

The
POLITY
of
BEASTS

RENALD IACOVELLI



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*Though you drive Nature out with a pitchfork,
she will still find her way back.*

—Horace



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I

The Eagle and His Plan

Once upon a time, in a place far, far away, in a forest that was one of many, there was an eagle who liked to fly about for the sake of doing so. That in itself pretty much cast him into suspicion with his own kind, who of course never flew but for reasons they regarded as legitimate, such as hunting, looking for a mate, or gathering nesting materials. Whenever the other eagles asked him the reason for his peculiar behavior (and they never asked but in disapproving tones), he would only shrug his shoulders and embarrassedly looked away.

Yet he had not always been so reticent about his motives. There had been a time when he had answered the question forthrightly and to the best of his ability; when, articulate eagle that he was, he had even answered at length and with pride; but whenever he had done so, it had become apparent that his auditors really didn't understand him. They would regard him with tilted heads, unblinking eyes, and contracted brows, and he could see that his attempts to explain were only confirming their worst suspicions about him, whatever those suspicions happened to be. And so he had quite given up on explaining. But if he had been willing to explain himself again, this is what he would have said: That while flying very high, and so no longer distracted by the goings on of the forest, he was able to think and feel more clearly and intensely. Up there, above all the clouds and close, it seemed, to the very sun, his mind clarified and he seemed endowed with a purer consciousness, so that he was able to see into the depths of matters previously obscure, or would see the importance of subjects that had before never occurred to him. And sometimes he soared aloft simply for the sake of witnessing the beautiful. It never ceased to puzzle him why the other birds, much less the other eagles, never took it into their heads to rise up to those great heights

where so much beauty was. For nothing could be lovelier than when rain clouds came thick and low over the land, and one rose above them and flew in that enchanted space carpeted below by an expanse of puffy white and vaulted above by the purest, most crystalline blue. To be within such an ensorcelled place—so quiet, so clear, so bright—was breathtaking, and his eagle eyes would open wide as though to take in every bit of its magnificence. But whenever he had tried to relate the wonder of this experience to the other eagles, they had only looked at him with a blank expression, obviously regarding such escapades as pointless and so many proofs of his good-for-nothingness. Better to be running down a squirrel, they told him. Of one thing there was no doubt: while on his highest flights—those in which he had strained his wings and panted for breath—he had been able to see the forest as it really was, that is to say, as a whole, as a definite, circumscribed topographical entity, surrounded by quite different and in some instances hostile terrain. That was something which the other animals never seemed to understand. So far as they knew or cared, the forest went on forever and ever, could never change, and would be till the end of time an inexhaustible reservoir of life.

It happened that during one such exalted flight the eagle, in looking down, seeing the forest, and considering in their totality the lives of the animals who lived there, was struck by the complete symbiosis of their existence. The lives of every species was intertwined with the lives of its neighbors. And from an even more distant, more objective view, he saw that their lives, however different in particulars, shared certain fundamental aspects. Foremost among these was the struggle for survival. They all spent their days scrounging for food, fighting one another for mates, or expending enormous amounts of time looking for building materials. They shivered for the cold in winter, panted for the heat in summer, or were swept away altogether by natural disasters; and all that was in addition to the peril of human hunters, who not infrequently showed up and took pot shots at everyone. As though all this weren't bad enough, the animals made things worse by their constant bickering, skirmishing, and mutual fears and hatreds.

They were always engaged in territorial disputes; always fighting over who was going to eat this or that fruit, or drink at this or that moment; and at least half of them spent all their time trying to kill the other half for supper. Well, perhaps there was nothing to be done about the age-old cycle of predator and prey, but the eagle could not help feeling that there must be a way to make the general existence a little easier. What if some kind of rule could be established—some kind of law and order that would nurture what was best and repress what was worst? What if the strength of every species could be used for the benefit of every other—if the weak could help the strong, the keen-sighted the purblind, the acute of hearing the nearly deaf? What if every mole could help every fox, every hawk help every squirrel, and every frog and mouse and bat help every deer and snake and rat? Why, even in the matter of predatory instinct it was perhaps possible to make arrangements that would, with only a little inconvenience to certain species, make this one forest a haven of safety and a model of happy existence. And then at least one small section of the earth would be a place in which life was not merely series of wants to be satisfied, but a joy to be thankful for.

The eagle felt that he had hit upon an excitingly original idea. He even emitted a great joyous screech and he thrilled at the prospect of delivering his message to his fellow animals. Oh, how happy they would be when they heard about his plan! They would thank him for ever and ever! Banking to the left, he drew in his wings, pointed his head downward, and fell back toward earth with such speed that he kept his eyes squinted against the tremendous rush of air. In only a few minutes he was sweeping over the treetops at great speed, calling out that he had an announcement to make and wanted everyone to assemble in a certain large clearing located in the center of the forest. Everyone must come and hear what he had to say, he announced—it was important, important! As he broadcast this unprecedented message, the animals on the ground or in the trees looked up at him and wondered what on earth he was making such a ruckus about. Nearly all the groundlings even considered him impertinent: after all, what could an eagle possibly have to say to a mouse or a squirrel? Ridiculous!

Furthermore, they all knew about the questionable reputation of this eagle. More than once had they heard rumors of his odd behavior and so were further inclined to pass off his rather hysterical calls as a fit of the brain-fever everyone had expected him to be one day affected with. However much the animals shook their heads with disdain or mumbled some brusque imprecation against him, it happened that in just a few hours hundreds of animals had shown up at the designated place. Perhaps they came out of curiosity, or because their more adventurous friends had dragged them along; perhaps they had come in order to mock, or to see others mock; or perhaps they had come, quite simply, because their lives had become so routine that they were unable to resist the temptation of novelty. Even if the eagle had finally flipped his lid and was going to say something crazy—well, even that might be amusing and at least would be something to talk about afterwards. Thus it was that the clearing, on that late afternoon day, was crowded with a representatives of most of the species in the forest.

The eagle himself arrived late and somewhat flustered; he was exhausted from the exertion of making his announcement, and his feathers were ruffled from all the flying he had done. He perched atop a birch tree in the middle of the assembly and sighed with relief. But the relief soon turned to bewilderment when he looked about him, for even now the animals were anything but polite and peaceable. Each species had huddled into its own little group and regarded the other with suspicion, loathing, or, at best, the coolest tolerance. The mice leered at the weasels; the rats stuck up their noses at the mice; the hawks and owls stared murderously at the squirrels; the beavers were already tiffing with the skunks, and the raccoons were baring their teeth at the opossums. The frogs, who composed a little green mass beside a rotting bole, began hopping about furiously merely at the sight of the snakes, who, however, thankfully, were some yards away and separated by a contingent of porcupines and box turtles. The only animals who seemed to be composed at all were the wild boars and the deer, and even they, where they met, gave one another little kicks and butts. And so from the clearing there arose a rumor

of conflicting animal voices: a discord of grunts, groans, wheezes, squeals, squawks, screeches, and shrill whistles. As he stood in the middle of it all, the eagle could not help feeling a shudder of hopelessness at such universal, essential, indefatigable conflict. Nevertheless, he raised up his wings and held them high above his head: held them up there as he screeched as loudly as his somewhat hoarse voice would allow: getting, little by little, the attention of the animals, who, one by one, group by group, left off their disputes; till silence, as though in concentric, ever-widening rings, reached the outermost limit of the congregation, and in a few minutes all was an expectant hush.

