

Jewish Fairy Tales and Legends
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The Palace of the Eagles

East of the Land of the Rising Sun there dwelled a king who spent all his days and half his nights in pleasure. His kingdom was on the edge of the world, according to the knowledge of those times, and almost entirely surrounded by the sea. Nobody seemed to care what lay beyond the barrier of rocks that shut off the land from the rest of the world. For the matter of that, nobody appeared to trouble much about anything in that kingdom.

Most of the people followed the example of the king and led idle, careless lives, giving no thought to the future. The king regarded the task of governing his subjects as a big nuisance; he did not care to be worried with proposals concerning the welfare of the masses, and documents brought to him by his advisors for signature were never read. For aught he knew they may have referred to the school regulations of the moon, instead of the laws of trading and such like public matters.

"Don't bother me," was his usual remark. "You are my advisors and officers of state. Deal with affairs as you think best."

And off he would go to his beloved hunting which was his favorite pastime.

The land was fertile, and nobody had ever entertained an idea that bad weather might some year affect the crops and cause a scarcity of grain. They took no precautions to lay in stocks of wheat, and so when one summer there was a great lack of rain and the fields were parched, the winter that followed was marked by suffering. The kingdom was faced by famine, and the people did not like it. They did not know what to do, and when they appealed to the king, he could not help them. Indeed, he could not understand the difficulty. He passed it off very lightly.

"I am a mighty hunter," he said. "I can always kill enough beasts to provide a sufficiency of food."

But the drought had withered away the grass and the trees, and the shortage of such food had greatly reduced the number of animals. The king found the forests empty of deer and birds. Still he failed to realize the gravity of the situation and what he considered an exceedingly bright idea struck him.

"I will explore the unknown territory beyond the barrier of rocky hills," he said. "Surely there will I find a land of plenty. And, at least" he added, "it will be a pleasant adventure with good hunting."

A great expedition was therefore arranged, and the king and his hunting companions set forth to find a path over the rocks. This was not at all difficult, and on the third day, a pass was discovered among the crags and peaks that formed the summit of the barrier, and the king saw the region beyond.

It seemed a vast and beautiful land, stretching away as far as the eye could see in a forest of huge trees. Carefully, the hunters descended the other side of the rock barrier and entered the unknown land.

It seemed uninhabited. Nor was there any sign of beast or bird of any kind. No sound disturbed the stillness of the forest, no tracks were visible. As well as the hunters could make out, no foot had ever trodden the region before. Even nature seemed at rest. The trees were all old, their trunks gnarled into fantastic shapes, their leaves yellow and sere as if growth had stopped ages ago.

Altogether the march through the forest was rather eerie, and the hunters proceeded in single file, which added to the impressiveness of the strange experience. The novelty, however, made it pleasant to the king, and he kept on his way for four days.

Then the forest ended abruptly, and the explorers came to a vast open plain, a desert, through which a wide river flowed. Far beyond rose a mountain capped by rocks of regular shape. At any rate, they appeared to be rocks, but the distance was too great to enable anyone to speak with certainty.

"Water," said the vizier, "is a sign of life."

So the king decided to continue as far as the mountain. A ford was discovered in the river, and once on the other side it was possible to make out the rocks crowning the mountain. They looked too regular to be mere rocks, and on approaching nearer the king was sure that a huge building must be at the top of the mountain. When they arrived quite close, there was no doubt, about it. Either a town, or a palace, stood on the summit, and it was decided to make the ascent next day.

During the night no sound was heard, but to everybody's surprise a distinct path up the mountain was noticed in the morning. It was so over-grown with weeds and moss and straggling creepers that it was obvious it had not been used for a long time. The ascent was accordingly difficult, but half way up the first sign of life, noticed since the expedition began, made itself visible.

It was an eagle. Suddenly it flew down from the mountain top and circled above the hunters, screaming, but making no attempt to attack.

At length the summit was gained. It was a flat plateau of great expanse, almost the whole of which was covered by an enormous building of massive walls and stupendous towers.

"This is the palace of a great monarch," said the king.

But no entrance of any kind could be seen. The rest of the day was spent in wandering round, but nowhere was a door, or window, or opening visible. It was decided to make a more serious effort next morning to gain entry.

However, it seemed a greater puzzle than ever. At length, one of the most venturesome of the party discovered an eagle's nest on one of the smallest towers, and with great difficulty he secured the bird and brought it down to the king. His majesty bade one of his wise men, Muflog, learned in bird languages, to speak to it. He did so.

In a harsh croaking voice, the eagle replied, "I am but a young bird, only seven centuries old. I know naught. On a tower higher than that on which I dwell, is the eyrie of my father. He may be able to give you information."

More he would not say. The only thing to do was to climb the higher tower and question the father eagle. This was done, and the bird answered:

"On a tower still higher dwells my father, and on yet a higher tower my grandfather, who is two thousand years old. He may know something. I know nothing."

