsanes. But there were no more nyamatsanes here than anywhere else. They had all gone on a hunting expedition, as their larder was empty, and the only person left at home was their grandmother, who was so feeble she never went out of the house. Our friend looked on

this as a great piece of luck, and made haste to kill her before the others returned, and to take out her liver, after which he dressed himself in her skin as well as he could. He had scarcely done this when he heard the noise of the nyamatsanes coming back to their grandmother, for they were very fond of her, and never stayed away from her longer than they could help. They rushed clattering into the hut, exclaiming, 'We smell human flesh! Some man is here,' and began to look about for him; but they only saw their old grandmother, who answered, in a trembling voice, 'No, my children, no! What should any man be doing here?' The nyamatsanes paid no attention to her, and began to open all the cupboards, and peep under all the beds, crying out all the while, 'A man is here! a man is here!' but they could find nobody, and at length, tired out with their long day's hunting, they curled themselves up and fell asleep.

Next morning they woke up quite refreshed, and made ready to start on another expedition; but as they did not feel happy about their grandmother they said to her, 'Grandmother, won't you come to-day and feed with us?' And they led their grandmother outside, and all of them began hungrily to eat pebbles. Our friend pretended to do the same, but in reality he slipped the stones into his pouch, and swallowed the crusts of bread instead. However, as the nyamatsanes did not see this they had no idea that he was not really their grandmother. When they had eaten a great many pebbles they thought they had done enough for that day, and all went home together and curled themselves up to sleep. Next morning when they woke they said, 'Let us go and amuse ourselves by jumping over the ditch,' and every time they cleared it with a bound. Then they begged their grandmother to jump over it too, and with a tremendous effort she managed to spring right over to the other side. After this they had no doubt at all of its being their true grandmother, and went off to their hunting, leaving our friend at home in the hut.

As soon as they had gone out of sight our hero made haste to take the liver from the place where he had hid it, threw off the skin of the old nyamatsane, and ran away as hard as he could, only stopping to pick up a very brilliant and polished little stone, which he put in his bag by the side of the liver.

Towards evening the nyamatsanes came back to the hut full of anxiety to know how their grandmother had got on during their absence. The first thing they saw on entering the door was her skin lying on the floor, and then they knew that they had been deceived, and they said to each other, 'So we were right, after all, and it was human flesh we smelt.' Then they stooped down to find traces of the man's footsteps, and when they had got them instantly set out in hot pursuit.

Meanwhile our friend had journeyed many miles, and was beginning to feel quite safe and comfortable, when, happening to look round, he saw in the distance a thick cloud of dust moving rapidly. His heart stood still within him, and he said to himself, 'I am lost. It is the nyamatsanes, and they will tear me in pieces,' and indeed the cloud of dust was drawing near with amazing quickness, and the nyamatsanes almost felt as if they were already devouring him. Then as a last hope the man took the little stone that he had picked up out of his bag and flung it on the ground. The moment it touched the soil it became a huge rock, whose steep sides were smooth as glass, and on the top of it our hero hastily seated himself. It was in vain that the nyamatsanes tried to climb up and reach him; they slid down again much faster than they had gone up; and by sunset they were quite worn out, and fell asleep at the foot of the rock.

No sooner had the nyamatsanes tumbled off to sleep than the man stole softly down and fled away as fast as his legs would carry him, and by the time his enemies were awake he was a very long way off. They sprang quickly to their feet and began to sniff the soil round the rock, in order to discover traces of his footsteps, and they galloped after him with terrific speed. The chase continued for several days and nights; several times the nyamatsanes almost reached him, and each time he was saved by his little pebble.

Between his fright and his hurry he was almost dead of exhaustion when he reached his own village, where the nyamatsanes could not follow him, because of their enemies the dogs, which swarmed over all the roads. So they returned home.

Then our friend staggered into his own hut and called to his wife: 'Ichou! how tired I am! Quick, give me something to drink. Then go and get fuel and light a fire.'

So she did what she was bid, and then her husband took the nyamatsane's liver from his pouch and said to her, 'There, I have brought you what you wanted, and now you know that I love you truly.'