“Good afternoon!” the eagle began, bowing this way and that by way of introduction, and trying to seem at ease, though in fact he was rather nervous and his mouth was a little dry. “I’m glad so many of you were kind enough to attend! I called you all here today because I wanted to discuss our forest with you. Perhaps I should start by saying that I was doing some flying this morning, as I usually do, and got up especially high. You animals who don’t fly may not know this, but if you get up high enough you can see that our forest has definite boundaries. I don’t know exactly how many miles across it is at any one point, but I do know that it doesn’t go on forever as some of you seem to think. It really does end, and there are little patches of woods and human farms around it, and beyond those are still greater stretches of land: for instance, to the south lies a hot, barren, region where there’s hardly any water or trees; to the east are arid savannahs stretching for endless miles; to the west there are hilly regions where the only plant life consists of tall, spiny cacti; and as for the north, it’s generally cold up there and in the winter everything turns to snow and ice and hardly anything can live. Of course, these areas don’t go on forever either, and beyond them there are probably forests as big as this one, and I hope one day to fly far enough to see a few of them. (A few of the eagles rolled their eyes, and thought: “What a braggart he is!”) Anyway, while flying around this morning I started thinking about how we animals live and how we’re all basically the same and suffer from the same problems. For instance, a lot of us are hungry in the winter, or lack a

good water supply, or have to run for our lives when human hunters show up, or have border disputes with one another—things like that. It occurred to me this morning that there's no reason why we have to live that way. We could probably solve most of our problems if each species would use its talents and abilities to help others. For instance, take the moles," the eagle said, turning to that section of the clearing where the moles were just sticking their heads up from the ground in order to hear the proceedings. "Everyone knows that sometimes it's hard to find water in the winter when the river freezes, right? But if the moles would be willing to dig a tunnel from the stream bed to some place that could be sheltered from the icy air—well, then we would have a steady supply of drinkable water. We could have the beavers," he said, turning to that species, "construct a shelter over the artificial watering hole. While they're building it, and in return for their services, the other animals could help provide them with food. And take another problem: hunters. Every one of you groundlings has to worry about them, especially in the autumn. But what if the magpies and crows could be organized into a lookout network that would warn you about any hunters when they enter the forest, and where? That would give you all plenty of time to hide. We could have the same kind of warning system for traps. The smaller animals could go on patrols in order to find out where they are and inform the larger animals about their location. For instance, the mice and the snakes might form trap-patrols—"

"Now wait just one minute!" a little voice called out. The voice came from the cluster of mice sitting up on their hind legs at the edge of the clearing. From among them one little, skinny, nervous-looking mouse had jumped forward, his pink nose twitching with excitement. "If you think any of us are going on any patrols with a snake, then you really must be nuts! If you really want to help us, why don't you and a few hawks and owls get together and clear out those filthy snakes once and for all!"

"It doesn't have to be a mouse and snake patrol," the eagle returned with some exasperation. "I only used it as an example of helping one another. It could be any combination of animals.

In fact, it doesn't even have to be a combination—it could be just the mice, or just the snakes, or just the frogs—or anybody. The point is not who does it, but that it gets done and helps a species that isn't able to help itself."

"Look who's talking about helping!" This too was a rather high, squeaky voice, and all eyes turned in amazement to the gathering of squirrels, from among whom stepped forth a young female. Her bushy tail was quivering with anger and she had even balled up one of her delicate little paws into a fist, which she held up high and shook. "It was one of you eagles that ate one of my babies! You swooped right down in my nest and tore it apart and grabbed up my precious darling in your big ugly hooked beaks! You're filthy slime, all of you! You ought to be ashamed of yourselves!—ashamed and disgusted! You're all horrible, ugly, ruthless, mean, despicable monsters!"

There was some applause at the end of this outburst—nearly all of it from the squirrels, mice, rats, frogs, and other tiny creatures who had, at one time or another, seen their kind set upon by a bird of prey. The weasels, hawks, owls, and other predators remained disdainfully silent.

"My dear, dear squirrel," the eagle said, shaking his head and speaking in a becalming, reasonable tone of voice, "I sympathize with your loss. I agree, it must have been terrible. But I was not the eagle who took your baby. It just so happens that I've been a vegetarian now for almost a year. You can't imagine how difficult the adjustment has been for me, and I won't say that I haven't been tempted by a few chipmunks now and then, but I haven't—I swear to you—so much as tasted anything other than berries and nuts since last summer." (At this disclosure the other eagles, and the hawks and owls too, shook their heads and frowned.) "An eagle ate your baby? Well, I'm sorry. What else do you want me to say? You know as well as I do that the eagle who did it probably had her own hatchlings to feed or was herself hungry. What would you expect her to do? That's just the way it is. If you had been in her place, you would have done the same thing; you wouldn't have been able to help yourself. We all," the eagle said, looking up at the animals in general, "we all have to try to understand one another. We have to stop being so subjective about things.

It seems to me that half the problems in the forest could be solved at once if we would only put ourselves in other animals' places. If we make an attempt to get to know each other, to help each other, then maybe we wouldn't be so eager to eat each other! What we need is to stop looking at our lives in the same old way."

The animals cast long glances at one another, each species doubtfully wondering if the other could be so large-minded as the eagle had proposed.

"Just take a look at yourselves!" the eagle continued, speaking now in a tone of voice that was half disdainful, half pitiful. "You're all no better off now than your ancestors were a thousand years ago. Hasn't that ever occurred to any of you? Haven't you ever asked yourselves how your lives are any different from those of your parents, and their parents, and theirs? Haven't you ever wondered why things have never gotten any better? We're doing the same things they did—have the same problems they had—and unless we want our children, and our children's children, to inherit our problems, we have to make a change. Now," the eagle said, with a definitive shake of his head, for he saw by the way that some of the animals looked down thoughtfully that his reasoning had made an impression on them, "you can go on spending all your lives struggling to survive from day to day like a bunch of rats—no offense to the rat community!—or you can finally take hold of matters and try to make them better. But it's not going to happen by itself, and it's not going to happen so long as your only concern is yourselves and the taking advantage of another species. It's also, I might add, not going to happen unless you make a few sacrifices. None of us likes to make sacrifices. I understand that; it's only animal nature. But sometimes a sacrifice is just the inverse face of an advantage you can't yet see: for instance giving up your time for the welfare of other animals, even when you don't happen to like those other animals. But in return one day they might be able to help you in a way that will ensure your very survival! Isn't that worth a little sacrifice, a little compromise, a little restraint of interspecies suspicion and negativity? Of course it is! In order to get along with one another, we're going to have to learn how

to compromise. Compromise!—that's the name of the game. No one's going to get everything he wants; on the other hand, everyone will get something he didn't have before and which he needs, and I'm confident that in the end most of us would benefit from that system. In short, we have to have some kind of government among ourselves."

Just then from among a thicket of briars hopped forth a chubby rabbit. His long ears were sticking almost straight up with anxiety, for he was not used to showing himself so publicly. He placed his forelegs on a thick, fallen oak branch, raised his head, and piped up: "May I say something?"

"Yes, rabbit, you have a comment?" asked the eagle, recognizing him.

"First of all," the rabbit said, "it seems to me that the premier role of any government is to guarantee the safety of its members. But what can you possibly do that would stop the carnivores from eating us? I think I speak for all the rabbits when I say that there's no government you could possibly come up with that would make our lives any better or safer. Or are you trying to tell us that from now on you and the rest of your carnivore friends are going to be decent animals, like us rabbits, and live on grass and berries?"

All of the groundlings squeaked or wheezed or clapped their approval of this protest; indeed, the vegetarians in general seemed to find in this rabbit's words the exact articulation of their deepest misgivings. The rest of the animals looked at one another with air of satisfied amusement, for the point raised seemed indeed to be thornily insuperable, and they looked forward to the eagle's discomfiture. But the eagle seemed to be unfazed by what he had heard.

"I don't pretend," he said, in a very reasonable tone of voice, "to tell you rabbits or any other small animals that the predators are going to stop eating flesh. That would be absurd—that would be a lie. In fact, it would as absurd in you to expect the carnivores to become vegetarians as it would be in the plants—if they could think—to expect you vegetarians to stop eating them. Carnivores are carnivores, and that's just the way it is. However, even in this matter I believe we can make progress. Perhaps we could convince the predators to do their

hunting only during specific times and in specific area. Or maybe we could go even further and ask the predators to hunt in some other woodland or forest. That would certainly be inconvenient, and in some cases it would require a great effort, but at least it would evince goodwill and promote interspecies harmony in this forest, and after all this is the place where we all have to live together.”

“Why do we have to make an effort at all?” asked an owl, who had been sitting in the darkened recess of a nearby pine tree but who now fluttered to an outer branch and came into clear view of all. “You talk about hunting somewhere else, but I can tell you right now that the mice around here taste pretty good.”

