

THUNDER, ELEPHANT, AND DOROBO

*African folktale as told by
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The people of Africa say that if you go to the end of a tree (they mean the top) you find more branches than a man can count, but if you go to the beginning (they mean the bottom) you just find two or three, and that is much easier. Nowadays, they say, we are at the end, and there are so many people and so many things that a man doesn't know where to turn for the clutter the world is in, but that in the beginning things were simpler, and fewer, and a man could see between them. For in the beginning there was only the Earth, and on the Earth were just three important things.

The Earth was much as it is now except that there was nothing on it which had been *made*. Only the things that *grow*. If you go into a corner of a forest very early on a warm misty morning then you might get some idea of what the world was like then. Everything very still and vague round the edges, just growing, quietly.

And in this kind of world were three important things.

First there was Elephant. He was very shiny and black because it was a rather wet world, and he lived in the forest where it is always wet. The mist collected on his cold white tusks and dripped slowly off the tips. Sometimes he trampled slowly through the forest, finding leaves and bark and elephant grass and wild figs and wild olives to eat, and sometimes he stood, very tall, very secret, just thinking and listening to the deep, dignified noises in his stomach. When he flapped his great ears it was a gesture, no more. There were no flies.

Then there was Thunder. He was much bigger than Elephant. He was black also, but not a shiny black like Elephant. Sometimes there were streaks of white about him, the kind of white that you get on the belly of a fish. And he had no *shape*. Or, rather, one moment he had one shape, and the next another shape. He was always collecting himself in and spreading himself out like a huge jellyfish. And he didn't walk, he rolled along. He was noisy. Sometimes his voice was very far away, and then it was not so much a sound as a shaking, which Elephant could feel coming up from the ground. It made the drops of mist fall off the leaves and patter on his broad back. But sometimes, when Thunder was in his tight shape, his voice cracked high and angrily, and then Elephant would start and snort and wheel away deeper into the forest. Not because he was frightened, but because it hurt his ears.

And last there was Dorobo.

Dorobo is a man, and if you want to see Dorobo you have to go to Africa, because he lives there still. Even then you won't see him very often because he keeps on the edges of places, and most people like to

stay in the middle. He lives where the gardens fade out and the forests begin; he lives where the plains stop and the mountains begin, where the grass dries up and the deserts take over. If you want to see him you had better come quickly, because as more and more things are made there is less and less room for Dorobo. He likes to keep himself to himself, and he's almost over the edge.

He is a small man but very stocky. He is the kind of brown that is almost yellow, and he borrows other people's languages to save himself the bother of making up one of his own. He is always looking steadily for small things that are good at hiding, and because of this the skin round his eyes is crinkled. He makes fire by twirling a pointed stick between the palms of his hands, and then he bends his face sideways and just breathes on a pinch of dried leaf powder and it burns. Fire is about the only thing he does make.

He is very simple and wise, and he was wise then too, when the world was beginning, and he shared it with Elephant and Thunder.

Now these three things were young and new in those days, not quite certain of themselves and rather suspicious of the others because they very seldom met. There was so much room.

One day Thunder came to see Elephant, and after he had rumbled and swelled he settled into the shape that soothed him most, and said, "It's about Dorobo."

Elephant shifted his weight delicately from one foot to the other and said nothing. His ears flapped encouragingly.

“This Dorobo,” Thunder went on, “is a strange creature. In fact, so strange that . . . I am leaving the Earth, because I am afraid of him.”

Elephant stopped rocking and gurgled with surprise.

“Why?” he asked. “He seems harmless enough to me.”

“Listen, Elephant,” said Thunder. “When you are sleeping and you get uncomfortable and need to turn upon your other side, what do you do?”

Elephant pondered this. “I stand up,” he said at last. “I stand up, and then I lie down again on my other side.”

“Well, Dorobo doesn’t,” said Thunder. “I know. I’ve watched him. He rolls over without waking up. It’s ugly and very strange, and it makes me uncomfortable. The sky, I think, will be a safer home for me.”

And Thunder went there. He went straight up, and he’s been there ever since. Elephant heard his grumbling die away, and he sucked in his cheeks with astonishment. Then he went to find Dorobo.

It took him three days, but he found him at last, asleep beneath a thorn tree with the grass curled beneath him, like the form of a hare. Elephant rolled slowly forward until he stood right over the sleeping man, and Dorobo lay in his gigantic shadow. Elephant watched him and pondered over all that Thunder had said.