And the wife answered, 'It is well. Now go and take out the children, so that I may remain alone in the hut,' and as she spoke she lifted down an old stone pot and put on the liver to cook. Her husband watched her for a moment, and then said, 'Be sure you eat it all yourself. Do not give a scrap to any of the children, but eat every morsel up.' So the woman took the liver and ate it all herself.

Directly the last mouthful had disappeared she was seized with such violent thirst that she caught up a great pot full of water and drank it at a single draught. Then, having no more in the house, she ran in next door and said, 'Neighbour, give me, I pray you, something to drink.' The neighbour gave her a large vessel quite full, and the woman drank it off at a single draught, and held it out for more.

But the neighbour pushed her away, saying, 'No, I shall have none left for my children.'

So the woman went into another house, and drank all the water she could find; but the more she drank the more thirsty she became. She wandered in this manner through the whole village till she had drunk every water-pot dry. Then she rushed off to the nearest spring, and swallowed that, and when she had finished all the springs and wells about she drank up first the river and then a lake. But by this time she had drunk so much that she could not rise from the ground.

In the evening, when it was time for the animals to have their drink before going to bed, they found the lake quite dry, and they had to make up their minds to be thirsty till the water flowed again and the streams were full. Even then, for some time, the lake was very dirty, and the lion, as king of the beasts, commanded that no one should drink till it was quite clear again.

But the little hare, who was fond of having his own way, and was very thirsty besides, stole quietly off when all the rest were asleep in their dens, and crept down to the margin of the lake and drank his fill. Then he smeared the dirty water all over the rabbit's face and paws, so that it might look as if it were he who had been disobeying Big Lion's orders.

The next day, as soon as it was light, Big Lion marched straight for the lake, and all the other beasts followed

him. He saw at once that the water had been troubled again, and was very angry.

‘Who has been drinking my water?’ said he; and the little hare gave a jump, and, pointing to the rabbit, he answered, ‘Look there! it must be he! Why, there is mud all over his face and paws!’

The rabbit, frightened out of his wits, tried to deny the fact, exclaiming, ‘Oh, no, indeed I never did;’ but Big Lion would not listen, and commanded them to cane him with a birch rod.

Now the little hare was very much pleased with his cleverness in causing the rabbit to be beaten instead of himself, and went about boasting of it. At last one of the other animals overheard him, and called out, ‘Little hare, little hare! what is that you are saying?’

But the little hare hastily replied, ‘I only asked you to pass me my stick.’

An hour or two later, thinking that no one was near him, he said to himself again, ‘It was really I who drank up the water, but I made them think it was the rabbit.’

But one of the beasts whose ears were longer than the rest caught the words, and went to tell Big Lion about it. Do you hear what the little hare is saying?’

So Big Lion sent for the little hare, and asked him what he meant by talking like that.

The little hare saw that there was no use trying to hide it, so he answered pertly, ‘It was I who drank the water, but I made them think it was the rabbit.’ Then he turned and ran as fast as he could, with all the other beasts pursuing him.

They were almost up to him when he dashed into a very narrow cleft in the rock, much too small for them to follow; but in his hurry he had left one of his long ears sticking out, which they just managed to seize. But pull as hard as they might they could not drag him out of the hole, and at last they gave it up and left him, with his ear very much torn and scratched.

When the last tail was out of sight the little hare crept cautiously out, and the first person he met was the rabbit. He had plenty of impudence, so he put a bold face on the matter, and said, 'Well, my good rabbit, you see I have had a beating as well as you.'

But the rabbit was still sore and sulky, and he did not care to talk, so he answered, coldly, 'You have treated me very badly. It was really you who drank that water, and you accused me of having done it.'

'Oh, my good rabbit, never mind that! I've got such a wonderful secret to tell you! Do you know what to do so as to escape death?'

'No, I don't.'

'Well, we must begin by digging a hole.'

So they dug a hole, and then the little hare said, 'The next thing is to make a fire in the hole,' and they set to work to collect wood, and lit quite a large fire.