“You scoundrel!” screamed the mice. “You filthy scoundrel! Why don’t you come down here now, where we can get at you! That’s right, c’mon down! You like to attack us when we’re alone and not expecting you, but why don’t you try it now when we’re all here and can see you coming? We’d love to get our front teeth into you and nibble out those bug eyes of yours! Why, you dirty, sonofa—!”

“Mice, mice please!” the eagle said, calming them down; and turning to the owl: “That’s just the kind of thing I’m trying to tell you we have to stop! What’s wrong with you? You know as well as I do that most of the time you’re flying around as hungry as ever. Besides, what about when you get a little older, eh? What about when your eyes get a little weaker, and you don’t see so well at night—eh? You know what’s going to happen? I’ll tell you, because I’ve seen it happen to a lot of owls: you’re going to starve to death, that’s what. You’re going to sit there in a tree growing weaker and weaker till you keel over like a dried-up pine cone. Is that what you want?”

The owl made no answer; she merely shrugged; she was a stolid owl.

“Do you see what I mean?” called out the mouse, with an air of vindication.

“I do, yes,” the eagle replied. “However, the owl and those who think like her don’t realize that they have a lot more to gain by not eating you than otherwise. Did it ever occur to you, owl,” the eagle said, again turning to that creature, “that the

mice could be of great service to you? After all, you're not without your enemies either. If I'm not mistaken, your nests are often raided by the snakes. But what if the mice could set up an outpost at the base of your tree in order to warn you about any snake that happens to come by?"

The owl leaned back somewhat and hesitated to answer, so favorably surprised was she with the idea. She was about to say something when a hissing voice called out:

"Now wait one minute!"

The animals looked about in order to see the source of this vociferous objection. There was a shudder of leaves and loam around the base of a tree only twenty feet away from the one in which the owl was sitting, and then up popped the head of a snake. She was certainly a beautiful creature, if one could be objective enough to regard merely her scaly coat, for this was by turns coppery and blue, with specks of red and gold, and shimmered iridescently. Her eyes were as red as two shiny garnets. When she oozed up out of the ground and slithered forth, the mice, though quite a distance away from her, could not help pulling back instinctively, as did the frogs and rats. Even the owl flinched and seemed to maintain her perch only by a conscious act of will, only because she did not want to seem cowardly before her peers.

"You wanted to say something, snake?" the eagle asked, in what the other animals recognized as an admirable show of goodwill, for it was well known that snakes were frequent raiders of eagles' nests.

"I certainly would!" the snake said, raising up the forepart of its body in what was, given the general air of fear and hostility toward it, a magnificent show of bravado. "If the idea of setting up a government among us animals is only to set up little warning systems against each other's instinctual behaviors, then you can count us snakes out, since every little animal in the forest will be out to thwart our attempts to feed ourselves and our young. We know that most of you don't like us snakes and that, given half the chance, you'd drive us out of the forest altogether. But we live here too; we have as much a right to be here as any of you! And you mice," the snake said, turning toward that group, "should realize that if you didn't

have us to contend with, you'd still have the owls and even the eagles to worry about, not to mention the weasels and the raccoons."

"But you don't have to come after my eggs!" shouted one of the hawks, who had been listening with rising impatience.

"Or us mice!" squeaked the mouse.

"Or us frogs!" burped that species.

And a raccoon yelled out: "One of you bit my sister!"

"Oh-ho!" the snake returned, knowingly, contemptuously, and looked up to the eagle with especial defiance. "See what I mean? I'm not supposed to eat anybody that I can eat, is that it? Well, my friend, let me tell you that if that's your idea of a government, I, for one, don't intend to join in. I'm a snake—I can't help being what I am!"

The snake gave an angry hiss, and seemed about to slither away in a huff, when another voice, this time smooth and silky, came from a distant quarter of the gathering, saying:

"One moment, please! One moment, please!"

The voice had come from behind a bank of thick brush, which now began to shudder and shake as the creature who had been hiding behind it made his way through it. Everyone waited to see who it was, and a rumor of amazement went up when it turned out to be a fox. The boars and all of the rodents seemed especially disturbed and nervous, for most of them knew firsthand how dangerous a fox could be. And yet, at the moment anyway, his demeanor was not that of the sly and watchful predator, but rather that of an outgoing, perkily naive fellow creature who just wanted to have his opinion heard as well as possible. He trotted forthrightly toward the center of the clearing, the animals making a way for him as he did so. He stopped just under the tree in which the eagle was perched.

Few of the animals had ever seen this fox so closely and clearly before, and they could not help being impressed with him. He had a beautiful, compact body, held high off the ground with well-proportioned hind legs and straight, tapering forelegs. His fur was a rich chestnut color, with darker markings on his breast and along his back; and his bushy tail, which made up nearly a third of his length, was of fur so fine and silky that the merest puff of air made it sway. His head

was marvelously triangular, with two large, upraised ears on either side. His snout, jutting forth with sharp pride, sprouted dashing and somewhat impertinent whiskers, and ended in a severely proper black dot of a nose. Most engaging of all perhaps were his eyes: sparkling, wide-open, intelligent: they seemed to look right through you.

With his head erect and his tail stretched forth like a banner, he looked this way and that with a grand air of approval, as though he himself had only now become aware of how pleased he was to see his fellow animals. It was a magnificent show of self-possession, a fine example of how a relatively small animal could make himself appear to be larger than he was. When he spoke, his words came out with an easy yet perfect enunciation, and the tone of his voice was bell-like.

“My fellow animals!” he began, “may I address you just for a few moments? First of all, allow me to say what an extraordinary day this is for all of us. Never before in the history of us animals have we come together even this far. In a real sense, we’ve already made progress, and I think we ought to congratulate the eagle here”—he looked up deferentially to the eagle and gave something of a bow—“for having accomplished this. He’s come up with a pretty good idea, in my opinion: indeed, it’s brilliant. And yet, as our friend the snake has pointed out”—with a nod of recognition toward that creature—“no matter what form of government we dare to propose for ourselves, there are bound to be arrangements that will be unacceptable to some of us. Now, what does that mean? It means that we will never get anywhere so long as we try to formulate the finer points of our government in a group such as this one. Any attempt to do so can only result in squabbling and recrimination, in hostile partisanship that would obstruct all progress toward generally beneficial resolves. What we need is a strong, impartial central authority: someone who will regard the needs of every species dispassionately and fairly, and pass rules we can all adhere to. In short, we’re going to have to elect a Head Animal—a Leader—a President, if you will.”

“A President?” asked many voices. Animal looked to animal, as though for clarification of this concept. Many animals took

a step forward as though to better hear what the fox meant by this strange proposition.

“Yes, a President. Someone who really cares about all of us animals. Someone who will take into consideration the needs of every group, and arrive at the best decisions for all concerned. Someone who won’t play favorites.”

“And who is going to be this President?” croaked one of the frogs.

“Why don’t we all take turns?” asked one of the raccoons.

“Good idea,” said one of the deer. “We’ll start with a deer.”

“I say we start with a rabbit!” exclaimed one of the rabbits.

“No, no—we start with a hawk!” said one of the hawks; and, as though to show his impartiality, the hawk added: “We can change every other month.”

“I’m afraid that won’t work, hawk,” said the fox, shaking his head. “If we have a different animal every month, we’d have new rules just as often, and pretty soon nobody would follow the rules at all. Besides, let’s be realistic: a lot of animals would just use the power to suit their own ends. No, we need a President who is truly impartial and has the best interests of all the animals in mind.”

“And which animal is that supposed to be?” asked the eagle; and if there was an edge of sarcasm in his voice, it was because he had anticipated the fox as nominating himself for that high office.

“There’s only one way to find out,” replied the fox. “We’ll hold an election. All the animals will vote. We will all have a share in electing our leader.”

The eagle nodded to himself. “That’s not a bad idea, fox,” he said.

“Thank you,” the fox said.

“I have a better idea!” a grunting voice called out. It was one of the boars. He was a middle-aged boar, and his expression and manner were that of stern determination. He stood up on his plump hind legs and, through sheer force of will or dire enthusiasm, balanced himself thereupon as he shouted at the top of his lungs. “What we really need in this forest,” he said, “is a little more faith in Big Boar! If we would only listen to the instructions of Big Boar, we could all live happily ever

after!”