Presently Dorobo stirred and shivered in his sleep. Then he sighed and then he rolled over and curled himself tighter. It was precisely as Thunder had described.

Elephant had never noticed it before. It was strange indeed, but not, he thought, dangerous.

Dorobo opened his eyes and stared up at Elephant and smiled.

“You are clever, Elephant,” he said. “I didn’t hear you come. You move so silently.”

Elephant said nothing.

Dorobo sat up and put his arms round his knees.

“I’m glad you came,” he went on. “I’ve been wanting to speak to you. Do you know Thunder has left us?”

“I had heard that he had gone,” replied Elephant.

“Yes,” said Dorobo, “I heard him yesterday in the sky. I’m glad and grateful that he’s gone, for, to tell you the truth, I was afraid of Thunder. So big, so loud; and you never knew where he might bob up next. Or in what shape. I like things definite.”

“He *was* noisy,” said Elephant.

“Now you, Elephant, you’re quite different. So quiet and kind. Just think, Elephant, now in the whole world there is just you and me, and we shall get on well together because we understand each other.”

Then Elephant laughed. He didn’t mean to. It rumbled up inside him and took him by surprise. He threw up his trunk and trumpeted. “This ridiculous little creature!”

Then he was ashamed of his bad manners, and he wheeled ponderously and smashed off into the forest, shaking his great head, shaken by enormous bellows of laughter.

“Yes,” he shouted back over his shoulder, “we understand . . . ha, ha! . . . understand one another . . . very . . . well!”

He was a good-natured animal, and he didn't want Dorobo to see that he was laughing at him.

But Dorobo had seen, and although the smile stayed on his face, his eyes were very cold and hard and black, like wet pebbles.

Presently he too slipped into the forest, but he walked slowly and looked carefully about him, and after a while he saw the tree he wanted. It was an old white olive tree, a twisted, slow-growing thing, with a very hard, tough wood. Dorobo searched that tree, and after a long time he found a branch that was straight enough and he bent and twisted it until it broke off.

Then he skinned it with his teeth and trimmed it and laid it in the shade to dry. Then he found thin, strong vines hanging from tall trees like rope from a mast, and he tore them down and trailed them behind him to the river. There he soaked them and beat them into cords against the river rocks, and plaited them very tightly together. When his cord was long enough he took his wild olive branch, which was dry now, and strung the first bow. And he bent the bow almost double and let it go, and it sang for him. Next he found straight, stiff sticks, and he made a fire and burned the end of his sticks a little, and rubbed the charred wood off in the sand. This gave them very hard, sharp points.

Taking his bow and his arrows, he ran to the edge of the desert and found the candelabra tree. The candelabra is a strange tree. It has thick, dull green branches that bear no leaves. And the branches stick up in bunches, a little bent, like the fingers of an old man's hand. And when a branch breaks, and it does very easily, it bleeds a white, sticky sap that

drips slowly on the sand. You must never shelter beneath a candelabra tree because if the sap drips in your eyes you go blind.

Dorobo broke a branch and dipped his arrows into the thick, milky sap, and twisted them like a spoon in syrup. Then he laid each carefully against a stone to dry.

When everything was ready he went in search of Elephant.

Elephant was asleep under a fig tree, but he woke up when he heard Dorobo's footsteps in the undergrowth. There was something in the way Dorobo walked—something secret and unfriendly that Elephant did not like. For the first time in his life he felt afraid. As quickly as he could he got to his feet and made off through the forest. Dorobo grasped his bow and arrows more firmly and began to follow. Elephant trumpeted to the sky for help. But Thunder growled back, "It is useless to ask for help now. I warned you and you did nothing. You can't tell what a man is thinking by what he *says*, you can only tell by what he *does*. It is too late." From that time to this Dorobo has always hunted Elephant, and so have all men that have come after him.

As for Elephant, he has never again laughed at Dorobo, and has kept as far away from him as he can.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

Why does Dorobo decide to hunt Elephant?

- Why does Dorobo compliment Elephant on his cleverness?
- Why does Elephant say, "I had heard that he had gone," instead of telling Dorobo why Thunder went to the sky? (5)
- Why does Dorobo tell Elephant that they "understand each other"? (5)
- Why does Elephant laugh at Dorobo?