When it was burning brightly the little hare said to the rabbit, 'Rabbit, my friend, throw me into the fire, and when you hear my fur crackling, and I call "Itchi, Itchi," then be quick and pull me out.'

The rabbit did as he was told, and threw the little hare into the fire; but no sooner did the little hare begin to feel the heat of the flames than he took some green bay leaves he had plucked for the purpose and held them in the middle of the fire, where they crackled and made a great noise. Then he called loudly 'Itchi, Itchi! Rabbit, my friend, be quick, be quick! Don't you hear how my skin is crackling?'

And the rabbit came in a great hurry and pulled him out.

Then the little hare said, 'Now it is your turn!' and he threw the rabbit in the fire. The moment the rabbit felt the flames he cried out 'Itchi, Itchi, I am burning; pull me out quick, my friend!'

But the little hare only laughed, and said, 'No, you may stay there! It is your own fault. Why were you such a fool as to let yourself be thrown in? Didn't you know that fire burns?' And in a very few minutes nothing was left of the rabbit but a few bones.

When the fire was quite out the little hare went and picked up one of these bones, and made a flute out of it, and sang this song:

Pii, pii, O flute that I love, Pii, pii, rabbits are but little boys. Pii, pii, he would have burned me if he could; Pii, pii, but I burned him, and he crackled finely.

When he got tired of going through the world singing this the little hare went back to his friends and entered the service of Big Lion. One day he said to his master, 'Grandfather, shall I show you a splendid way to kill game?'

'What is it?' asked Big Lion.

'We must dig a ditch, and then you must lie in it and pretend to be dead.'

Big Lion did as he was told, and when he had lain down the little hare got up on a wall blew a trumpet and shouted—

Pii, pii, all you animals come and see, Big Lion is dead, and now peace will be.

Directly they heard this they all came running. The little hare received them and said, 'Pass on, this way to the lion.' So they all entered into the Animal Kingdom. Last of all came the monkey with her baby on her back. She approached the ditch, and took a blade of grass and tickled Big Lion's nose, and his nostrils moved in spite of his efforts to keep them still. Then the monkey cried, 'Come, my baby, climb on my back and let us go. What sort of a dead body is it that can still feel when it is tickled?' And she and her baby went away in a fright. Then the little hare said to the other beasts, 'Now, shut the gate of the Animal Kingdom.' And it was shut, and great stones were rolled against it. When everything was tight closed the little hare turned to Big Lion and said 'Now!' and Big Lion bounded out of the ditch and tore the other animals in pieces.

But Big Lion kept all the choice bits for himself, and only gave away the little scraps that he did not care about eating; and the little hare grew very angry, and determined to have his revenge. He had long ago found out that Big Lion was very easily taken in; so he laid his plans accordingly. He said to him, as if the idea had just come into his head, 'Grandfather, let us build a hut,' and Big Lion consented. And when they had driven the stakes into the ground, and had made the walls of the hut, the little hare told Big Lion to climb upon the top while he

stayed inside. When he was ready he called out, 'Now, grandfather, begin,' and Big Lion passed his rod through the reeds with which the roofs are always covered in that country. The little hare took it and cried, 'Now it is my turn to pierce them,' and as he spoke he passed the rod back through the reeds and gave Big Lion's tail a sharp poke.

'What is pricking me so?' asked Big Lion.

'Oh, just a little branch sticking out. I am going to break it,' answered the little hare; but of course he had done it on purpose, as he wanted to fix Big Lion's tail so firmly to the hut that he would not be able to move. In a little while he gave another prick, and Big Lion called again, 'What is pricking me so?'

This time the little hare said to himself, 'He will find out what I am at. I must try some other plan. 'So he called out, 'Grandfather, you had better put your tongue here, so that the branches shall not touch you.' Big Lion did as he was bid, and the little hare tied it tightly to the stakes of the wall. Then he went outside and shouted, 'Grandfather, you can come down now,' and Big Lion tried, but he could not move an inch.