Big Boar? What on earth was Big Boar? The other animals murmured the question among themselves. But the boar was about to give everyone the answer.

“As you all should know,” the boar continued, speaking now with a voice that held one’s attention by the very unshakable authority of its tone, “in the beginning, there was nothing in the whole world but a Big Boar. He made everything we see: the trees, the grass, the water, the sky—everything. Big Boar put us boars here to use whatever we needed and do whatever we wanted. He told us to eat all we wanted and to raise up all the litters we could. He gave us laws about how to conduct ourselves. We boars have been trying to teach you other animals these lessons for years, but you never listened to us. But the fact is that no government an animal can set up is ever going to be as good as the government that was handed down to us by Big Boar. Only through Big Boar can one ever get to the Great Berry Fields.”

“Great Berry Fields?” the other animals asked one another, shaking their heads and shrugging their shoulders. “What’s that crazy boar talking about?”

“Look,” one of the frogs said, “if you boars want to believe in a Big Boar—well, that’s your business, but that doesn’t give you the right to force your opinions on the rest of us. Us frogs happen to think you’re all out of your minds, since, if anything, the world was made by a Big Frog, not a Big Boar!”

“Not a Big Boar or a Big Frog,” a turtle called out. “It was a Big Turtle! With a bright yellow shell!”

“Big Turtle? That’s a laugh! It was a Big Rat!” Of course, it was one of the more pious rats who had spoken.

“Rat?” asked one of the quails. “You rats must be as crazy as the boars! Everyone knows it was a Big Quail—a big gray quail with beautiful speckled tail feathers, and when he said ‘Woooo Woooo Woooo’ in his beautiful voice all the flowers dropped their seeds, and every plant bent low their branches laden with fruit, and the bumblebees sang.”

—At which not a few of the animals simply laughed in the quail’s face.

In a few more seconds, each species was loudly shouting out

its spiritual beliefs so that the assembly had once again degenerated into a cawing, squealing, wheezing, mewling, growling multitude of animals who were growing angrier by the moment. Aspersions, insults, sarcasms, and vitriol of all kinds flew hither and yon, and in some places individuals got physical and scratched and nipped at one another. But the volume of these accumulated arguments had no sooner reached a climax than it started to lessen: for one by one the animals realized that they were all spouting basically the same belief, only with such variations as would make their species seem superior to every other. Even those who had been most fanatically vociferating their belief began falling silent and casting their eyes down, having suddenly realized the ubiquity of the Big Animal theme, and of how self-serving their own version of it was.

The eagle, shaking his head, looked about with exasperation. "I think it ought to be clear," he said, "that we're never going to get anywhere by taking that tack. Our personal beliefs are only good for ourselves and we can no more expect other species to agree to them than they can expect us to agree to theirs. So let's just leave off with all that talk about Big Boar, and Big Rat, and Big Whatever Else. But it seems to me that the fox might have come up with a good idea. Perhaps we really do need a strong central authority, a President. It's only a question of selecting candidates and voting for one of them."

Just then the boars grunted: "Let one of the candidates be a boar!"

And the skunks snorted: "Let one of them be a skunk!"

And the raccoons squealed: "Let one of them be a raccoon!"

And the deer yelped: "But one of them must be a deer!"

And the turtles whispered (for turtles have very low voices): "There absolutely must be a turtle!"

And on and on, till every species was clamoring that one of its own be a candidate; and once again the squawking and squealing and piping and mewling grew to such a pitch that the whole clearing was engulfed in an indecipherable, unintelligible rumor. The fox stood up on his hind legs and called for order, and when this didn't work, the eagle, in order to help out the fox, flew up into the sky and dive-bombed toward each part of

the congregation, screeching, as he came close to the animals, "Shut up! Shut up! Shut up!"—till once more (but this time begrudgingly and tentatively) the assembly had quieted down.

The fox raised his face to the eagle, who resumed his perch with an air of frustration, and loudly thanked him. It was remarkable how he had seemed to take away from the eagle a great deal of authority over these proceedings, and of how willing the eagle had been to relinquish it.

"My fellow animals," the fox announced, "I propose that we do the following: Let us spend the next few days deciding what candidates will run for the office of President. Once the candidates have been announced, then the process of electing one of them can begin. They can campaign and make their case for the Presidency. Is that fair enough?"

All of the animals expressed their approval, mostly by nods and low murmurs.

"Good," said the fox. "And before I go, I would personally like to thank you all for having heard me out. I would only like to add that I before I came out here to address you I made a point of hiding behind those bushes because I didn't want to startle anybody. Contrary to what some of you might think, I've always been conscientious about the sensibilities of my fellow animals. The last thing I wanted to do was just pop right out and give anyone a scare. Let me also say that it's been a great pleasure to me finally to meet many of you face to face, as it were. Your graciousness has touched me. I will never forget it! Thank you all!"

The fox strode away to the accompaniment of various approving murmurs and nods. A few animals even clapped. His charming, respectful manner had aroused admiration even in those species who had a legitimate reason to think the worst of him. He trotted away from the clearing with, again, his head and bushy tail held high, as though in pride at having nothing to hide. He made a line straight for the weasels, stopping before one of them and saying quickly and confidentially:

"I need to speak with you."

"About what?"

"About choosing a President. But I can't talk here. Come to my lair later on. I'll be waiting for you." And he added,

with a strange emphasis: “Don’t worry, it isn’t a trick. I won’t hurt you. Come and see me. It’s important.”

And with that, the fox trotted off into the brush.

II

Making Alliances

If the weasel considered a long time before actually venturing to visit the fox, it was because he could not but consider such an invitation with suspicion. He knew the fox somewhat from having occasionally run into him while on hunting expeditions, but these rare meetings had hardly constituted friendly intercourse. On the contrary, at such times the weasel had felt it necessary to watch his back lest the fox pounce upon him and tear him to shreds for dinner. Who knew but that the invitation to come to his lair was some kind of trick? On the other hand, the weasel could not help recalling the fox's demeanor, which had been not so cunning as confiding: less that of a potential killer than of a hopeful accomplice. Thus, the weasel decided to give the fox the benefit of the doubt, telling himself, however, that he would be very careful.

It was nightfall when the weasel arrived at the fox's lair, which was built into one of the vine-clad embankments along the forest's stream. The fox welcomed his visitor inside and bade him make himself comfortable. The weasel tried to appear calm as, in the dimness of the place, he sat on his rump with his forelegs legs stretched out before him. However, he was careful to remain beside the entrance in case he should have to escape at a moment's notice.

But the fox was all smiles and warm invitation, and, as though he sensed the weasel's discomfort, he kept as far away from his visitor as space would allow. Lying on his belly, he had delicately crossed his forepaws and had drawn up his bushy tail close to his left side, now and then curling the dark-pointed tip of it.

"Well, I'm glad you decided to come by!" the fox said. And he really was delighted, for he had anticipated the weasel's uncertainty about accepting the invitation. "Hope you found my

lair all right?"

"Oh, yes, no problem at all," the weasel replied; and added, "We all know where you live."

There seemed to be a tacit insult in that, but the fox let it pass without remark. He had more important things on his mind. In a mild and cheerful vein, he continued, "Good, glad you found it. And tell me, how is everything by you? How's the family?"

The weasel frowned: this friendliness act was getting to be a bit much. In a strained voice, which sufficiently conveyed his impatient skepticism of this meeting, he said:

"Fine, fox, fine."

"Good. Glad to hear it. Well, I wanted to talk to you about that little gathering all of us animals had today. What did you think about the eagle's idea about a government and electing a President?"

"As I recall," the weasel said, dryly, "the idea of electing a President was your idea."

"Ah, yes, so it was. Well, but the eagle started me thinking about it, so I'm just giving credit where credit is due. Anyway, you'd have to be pretty dumb not to see that such a government has a lot of potential for us all. Only—and as I think you might understand—it's not going to be so easy as all that to elect a President. There are just too many factions: too many species, too many animosities. Why, did you hear the way those animals were fighting about which Big Animal has put them in this forest? I'm telling you, several times I almost broke out laughing, it was so ridiculous! Big Boars, Big Rats, Big Turtles! What imbeciles! You know, I always knew the other animals were a little slow upstairs, but I never realized till today just how stupid they really are. Anyway," the fox continued, shrugging his shoulders, "that's not the reason why I called you in here. What I really wanted to talk to you about was the campaign for President."

