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Ririro

IMAGINATION OVER KNOWLEDGE

Ririro

Bambi (10/25)

Winter dragged on. Sometimes it was warmer, but then the snow would fall again and lie deeper and deeper, so that it became impossible to scrape it away. It was worse when the thaws came and the melted snow water froze again in the night. Then there was a thin slippery film of ice. Often it broke in pieces and the sharp splinters cut the deer's tender fetlocks till they bled.

A heavy frost had set in several days before. The air was purer and rarer than it had ever been, and full of energy. It began to hum in a very fine high tone. It hummed with the cold.

It was silent in the woods, but something horrible happened every day. Once the crows fell upon Friend Hare's small son who was lying sick, and killed him in a cruel way. He could be heard moaning pitifully for a long while. Friend Hare was not at home, and when he heard the sad news he was beside himself with grief. Another time the squirrel raced about with a great wound in his neck where the ferret had caught him. By a miracle the squirrel had escaped. He could not talk because of the pain, but he ran up and down the branches. Everyone could see him. He ran like mad. From time to time he stopped, sat down, raised his forepaws desperately and clutched his head in terror and agony

while the red blood oozed on his white chest. He ran about for an hour, then suddenly crumpled up, fell across a branch, and dropped dead in the snow. A couple of magpies flew down at once to begin their meal.

Another day a fox tore to pieces the strong and handsome pheasant who had enjoyed such general respect and popularity. His death aroused the sympathies of a wide circle who tried to comfort his disconsolate widow.

The fox had dragged the pheasant out of the snow, where he was buried, thinking himself well hidden. No one could have felt safer than the pheasant for it all happened in broad daylight. The terrible hardship that seemed to have no end spread bitterness and brutality. It destroyed all their memories of the past, their faith in each other, and ruined every good custom they had. There was no longer either peace or mercy in the forest.

"It's hard to believe that it will ever be better," Bambi's mother sighed.

Aunt Ena sighed too. "It's hard to believe that it was ever any better," she said.

"And yet," Marena said, looking in front of her, "I always think how beautiful it was before."

"Look," old Nettla said to Aunt Ena, "your little one is trembling." She pointed to Gobo. "Does he always tremble like that?"

"Yes," Aunt Ena answered gravely, "he's shivered that way for the last few days."

"Well," said old Nettla in her frank way, "I'm glad that I have no more children. If that little one were mine I'd wonder if he'd last out the winter."

The future really didn't look very bright for Gobo. He was weak. He had always been much more delicate than Bambi or Faline and remained smaller than either of them. He was growing worse from day to day. He could not eat even the little food there was. It made his stomach ache. And he was quite exhausted by the cold, and by the horrors around him. He shivered more and more and could hardly stand up. Everyone looked at him sympathetically.

Old Nettla went up to him and nudged him good-naturedly. "Don't be so sad," she said encouragingly, "that's no way for a little prince to act, and besides it's unhealthy." She turned away so that no one should see how moved she was.

Ronno who had settled himself a little to one side in the snow suddenly sprang up. "I don't know what it is," he mumbled and gazed around.

Everyone grew watchful. "What is it?" they asked. "I don't know," Ronno repeated. "But I'm restless. I suddenly felt restless as if something were wrong." Karus was snuffing the air. "I don't smell anything strange," he declared.

They all stood still, listening and snuffing the air. "It's nothing, there's absolutely nothing to smell," they agreed one after another.

"Nevertheless," Ronno insisted, "you can say what you like, something is wrong."

Marena said, "The crows are calling."

"There they go calling again," Faline added quickly, but the others had already heard them.

"They are flying," said Karus and the others.

Everybody looked up. High above the tree-tops a flock of crows flapped by. They came from the farthest edge of the forest, the direction from which danger always came, and they were complaining to one another.

Apparently something unusual had happened.

"Wasn't I right?" asked Ronno. "You can see that something is happening."

"What shall we do?" Bambi's mother whispered anxiously.

"Let's get away," Aunt Ena urged in alarm.

"Wait," Ronno commanded.

"But the children," Aunt Ena replied, "the children. Gobo can't run."

"Go ahead," Ronno agreed, "go off with your children. I don't think there's any need for it, but I don't blame you for going." He was alert and serious.

"Come, Gobo. Come, Faline. Softly now, go slowly. And keep behind me," Aunt Ena warned them. She slipped away with the children.