Then the little hare began quietly to eat Big Lion's dinner right before his eyes, and paying no attention at all to his growls of rage. When he had quite done he climbed up on the hut, and, blowing his flute, he chanted 'Pii, pii, fall rain and hail,' and directly the sky was full of clouds, the thunder roared, and huge hailstones whitened the roof of the hut. The little hare, who had taken refuge within, called out again, 'Big Lion, be quick and come down and dine with me.' But there was no answer, not even a growl, for the hailstones had killed Big Lion.

The little hare enjoyed himself vastly for some time, living comfortably in the hut, with plenty of food to eat and no trouble at all in getting it. But one day a great wind arose, and flung down the Big Lion's half-dried skin from the roof of the hut. The little hare bounded with terror at the noise, for he thought Big Lion must have come to life again; but on discovering what had happened he set about cleaning the skin, and propped the mouth open with sticks so that he could get through. So, dressed in Big Lion's skin, the little hare started on his travels.

The first visit he paid was to the hyaenas, who trembled at the sight of him, and whispered to each other, 'How shall we escape from this terrible beast?' Meanwhile the little hare did not trouble himself about them, but just asked where the king of the hyaenas lived, and made himself quite at home there. Every morning each hyaena

thought to himself, 'To-day he is certain to eat me;' but several days went by, and they were all still alive. At length, one evening, the little hare, looking round for something to amuse him, noticed a great pot full of boiling water, so he strolled up to one of the hyaenas and said, 'Go and get in.' The hyaena dared not disobey, and in a few minutes was scalded to death. Then the little hare went the round of the village, saying to every hyaena he met, 'Go and get into the boiling water,' so that in a little while there was hardly a male left in the village.

One day all the hyaenas that remained alive went out very early into the fields, leaving only one little daughter at home. The little hare, thinking he was all alone, came into the enclosure, and, wishing to feel what it was like to be a hare again, threw off Big Lion's skin, and began to jump and dance, singing—

I am just the little hare, the little hare, the little hare; I am just the little hare who killed the great hyaenas.

The little hyaena gazed at him in surprise, saying to herself, 'What! was it really this tiny beast who put to death all our best people?' when suddenly a gust of wind rustled the reeds that surrounded the enclosure, and the little hare, in a fright, hastily sprang back into Big Lion's skin.

When the hyaenas returned to their homes the little hyaena said to her father: 'Father, our tribe has very nearly been swept away, and all this has been the work of a tiny creature dressed in the lion's skin.'

But her father answered, 'Oh, my dear child, you don't know what you are talking about.'

She replied, 'Yes, father, it is quite true. I saw it with my own eyes.'

The father did not know what to think, and told one of his friends, who said, 'To-morrow we had better keep watch ourselves.'

And the next day they hid themselves and waited till the little hare came out of the royal hut. He walked gaily towards the enclosure, threw off, Big Lion's skin, and sang and danced as before—

I am just the little hare, the little hare, the little hare, I am just the little hare, who killed the great hyaenas.

That night the two hyaenas told all the rest, saying, 'Do you know that we have allowed ourselves to be trampled on by a wretched creature with nothing of the lion about him but his skin?'

When supper was being cooked that evening, before they all went to bed, the little hare, looking fierce and terrible in Big Lion's skin, said as usual to one of the hyaenas 'Go and get into the boiling water.' But the hyaena never stirred. There was silence for a moment; then a hyaena took a stone, and flung it with all his force against the lion's skin. The little hare jumped out through the mouth with a single spring, and fled away like lightning, all the hyaenas in full pursuit uttering great cries. As he turned a corner the little hare cut off both his ears, so that they should not know him, and pretended to be working at a grindstone which lay there.

The hyaenas soon came up to him and said, 'Tell me, friend, have you seen the little hare go by?'

'No, I have seen no one.'

'Where can he be?' said the hyaenas one to another. 'Of course, this creature is quite different, and not at all like the little hare.' Then they went on their way, but, finding no traces of the little hare, they returned sadly to their village, saying, 'To think we should have allowed ourselves to be swept away by a wretched creature like that!'

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