"I'm listening," said the weasel politely.

"I'll get right to the point. Are you weasels intending to put up a candidate?"

"Well," the weasel temporized, "that depends on various circumstances within the weasel community."

The fox pulled back his upper lip and showed his tiny front teeth in a smile. "Various circumstances"! Oh, that's good—very good—very cautious: spoken like a true weasel! But you know, you're not talking to a rabbit or a crow right now: you're talking to a fox: and I know a snow job when I hear one. Look, I'm going to be very frank with you, because you and I have a lot more in common than you might think. Here's the deal: I reckon that you weasels already have a candidate picked out, and I'd wager that after the assembly this afternoon you all huddled together in your dens and started planning how to win the election. Am I right? I can see by your hesitation that I am. Don't even bother denying it. Besides, it's really immaterial. What isn't immaterial—and as you weasels know very well—is the importance of who becomes the President. We both know that no other animal has ever had that kind of power in the forest before. It's unprecedented; it's epoch-making. I've never had much respect for the eagles, and for that eagle in particular, but I have to admit that he came up with a doozy this time. Why, I don't think he himself realizes just how much his idea can change life in this forest. The other animals, the boars and the frogs and the turtles—they might not realize what's at stake here; but I do, and I know that you weasels do too. Therefore, on behalf of the fox community, I would like to make a deal with you weasels."

The weasel let out a long breath. Upon first stepping into the fox's lair he had felt threatened; during the first few minutes of his visit his muscles had been, of themselves, instinctively, flexing and twitching, as though at any moment he would have to flee; but by this time he had become, if not exactly comfortable, then at least sure of his safety, and he allowed himself the pleasure of stretching out his forepaws and even, with his little nails, digging into the earthy bottom of the lair, just as he would do if we were at home. Also, he could not help thinking to himself just how astute this fox really was. He had been exactly right in saying the weasels had discussed the matter of putting up a candidate for President; indeed, they had already settled on one or two among them who might run. He told himself that in the future there wouldn't be much of a point in trying to deceive such an insightful character as the

fox. "What kind of deal?" the weasel asked.

"A partnership—in the candidacy. A kind of pledge of support."

"Support for whom? Us or you?"

"Well ... me, of course."

"What do you mean, 'of course'? A weasel can be President just as well as a fox, and we'd certainly be more interested in electing one of our own. And second of all, you know as well as I do that there aren't too many weasels in this forest. There are more opossums than us. Why bother with us at all? It seems to me it would make a lot more sense for you to court their vote."

"Ahhh, once more allow me to commend you on your perspicacity! There's no question about it: you weasels are pretty smart. I always knew it. That's why I approached you first—I need smart animals behind me. And it's because you're so smart that I know you'll take what I'm about to say in stride and not regard it as an insult. You ask me why I don't think a weasel can run for President? He could—he could—very easily: the question is, Would he win? And the answer to that is, No, he wouldn't. He wouldn't because, as you know very well, most of the small groundlings don't trust you weasels. True, they don't trust us foxes either; but the difference is that they trust you guys a lot less because there are more of you and, let's face it, you like to prey on the littlest of them, who are also among the most populous species in the forest. Every animal in this forest knows about that mouse massacre you guys went on last year—how five of you went on a rampage in the mouse community and devoured a whole slew of nests, parents and babies and all! Between you and me, I can't say I blame you; there really is nothing tastier than a nice plump mouse—but you have to admit that you guys did overdo it a little. To this day the vegetarians talk about it with horror, and there are a lot of vegetarians in this forest. If a weasel were to run for President, don't you think the mice would bring up the matter of that massacre and hold it against your candidate?—and get all their ridiculous leaf-nibbling friends to be against you too? Of course they would; it would be their revenge. They'd stir up the whole vegetarian community

against you and you wouldn't have a chance.

"Now, it's also true," the fox continued, "that I'm not especially well-liked in this forest. But I don't have a massacre on my record to deal with. The dislike of me is just the general dislike of vegetarians for carnivores, and I'm confident I can get over that hurdle pretty easily, so long as I get a fair hearing. I've always prided myself on having a way with words, not to mention the fact that I'm rather good at charming the ladies, some of whom are sure to influence their mates. The point is, I have to begin building my base now, and I felt I might as well start where it was likely to be strongest: among you weasels. We're different in a lot of ways, but we're also the same in a lot of ways. Also, through you I could court the raccoon vote. From what I understand you weasels get on fairly well with them?"

"We've never had any problems."

"Good. Then you could persuade them to join our alliance. And through the raccoons we could win over the opossums, since those two species are rather friendly. And so forth and so on. In short, I'm looking toward a coalition of carnivores, since that's the only way we're going to win this forest."

"But you're forgetting one thing," the weasel said. "There's a vegetarian candidate—the eagle."

"Oh?"

"I just heard about it. He's going to run."

"Figures. But, weasel, who's going to vote for him? Aside from this one good idea of his, he's a crackpot. Everyone knows he's not normal. Even the other eagles don't like him. Did you ever hear of a bird who goes flying about for no reason? Who seems to have no interest in settling down with a mate and building a nest and raising a brood? C'mon, now! He's got so many marks against him that he doesn't have a chance of winning the election."

"Well, what if a boar runs? There are a lot of boars in this forest."

"A boar? No way. A boar won't run for the Presidency, and if he does he won't get very far. You know as well as I do that the boars are stupid—stupid, stupid, stupid! Even if they were to find out the brightest boar among them and put him up as

a candidate, he'd be blown away in a few minutes' argument with a fox or a weasel or even a raccoon. Besides, boars aren't inherently political. They're followers, not leaders. The same is true of the rabbits, the deer, and most of the birds. Even if they come up with some good ideas for the forest, it won't mean anything. In order to impress oneself in the minds of animals one has to have a certain inborn flair and ability."

"But there are a lot of them," the weasel retorted, "and they're primarily vegetarian. Do you really think they'd vote for you so long as there's a vegetarian candidate?"

"As I said," the fox responded, "there is no viable vegetarian candidate. Nobody trusts the eagle, and the boars are all dopes."

"Well, I hate to burst your little bubble, fox," the weasel said, shaking his head, "but the race isn't going to be just between you and the eagle or a boar. The skunks are going to put up a candidate."

"Them too, eh?"

The weasel nodded.

The fox shrugged; the information didn't faze him much. "No matter. I can out-campaign a skunk any day. Besides, the only support they're sure to get is from themselves and maybe the weasels—if, that is to say, you don't support me instead."

"What about the raccoons? They'd vote for him."

"Whatever," the fox said, giving another nonchalant shrug, as though certain that even this additional support for a skunk candidate would be insufficient for him to win an election. "At any rate, I'm sure you'd rather support a fox than an eagle or a skunk, even though you and the skunks are supposed to be related in some way. So, what do you say? Will you help me?"

The weasel did not have to consider long. Everything the fox had said had struck him as logical and in the interest of the weasels. But of course he had to be sure of something.

"And what's going to be in it for us?" he asked.

"A lot of things. As I said, whoever gets to be President is going to have a lot of power in this forest. He'll be able to do things and get things that we can't even imagine right now. If you weasels support me, and then win over the raccoons and opossums, I promise you that if I win I will take especially good

care of your species and do whatever I can to make your lives easier.”

“Fair enough,” the weasel said. “I’ll talk it over with the rest of the weasels and let you know.”

“There is one other thing I’m going to need besides your votes,” the fox added.

He had spoken in an off-hand tone of voice, which the weasel rightly intuited as meant to camouflage an important point he had been withholding till the last possible moment.

“Which is?” the weasel asked.

“Food.”

“Food?”

“Yes, food. As long as I’m campaigning for President, I’m not going to be able to go hunting. And even if I did find the time for it, it wouldn’t be a good idea for me to be promising the animals goodies one minute only to be jumping on them the next and tearing them apart. The conflict of interest is obvious. Therefore, if you weasels and your friends could arrange to put something before my lair at the end of each day—just enough to keep me going till I’m elected—it would help me tremendously.”