Time passed. They stood still, listening and trembling.

"As if we hadn't suffered enough already," old Nettla began. "We still have this to go through..." She was very angry. Bambi looked at her, and he felt that she was thinking of something horrible.

Three or four magpies had already begun to chatter on the side of the thicket from which the crows had come.

"Look out! Look out, out, out!" they cried. The deer could not see them, but could hear them calling and warning each other. Sometimes one of them, and sometimes all of them together, would cry, "Look out, out, out!" Then they came nearer. They fluttered in terror from tree to tree, peered back and fluttered away again in fear and alarm.

"Akh!" cried the jays. They screamed their warning loudly.

Suddenly all the deer shrank together at once as though a blow had struck them. Then they stood still snuffing the air.

It was He.

A heavy wave of scent blew past. There was nothing they could do. The scent filled their nostrils, it numbed their senses and made their hearts stop beating.

The magpies were still chattering. The jays were still screaming overhead. In the woods around them everything had sprung to life. The tit-mice flitted through the branches, like tiny feathered balls, chirping, "Run! run!"

The blackbirds fled swiftly and darkly above them with long-drawn twittering cries. Through the dark tangle of bare bushes, they saw on the white snow a wild aimless scurrying of smaller, shadowy creatures. These were the pheasants. Then a flash of red streaked by. That was the fox. But no one was afraid of him now. For that fearful scent kept streaming on in a wider wave, sending terror into their hearts and uniting them all in

one mad fear, in a single feverish impulse to flee, to save themselves.

That mysterious overpowering scent filled the woods with such strength that they knew that this time He was not alone, but had come with many others, and there would be no end to the killing.

They did not move. They looked at the tit-mice, whisking away in a sudden flutter, at the blackbirds and the squirrels who dashed from tree-top to tree-top in mad bounds. They knew that all the little creatures on the ground had nothing to fear. But they understood their flight when they smelt Him, for no forest creature could bear His presence.

Presently Friend Hare hopped up. He hesitated, sat still and then hopped on again.

"What is it?" Karus called after him impatiently.

But Friend Hare only looked around with bewildered eyes and could not even speak. He was completely terrified.

"What's the use of asking?" said Ronno gloomily.

Friend Hare gasped for breath. "We are surrounded," he said in a lifeless voice. "We can't escape on any side. He is everywhere."

At the same instant they heard His voice. Twenty or thirty strong, He cried, "Ho! ho! Ha! ha!" It roared like the sound of winds and storms. He beat on the tree trunks as though they were drums. It was wracking and terrifying. A distant twisting and rending of parted bushes rang out. There was a snapping and cracking of broken boughs.

He was coming.

He was coming into the heart of the thicket.

Then short whistling flute-like trills sounded together with the loud flap of soaring wings. A pheasant rose from under His very feet. The deer heard the wing-beats of the pheasant grow fainter as he mounted into the air. There was a loud crash like thunder. Then silence. Then a dull thud on the ground.

"He is dead," said Bambi's mother, trembling.

"The first," Ronno added.

The young doe, Marena, said, "In this very hour many of us are going to die. Perhaps I shall be one of them." No one listened to her, for a mad terror had seized them all.

Bambi tried to think. But His savage noises grew louder and louder and paralyzed Bambi's senses. He heard nothing but those noises. They numbed him while amidst the howling, shouting and crashing he could hear his own heart pounding. He felt nothing but curiosity and did not even realize that he was trembling in every limb. From time to time his mother whispered in his ear, "Stay close to me." She was shouting, but in the uproar it sounded to Bambi as if she were whispering. Her "Stay close to me," encouraged him. It was like a chain holding him. Without it he would have rushed off senselessly, and he heard it at the very moment when his wits were wandering and he wanted to dash away. He looked around. All sorts of creatures were swarming past, scampering blindly over one another. A pair of weasels ran by like thin snake-like streaks. The eye

could scarcely follow them. A ferret listened as though bewitched to every shriek that desperate Friend Hare let out.

A fox was standing in a whole flurry of fluttering pheasants. They paid no attention to him. They ran right under his nose and he paid no attention to them.

Motionless, with his head thrust forward, he listened to the onrushing tumult, lifting his pointed ears and snuffed the air with his nose. Only his tail moved, slowly wagging with his intense concentration.

A pheasant dashed up. He had come from where the danger was worst, and was beside himself with fear.