After considerable difficulty the topmost tower was reached and the venerable bird discovered. He seemed asleep and was only awakened after much coaxing. Then he surveyed the hunters warily.

"Let me see, let me think," he muttered slowly. "I did hear, when I was a tiny eagle chick, but a few years old--that was long, long ago--that my great-grandfather had said that his great-grandfather had told him he had heard that long, long, long ago--oh, ever so much longer than that--a king lived in this palace; that he died and left it to the eagles; and that in the course of many, many, many thousands of years the door had been covered up by the dust brought by the winds."

"Where is the door?" asked Muflog.

That was a puzzle the ancient bird could not answer readily. He thought and thought and fell asleep and had to be kept being awakened until at last he remembered.

"When the sun shines in the morning," he croaked, "its first ray falls on the door."

Then, worn out with all his thinking and talking, he fell asleep again.

There was no rest for the party that night. They all watched to make certain of seeing the first ray of the rising sun strike the palace. When it did so, the spot was carefully noted. But no door could be seen. Digging was therefore begun and after many hours, an opening was found.

Through this an entrance was effected into the palace. What a wonderful and mysterious place it was, all overgrown with the weeds of centuries! Tangled masses of creepers lay everywhere over what were once trimly kept pathways, and almost completely hiding the lower buildings. In the

crevices of the walls, roots had insinuated themselves, and by their growth had forced the stones apart. It was all a terrible scene of desolation. The king's men had to hack a way laboriously through the wilderness of weeds with their swords to the central building, and when they did so they came to a door on which was an inscription cut deep into the wood. The language was unknown to all but Muflog, who deciphered it as follows:

"We, the Dwellers in this Palace, lived for many years in Comfort and Luxury. Then Hunger came. We had made no preparation. We had amassed jewels in abundance but not Corn. We ground Pearls and Rubies to fine flour, but could make no Bread. Wherefore we die, bequeathing this Palace to the eagles who will devour our bodies and build their eyries on our towers."

A dread silence fell on the whole party when Muflog read these strange words, and the king turned pale. This warning from the dead past was making the adventure far from enjoyable. Some of the party suggested the immediate abandonment of the expedition and the prompt return home. They feared hidden dangers now. But the king remained resolute.

"I must investigate this to the end," he said in a firm voice. "Those who are seized by fear may return. I will go on, if needs be, alone."

Encouraged by these words, the hunters decided to remain with the king. One of them began to batter at the door, but the king was anxious to preserve the inscription, and after more cutting away of weeds, the key was seen to be sticking in the keyhole. Unlocking the door, however, was no light task, for ages of rust had accumulated. When finally this was accomplished the door creaked heavily on its hinges and a musty smell came from the dank corridor that was revealed.

The explorers walked ankle-deep in dust through a maze of rooms until they came to a big central hall of statues. So artistically fashioned were they that they seemed lifelike in their attitudes, and for a moment all held their breath. This hall was dustless, and Muflog pointed out that it was an airtight chamber. Evidently it had been specifically devised to preserve the statues.

"These must be the effigies of kings," said his majesty, and on reading the inscriptions, Muflog said that was so.

At the far end of the hall, on a pedestal higher than the others, was a statue bigger than the rest. In addition to the name there was an inscription on the pedestal. Muflog read it amid an awed stillness:

"I am the last of the kings--yea, the last of men, and with my own hands have completed this work. I ruled over a thousand cities, rode on a thousand horses, and received the homage of a thousand vassal princes; but when Famine came I was powerless. Ye who may read this, take heed of the fate that has overwhelmed this land. Take but one word of counsel from the last of the mortals; prepare thy meal while the daylight lasts * * *"

The words broke off: the rest was undecipherable.

"Enough," cried the king, and his voice was not steady. "This has indeed been good hunting. I have learned, in my folly and pursuit of pleasure, what I had failed to see for myself. Let us return and act upon the counsel of this king who has met the end that will surely be our own should we forget his warning."

Looking out across the plain they had traversed, his majesty seemed to see a vision of prosperous cities and smiling fertile fields. In imagination, he saw caravans laden with merchandise journeying across the intervening spaces. Then, as darker thoughts followed, a cloud appeared to settle over the whole land. The cities crumbled and disappeared, the eagles swooped down and took possession of that which man had failed to appreciate and hold; and after the eagles the dust of the ages settled slowly, piling itself up year by year until everything was covered and only the desert was visible.

Scarcely a word was spoken as the king and his hunters made their way back to the land East of the Rising Sun. In all, they had been away forty days when they re-crossed the barrier of rocks. They were joyously welcomed.

"What have you brought," asked the populace. "In a little while we shall be starving."

"Ye shall not starve," said the king. "I have brought wisdom from the Palace of the Eagles. From the fate and sufferings of others I have learned a lesson--my duty."

At once he set to work to organize the proper distribution of the food supply and the cultivation of the land. He wasted no more time on foolish pleasures, and in due course the land East of the Rising Sun enjoyed happiness and prosperity and even established fruitful colonies in the plain overlooked by the Palace of the Eagles.