“Anything else?”

“No, I can’t really think of anything just now.”

The weasel got up on all four legs and seemed about to leave, but he hesitated, turned his attention to the fox, and said, “You know, even if we decide to help you, I can’t promise you that we can get you food every night: there are going to have to be some nights when you go hungry, if only because there are some days when we don’t get anything ourselves.”

“No problem, my friend. It wouldn’t be the first time I’ve gone hungry for a few days.”

The fox stood up in order to show out his visitor. For some time he peered out after the weasel, not entirely confident that he had gotten what he wanted.

III

Fox Becomes A Candidate

In only a few days it became known which animals were running for the Presidency: the eagle, the fox, and a skunk. Though several other animals announced themselves as candidates, they were from the first not taken seriously. For instance, one of the frogs hopped about from morning till night proclaiming his candidacy, yet he might not have said a word for all the attention he got; his own community merely staring at him goggle-eyed and indifferent. So, too, one of the boars tried to drum up attention in himself—all to no avail; his fellow boars grunting impatiently and trotting off in all directions the moment he began to make his appeal. Undoubtedly the fox had been correct in his assumption that there really were some animals who, no matter how worthy their ideas or how thoroughgoing their sincerity, did not have the all-important talent of impressing themselves on the consciousness of others.

Assured of the support of the weasel community, and through them of the support of the raccoons and at least some of the opossums, the fox began campaigning for President. He was confident that he would out-campaign his opponents, the skunk and the eagle, for the latter had the almost impossible task of overcoming his image as a strange bird, while the former was embarrassed by the unsavory nature of the species to which he belonged. True, the fox also had a bad reputation to overcome; there were plenty of animals who would hold his vulpine nature against him; but he was confident that he had the strategic wherewithal to reshape his image.

The image he had to project was, of course, one that the majority of animals would find appealing, or at least not threatening; and as most of the animals were vegetarians, that meant that he had to change, at least outwardly, his carnivorous-predatory behavior. Thus, whereas ordinarily he would have slunk about with his nose close to the ground,

sniffing out spoors and stealthily padding through the underbrush with murderous intent, he now walked upright and in clear view of everyone. As he did so, he would accost every animal he met in order to announce his candidacy and to discuss his platform. But he learned that it was not easy for him to win even that little confidence by which he might get a fair hearing. Animals often assumed his friendly overture was merely a ploy by which he might gain their confidence in order the more easily to devour them, and they would scatter in panic, leaving him standing by himself, abandoned and looking foolish, and even—if the truth must be told—feeling a little hurt.

But if political ambition teaches an animal anything, it is that he must often swallow his pride. In the face of implied or direct insults, he must remain imperturbable, lest in giving way to uttering angry expletives he gains a reputation for hot-headedness. Though not a few times the fox felt like cursing out the animals who had scattered at his approach, he always held his peace and, directing his attention to the goal to be gained—the Presidency—would grit his teeth and set out to promote his candidacy elsewhere. Certainly for an animal as nervously quick and impatient as the fox, nothing could have been more exhausting than maintaining for whole days at a time a patient, mild-mannered, all-accepting persona. It was a testament to both the greatness of his ambition and to the effectiveness of his strategy that in time the animals no longer fled at the sight of him but returned his greetings and politely heard him out. Once it became generally known that he really was not attacking anyone, even the rabbits, ordinarily terrified of him, deferentially listened to his harangues. At such times, his mouth watered and he would have liked nothing better than to dash into the midst of his auditors and gobble up a few of them, but he held himself in check and maintained his air of disinterested reason. And such a charming creature did he give himself out to be that even the rabbits could be heard saying among themselves, “You know, maybe that fox isn’t so bad after all. You have to admit he has some good ideas.”

But of course it was the boars that the fox especially sought to impress as a candidate. They constituted one of the most

numerous groups in the forest, so it was important to get as many of their votes as possible, or at least to make sure they would not all vote against him. Quite apart from their dislike of strict carnivores, they also remembered an incident in which a group of foxes had encircled and killed a baby boar. When the fox had announced his candidacy to them, they assailed him with virulent denunciations, grunting out malevolent reminders to him of that incident and calling him and his kind marauders, murderers, and whatever other hateful term they could summon up. But he had prepared for just such a reaction; indeed, he had expected nothing less. He did the only politically expedient thing he could do under the circumstances: he denied everything.

“You must think I’m the only fox in this forest!” he told them, when their angry clamor had died down enough for him to be heard. “But it just so happens that I’m not. There are dozens of us. I have no idea which foxes might have been responsible for that incident, and you can bet that I’m as aghast at it as you are. As for myself, I have never—never—preyed upon a boar!” (That was true.) “Nor have I or would I never prey upon a baby of any species.” (That was not true.) “In fact, the only animals I’ve ever preyed upon are salamanders and lizards.”

“Hey, wait a minute, wait a minute!” one of the boars called out, when he heard this. “Who are you trying to fool! There ain’t no salamanders or lizards in this forest!”

“Ahh, you see!” the fox said, giving a triumphant shake of his head. “I must have eaten them all! Didn’t I tell you that they’re the only animals I ever go after? Once they disappeared I decided it was a lot easier, and a lot kinder toward you, my fellow animals, not even to prey upon other species, but either to survive on vegetation or at most indulge myself with the remains of some poor soul that had died of natural causes or that another predator had left behind half-eaten.”

The boars looked at one another with upraised eyebrows. Expressions of uncertainty played upon their faces as they silently debated with themselves about whether or not they should believe him. They began to think that perhaps he really had never eaten a boar. Surely just as it was possible for a

vegetarian not to like certain plants, it was possible for a carnivore not to like the flesh of certain animals. Moreover, as they could not without a shudder of revulsion think about anyone eating boar flesh, it was the easier for them to attribute these sentiments even to animals purely carnivorous.

“The fact is, my friends,” the fox continued, “I am shocked—shocked and appalled—that any animal would want to attack a boar. I don’t doubt that foxes have attacked your community, but I can assure you, my esteemed fellow animals, that I was not among them. And I promise you now that if I become President of this forest I will do all I can to stop the rest of my species from preying on you.”

The boars could not help thinking that a very attractive promise.

During every audience the fox was always careful to look “Presidential”—that is to say, important and almost mystically authoritative, though never distant or superior. Even when he was asked the stupidest questions, he would consider them as though they were entirely legitimate, even quite thoughtful, and give long, detailed answers. Little did the mice, or squirrels, or rabbits know that even as he spent whole days among them winning their support, he would return to his lair at the end of the day in order to dine on one of them that had been done in for him by one of the weasels; and as he tore into a neck or breast or hind quarter, and gratefully chewed, he would think, “Good heavens, what stupid animals these are!”

As the eagle and the skunk were also campaigning, it was not unusual for the fox to run into them addressing a crowd. Whenever this happened he would listen to what was being said, then speak up and challenge the candidate—bearing down upon him with a host of shrewd arguments about why the ideas just expressed were imprudent or doomed to failure, and why his, the fox’s, ideas and intentions were better. Even when the eagle or skunk really had a good idea—an idea that the fox himself wished he had come up with—he still made it a point to knock it down in public, the better to convince his auditors that he alone possessed the wisdom needed to make for a good leader.

Now, popularity is a strange thing in that it is often

self-fueling, self-continuing; that is to say, the popular tend to become even more popular, because by reason of their popularity others are eager to know them. This was so in the fox's case. The boars, mice, rats, and other medium-sized and small vegetarian animals, who only a few weeks before would no more have voted for the fox than they would have flung themselves into the flames of a forest fire, began to think that perhaps he really was the best candidate. He seemed to have all the answers, after all! No matter what anyone asked him, he always had a quick, cogent-seeming response. And how could so many different animals like him so much unless there really was something good about him? And his manner was so charming! And his appearance was so proper! Plenty of the female boars, in private, squealed out their admiration for his pretty fur and pointy triangular ears. "And his teeth are so white and sharp!" they would say, comparing them favorably with the often unsightly stained tusks of their mates. Soon wherever he appeared anywhere in the forest he led a train of supporters and admirers who wished to be close to him. Secretly, the fox held these hangers-on and lackeys in the utmost contempt, for he knew that if they had had any substance they would either themselves have been candidates or would have been too engrossed in their own affairs to have so much interest in his; but outwardly he encouraged their suit by seeming pleased and flattered at their attendance.