"Don't try to fly," he shouted to the others. "Don't fly, just run! Don't lose your head! Don't try to fly! Just run, run, run!"

He kept repeating the same thing over and over again as though to encourage himself. But he no longer knew what he was saying.

"Ho! ho! ha! ha!" came the death cry from quite near apparently.

"Don't lose your head," screamed the pheasant. And at the same time his voice broke in a whistling gasp and, spreading his wings, he flew up with a loud whir. Bambi watched how he flew straight up, directly between the trees, beating his wings. The dark metallic blue and greenish-brown markings on his body gleamed like gold. His long tail feathers swept proudly behind him. A short crash like thunder sounded sharply. The pheasant suddenly crumpled up in mid-flight. He turned head over tail as though he wanted to catch his claws with

his beak, and then dropped violently to earth. He fell among the others and did not move again.

Then everyone lost his senses. They all rushed toward one another. Five or six pheasants rose at one time with a loud whir. "Don't fly," cried the rest and ran. The thunder cracked five or six times and more of the flying birds dropped lifeless to the ground.

"Come," said Bambi's mother. Bambi looked around. Ronno and Karus had already fled. Old Nettla was disappearing. Only Marena was still beside them. Bambi went with his mother, Marena following them timidly. All around them was a roaring and shouting, and the thunder was crashing. Bambi's mother was calm. She trembled quietly but she kept her wits together.

"Bambi, my child," she said, "keep behind me all the time. We'll have to get out of here and across the open place. But now we'll go slowly."

The din was maddening. The thunder crashed ten, twelve times as He hurled it from His hands.

"Watch out," said Bambi's mother. "Don't run. But when we have to cross the open place, run as fast as you can. And don't forget, Bambi, my child, don't pay any attention to me when we get out there. Even if I fall, don't pay any attention to me, just keep on running. Do you understand, Bambi?"

His mother walked carefully step by step amidst the uproar. The pheasants were running up and down, burying themselves in the snow. Suddenly they would spring out and begin to run again. The whole Hare family was hopping to and fro, squatting down and then

hopping again. No one said a word. They were all spent with terror and numbed by the din and thunderclaps. It grew lighter in front of Bambi and his mother. The clearing showed through the bushes. Behind them the terrifying drumming on the tree trunks came crashing nearer and nearer. The breaking branches snapped.

There was a roaring of "Ha, ha! Ho, ho!"

Then Friend Hare and two of his cousins rushed past them across the clearing. Bing! Ping! Bang! roared the thunder. Bambi saw how Friend Hare struck an elder in the middle of his flight and lay with his white belly turned upward. He quivered a little and then was still. Bambi stood petrified. But from behind him came the cry, "Here they are! Run! Run!"

There was a loud clapping of wings suddenly opened. There were gasps, sobs, showers of feathers, flutterings. The pheasants took wing and the whole flock rose almost at one instant. The air was throbbing with repeated thunderclaps and the dull thuds of the fallen and the high, piercing shrieks of those who had escaped.

Bambi heard steps and looked behind him. He was there. He came bursting through the bushes on all sides. He sprang up everywhere, struck about him, beat the bushes, drummed on the tree trunks and shouted with a fiendish voice.

"Now," said Bambi's mother. "Get away from here. And don't stay too close to me." She was off with a bound that barely skimmed the snow. Bambi rushed out after her. The thunder crashed around them on all sides. It

seemed as if the earth would split in half. Bambi saw nothing. He kept running. A growing desire to get away from the tumult and out of reach of that scent which seemed to strangle him, the growing impulse to flee, the longing to save himself were loosed in him at last. He ran. It seemed to him as if he saw his mother hit but he did not know if it was really she or not. He felt a film come over his eyes from fear of the thunder crashing behind him. It had gripped him completely at last. He could think of nothing or see nothing around him. He kept running.

The open space was crossed. Another thicket took him in. The hue and cry still rang behind him. The sharp reports still thundered. And in the branches above him there was a light pattering like the first fall of hail. Then it grew quieter. Bambi kept running.

A dying pheasant, with its neck twisted, lay on the snow, beating feebly with its wings. When he heard Bambi coming he ceased his convulsive movements and whispered: "It's all over with me." Bambi paid no attention to him and ran on.