In only a week there was no question but that the fox was in the lead for winning the election. Seeing this, the eagle and the skunk changed the focus of their campaigns from that of discussing the issues to attacking him personally. The eagle disliked having to do this, for there were many real and substantial issues to be debated and brought to public attention; but he knew that unless did something to lessen his opponent's popularity his own campaign would founder, and he too much believed in the importance of his mission to see it rendered futile. The skunk, on the other hand, was eager to begin personal attacks. He delighted in them and had a talent for them; his innuendoes were especially virulent and outrageous. The fox, then, became the subject of allegations about his past: about where he had hunted, and how many of

this or that species he had killed, and so forth. But always the fox deflected these charges nimbly by either excusing his behavior as instinctual, and therefore without the bounds of volition, or as momentary lapses in his better judgment, which could only be held against him by that animal who had never made a mistake—and where was such an animal as that? Whatever his other talents, that of defending himself against discredit was one of the fox's most accomplished.

Sometimes the facility with which he met and countered these allegations did not work wholly in his favor. Such effortless skill seemed to some animals only proof of his extraordinary cunning. Surely there was something a little suspicious about a creature who could, when confronted by the direst accusations of moral turpitude, deny them without batting an eye or explain them away as though they were the merest peccadilloes. No wonder he soon got the nickname of "Foxy-loxy," which he publicly brushed off with amused contempt but which secretly irritated him. If his popularity had been seriously threatened, he probably would have countered with a few innuendoes of his own, but he knew that it would not have behooved him to do so since the eagle and the skunk were so far behind him in popularity that any personal attacks made against them were likely only to do them the good of arousing some animals' sympathy or at least gain them more attention. As it was, they were both regarded with distrust: the eagle because he had always been a little odd, and the skunk because even though now and again he raised alternative and apparently viable points of view, he was, when you came right down to it, nothing but a little stinker.

Thus, whatever reservations some of the animals had about the fox, they continued to support him. As many said, he was far from the perfect candidate, but he was the best that could be had at the moment. It was a matter of voting for the lesser of three evils.

IV

The Ass

Just when the campaigning was at its height, there wandered into the forest an animal that had never lived there before. It was an ass. He had a kindly face, with large brown eyes, long eyelashes, and enormous nostrils. His lips were thick and rubbery, and there was a pink dot on the upper one, just off to the left side. His voice was pleasantly subdued and his manner was easy-going. One morning he simply showed up out of nowhere—was seen standing amid a bank of saplings, grazing on the new grass there. Several animals approached him and questioned him about where he had come from. He claimed that he had escaped from the pasture on a farm. Precisely where this farm was, he couldn't say; he only knew that he had been walking for days, often having had to duck out of sight of human kind for fear of being recaptured.

His mild manners and wide-eyed, indulgent naiveté placed him in good standing with many species. Even the boars found him charming, though his feeding habits made him a direct competitor for some of their foraging materials. Certainly he was much more appealing, in their eyes, than either the fox, the eagle, or the skunk. Thus it was that after a little consideration a few of the boars filled him in on the election taking place in the forest and asked him if he would consider running as a candidate for the Presidency.

He hesitated. After all, what did he know about this particular forest? Moreover, he had no experience in politics; he was just a simple ass; he was content just to be free. He politely declined.

But several days later he announced that he had changed his mind and would indeed run for the office, much to the joy of the boars, and much to the irritation of the fox, skunk, and eagle who saw in him only another competitor for votes.

What amazed the other candidates more than anything else was the quickness with which the ass gained support. True, he campaigned hard; but then, so did they; and yet his rallies were always larger and more enthusiastic. Moreover, whenever the ass gave a speech, the audience came away smiling and nodding approvingly, not even arguing among themselves about the content of what they had heard. It seemed the ass could say nothing wrong, or that his vision for the future of the forest was beyond reproach.

For the fox, the ass's sudden popularity with the electorate was distressing. Up till now he had been the most popular candidate, the "front runner," as he was called, and now that advantage, for which he had worked so hard and so cunningly, was evanescing as does the morning mist on a summer's day. Also, he was confused. How was it possible that an ass could outwit a fox? Who had ever heard of such a thing? He wondered if this ass was some kind of prodigy—some kind of mutation that looked like an ass on the outside, but really had the mind of another, much more intelligent beast. How else could one explain his political savvy? Just what his mastery consisted of—just how the ass had in a matter of days won over the minds and hearts of so many of the animals—the fox became so eager to find out that he broke the most fundamental rule of campaign etiquette and himself attended one of the ass's rallies.

It took place in a small, moss-covered clearing not far from the forest's trickling stream. The fox stealthily took up a position behind a nearby knoll and peered out at the gathering of animals who were waiting for the ass to appear. In a few moments he emerged from the brush, heralded by a couple of porcupines, without whose prickly escort he never went anywhere of late. At the sight of him the boars especially grunted and pawed at the ground in expressions of pleasure; some even squealed with glee. The ass reacted to this enthusiasm with the most modest bearing—nodding here and there, pulling back his thick lips into an embarrassed smile full of his big ass's teeth, and now and then lowering his eyes, as though he were really undeserving of such a welcome. He was the very picture of gentle humility, which lengthened the

applause at his appearance. When the cheers and general enthusiasm finally died down, the ass began speaking.

“Thank you for your lovely, heart-warming reception,” he said. “I can sure tell you that it feels good to be among honest, down-to-earth animals. You know, I’ve done a lot of traveling in my time, but I never felt really at home till I came to this forest and met so many friendly, interesting, and—if you don’t mind my saying so—good-looking species; and that applies especially to you boars!”

The boars broke out into expressions of appreciation at the compliment, though heaven knew they were, what with their bristly coat, their waddling walk, their small eyes, narrow heads, big bellies, and enormous, usually stained tusks, one of the more unsightly species in the forest.

“Thank you for your applause! Yes, before coming to this forest I had never even met a boar, and now I find surrounded by them, and I can’t tell you how grateful I am for that! I also know that as a species the boars are often dismissed as unimportant and in some cases a nuisance, because, it is said, they eat grass down to the roots or strip saplings so that they don’t have a chance to grow. But I, for one, have always recognized them as animals who can serve as a role model for all of us on account of their good values and love of family. It is absolutely necessary that we make it clear to all animals how important boars are in this forest, and I, for one, intend to bring leadership to this area. As your President, I will ensure that not only you boars, but all of you foraging animals will be given the respect you deserve.

“As you may know, I decided to enter the campaign for President only when it was clear to me that the other candidates—the skunk, the eagle, and the fox—either did not really have the interests of all the animals in mind, or could not, by their very nature, be an impartial leader. For let’s face it: the animal who would be President should not pose a threat to anyone. For instance, the fox. I admit that he comes across well; but if you listen to the substance of what he says—well, you just put two and two together and you know he can’t mean it. For instance, when he talks about making the rabbit warrens safe from hunters! Who’s he kidding? Everyone in

this forest knows that he's knocked off a rabbit or two in his day. If he became President, he'd probably see to it that the baby rabbits were delivered right to his lair! My friends, what we need is honesty in government. We need an animal who has a track record of truthfulness and fairness, and I, as an ass, certainly have that. Believe me, I intend to bring strong leadership to the area of transparency in government."

The boors grunted with approbation.

"As for the skunk, I confess that he comes across rather as a harmless creature. But don't let him fool you. Skunks are notorious for their short tempers and overreacting to things. I'm sure all of you, at one time or another, have happened upon a skunk—and what did he do? He took it personally: he bared his teeth, snarled, spun around, raised his tail, and fumigated you! Who needs a President like that? At the very least, we need a leader who is approachable and won't make us hold our noses every time we come to call on him for a tête-à-tête."

Outbursts of "Absolutely!" and "Hear hear!" broke out from among the gathering.