A tangle of bushes he blundered into forced him to slacken his pace and look for a path. He pawed the ground impatiently with his hoofs. "This way!" called someone with a gasping voice. Bambi obeyed involuntarily and found an opening at once. Someone moved feebly in front of him. It was Friend Hare's wife who had called.

"Can you help me a little?" she said. Bambi looked at her and shuddered. Her hind leg dangled lifelessly in

the snow, dyeing it red and melting it with warm, oozing blood. "Can you help me a little?" she repeated. She spoke as if she were well and whole, almost as if she were happy. "I don't know what can have happened to me," she went on. "There's really no sense to it, but I just can't seem to walk...."

In the middle of her words she rolled over on her side and died. Bambi was seized with horror again and ran. "Bambi!"

He stopped with a jolt. A deer was calling him. Again he heard the cry. "Is that you, Bambi?"

Bambi saw Gobo floundering helplessly in the snow. All his strength was gone; he could no longer stand on his feet. He lay there half buried and lifted his head feebly. Bambi went up to him excitedly.

"Where's your mother, Gobo?" he asked, gasping for breath. "Where's Faline?" Bambi spoke quickly and impatiently. Terror still gripped his heart.

"Mother and Faline had to go on," Gobo answered resignedly. He spoke softly, but as seriously and as well as a grown deer. "They had to leave me here. I fell down. You must go on, too, Bambi."

"Get up," cried Bambi. "Get up, Gobo! You've rested long enough. There's not a minute to lose now. Get up and come with me!"

"No, leave me," Gobo answered quietly. "I can't stand up. It's impossible. I'd like to, but I'm too weak."

"What will happen to you?" Bambi persisted.

"I don't know. Probably I'll die," said Gobo simply.

The uproar began again and re-echoed. New crashes of thunder followed. Bambi shrank together. Suddenly a branch snapped. Young Karus pounded swiftly through the snow, galloping ahead of the din.

"Run," he called when he saw Bambi. "Don't stand there if you can run!" He was gone in a flash and his headlong flight carried Bambi along with it. Bambi was hardly aware that he had begun to run again and only after an interval did he say, "Good-bye, Gobo." But he was already too far away. Gobo could no longer hear him.



He ran till nightfall through the woods that was filled with shouting and thunder. As darkness closed in, it grew quiet. Soon a light wind carried away the horrible scent that spread everywhere. But the excitement remained.

The first friend whom Bambi saw again was Ronno. He was limping more than ever.

"Over in the oak grove the fox has a burning fever from his wound," Ronno said. "I just passed him. He's suffering terribly. He keeps biting the snow and the ground."

"Have you seen my mother?" asked Bambi.

"No," answered Ronno evasively, and walked quickly away.

Later during the night Bambi met old Nettla with Faline. All three were delighted to meet.

"Have you seen my mother?" asked Bambi.

"No," Faline answered. "I don't even know where my own mother is."

"Well," said old Nettla cheerfully. "Here's a nice mess. I was so glad that I didn't have to bother with children any more and now I have to look after two at once. I'm heartily grateful."

Bambi and Faline laughed.

They talked about Gobo. Bambi told how he had found him, and they grew so sad they began to cry. But old Nettla would not have them crying. "Before everything else you have got to get something to eat. I never heard of such a thing. You haven't had a bite to eat this livelong day!"

She led them to places where there were still a few leaves that had not completely withered. Old Nettla was wonderfully gentle. She ate nothing herself, but made Bambi and Faline eat heartily. She pawed away the snow from the grassy spots and ordered them to eat with, "The grass is good here." Or else she would say, "No, wait. We'll find something better farther on." But between whiles she would grumble. "It's perfectly ridiculous the trouble children give you."

Suddenly they saw Aunt Ena coming and rushed towards her. "Aunt Ena," cried Bambi. He had seen her first. Faline was beside herself with joy and bounded around her. "Mother," she cried. But Ena was weeping and nearly dead from exhaustion.

"Gobo is gone," she cried. "I've looked for him. I went to the little place where he lay when he broke down in the snow ... there was nothing there ... he is gone ... my poor little Gobo..."

Old Nettla grumbled, "If you had looked for his tracks it would have been more sensible than crying," she said.

"There weren't any tracks," said Aunt Ena. "But ... His ... tracks were there. He found Gobo."

She was silent. Then Bambi asked despondently, "Aunt Ena, have you seen my mother?"

"No," answered Aunt Ena gently.

Bambi never saw his mother again.