"Then there's the eagle. My friends, allow me to speak to you now not as another candidate, but merely as one animal to another. I have seen a lot of strange birds in my day, but I've never come across one like that. I am almost certain there is something wrong with him. Perhaps he wasn't paying attention to where he was flying one day and bumped his head against a cliff; or perhaps his mother, while he was a hatchling, sat a little too long on his head and he wasn't able to breathe for a few minutes and was oxygen-deprived;"—snickers in the audience, and the ass himself smiling as though at his own naughty humor—"whatever the reason, I'm almost certain he suffered some sort of brain damage. Have you heard some of the things he's been saying lately? Every other word out of his mouth is 'sacrifice,' or 'restraint,' or some other kind of negative and horrible word. As though you all haven't suffered enough! What he forgets is that the whole point of having a government is to make our lives easier, not harder. And the sacrifices he would have you make! Why, they're ridiculous. For he talks about how us animals—and in particular, you boars and rabbits—should try to curb your appetites and your eagerness

for bringing more litters into the world. He tells us that we have to eat less, mate less, and generally preserve the forest by cutting down on our population. I don't know what kind of values those are, but they are not the good, wholesome, family values that made this forest strong! If anything, this forest needs more boars—and more rabbits, and more squirrels, and more turtles, and more birds of all kinds!"

A storm of approbatory noises met this assertion: the boars grunted and wheezed; the rabbits chirped (it was the loudest sound they could make, and required no little effort on their usually mute part, but they were determined to show their audible support for their new favorite candidate); the squirrels spun around wildly, pattering their little paws together; the birds of the surrounding trees whistled and trilled as they hopped from branch to branch; deer stomped the ground; and in short every animal who had heard the ass expressed enthusiasm at what it had heard. Some few minutes passed before silence obtained and the ass could continue, which he did with a humble:

"Thank you, thank you! I realized almost as soon as I started campaigning for President that my message, so long as it was sensible, would appeal to you, my fellow animals. I must tell you that I have sometimes heard the opinion that the mass of animals in this forest don't have the intelligence needed to understand complex issues; but I have always disagreed with that. I have a lot more faith in the animals whose support I have been willing to work so hard to gain. I believe—I know—that you are very capable of seeing what this forest needs, of understanding the key issues, and choosing a course of action that will best solve whatever problems are at hand. That is why if I am elected President, I intend to consult with you on a regular and close basis. I believe that it is of the utmost importance for a President not to lose touch with the animals who elect him to office. You can be sure that as your President you can come to me at any time, day or night. I will be completely accessible. Indeed, as President I would count on hearing from you all, since I believe that the government will work best as a cooperative operation between the animal who is elected and those who have voted for him. It will also help

pave the way for getting done the things that need to be done. For we must get this forest on its feet again, and that's what I intend to do through a series of executive initiatives.

"You know, my friends, when I first started campaigning for the Presidency, some animals told me that it couldn't be done, that no one would ever support an ass for President. And yet here I am—"—a rumor of support interrupted him momentarily—"—yes, here I am, supported by a wide variety of animals which previously it would have been inconceivable as ever coming together. But this happened not because of me so much as because of you—you who believed that we could all move forward together, and had a true vision for the future, and had a commitment to progress. Like you, I strongly believe that we must have a change in this forest! It's time we went in a new direction! We can no longer wallow impotently in our present unsatisfactory situation; no, we want, we demand, the kind of leadership that will bring our forest to its true potential! And with true leadership, with hard work, with a new and bright vision for the future, I believe we can meet any goals we set! Let us meet those goals together! I want us all to share in the good things that can come when we act in accordance to the good values inherent in our diverse communities, and which are such a source of pride and strength among us. Those are the kinds of ideals on which I will base my Presidency, because in you, my dear boars, rabbits, squirrels, birds, turtles, deer—yes, in all of you, my friends!—lies the true greatness of this forest and our greatest hope for the future!"

After the applause died down, the animals who had been listening to this speech crowded clamorously around the ass, pouring on him compliments and pledges of their support, and patting him approvingly with hooves, paws, pads, webbed-feet, talons or whatever else it might be that they walked, crawled, or landed on. The ass was careful to exchange a few words with the top representatives of each species present, exchanging pleasantries and compliments, and always, with a wink and a smile, informing them that he was not one to forget his friends. When the ass, once more escorted by porcupines, departed from the area, the crowd broke up, each group of animals going their

own way in a euphoria of satisfaction.

V

A Snake In The Grass

The fox had no sooner come away from the ass's rally than he had the inescapable feeling that something was amiss. At first he couldn't figure out what it was. On the face of it, the rally had been quite successful and something to be envious of rather than puzzled at and disturbed by. He thought and thought about it, repeatedly going over certain parts of the ass's speech in the hope of finding a hint to the cause of his suspicions. And then the revelation struck: the fox stopped in his tracks: yes—he knew what it was! Namely, this: that the ass, though he had spoken at length, had said—absolutely nothing! He had neither laid out a platform, nor made a specific promise, nor enumerated grievances to be corrected, nor suggested even one change from the present structure of life in the forest. From first to last his speech was a concoction of denigration of his opponents, compliments toward his auditors, vague promises, and platitudes so trite and predictable that they might have come from a retarded boar;—and yet, he had not only held the attention of the boars and the other animals but had apparently convinced them that they had heard something substantial, important, and even revolutionary.

Only a little more reflection on this fact enabled the fox to see just how brilliant the ass had been in all this: for it is one thing to raise up enthusiasm and support by promising the world, and quite another to get the same result by not only promising nothing but not even saying anything substantial. It was as though he had an unerring instinct for knowing what the boars—toward whom he had obviously tailored his speaking points—did and didn't like to hear. And yet how was that possible? As the ass himself had said, before coming into this forest he had never known a boar. The fox put two and two together. The ass was obviously too stupid to have planned such a brilliant campaign on his own. Someone else, someone

with more knowledge about the forest, had to be behind him. But who? The skunk? The eagle? Some third party?

It was only another proof of the astuteness of fox that he had on the most tenuous evidence hit on the truth of the matter with regard to the ass. For in fact the ass could never have become the viable, indeed popular candidate he was unless he had received a great deal of assistance and coaching. Though the fox could not imagine who had helped the ass, it may be divulged here that it was none other than a snake.

It was the same snake who had objected to the eagle's proposal for a government. Once it was clear that the animals were determined to follow through on the idea, she herself had wanted to run for the office, if only to lessen any negative effect that forest-wide laws might have on her and her species. At the back of her mind, too, was the notion of what might have been called natural justice, of the right of genetic aristocracy: for as reptiles, snakes had existed for millions and millions of years, and in comparison with that pedigree most of the other animals were no better than vulgar upstarts. Moreover, she was aware that any animal who became President, no matter how much it might talk "objectively" about the welfare of all animals, would promote the interests of its own species; and why should not the snakes have that advantage?

But she also knew that her kind were intensely disliked by the animals at large. Snakes were hated and reviled because nature had fashioned them to prey on the weakest and most beloved possession of the other animals—that is to say, their children. She herself had slithered into many a nest and warren and den and gobbled up the newborn, the newly-hatched, or the still egg-encapsulated. No, the other animals would no more vote for her than they would vote for a forest fire. One would think that at least the other predators, such as the foxes or hawks, would have some sympathy for her; but even they were bound to stick up their snouts or beaks at her and say that they, at least, didn't murder children. The liars! The hypocrites! They deserved the bad reputation as well as she did.

But the snake was not a snake for nothing. No sooner had she ruled out the possibility of herself becoming President than

she began to explore the possibility of partaking of the power and prestige of that office without actually holding it. At first she had intended merely to insinuate her way into the favor of one of the candidates—perhaps the fox—and so hope for favors from him once he was elected. But she knew that animals could be very ungrateful, their memories conveniently short, and that the fox was likelier to use her to a frazzle and then, once the power was his, never give her anything she asked for. No, it would be better for her to seize power herself, to become President vicariously, as it were—through some animal that would, knowingly or not, do her bidding. Only, what animal was stupid enough to be guided by her every step of the way without once suspecting her motives? A boar? Perhaps. They were pretty stupid, after all, but they also had a streak of stubbornness that was not easy to manipulate. A rabbit? Maybe. Only, their concentration was non-existent, distracted as they were with perennial mating. A deer? They were such timid creatures that it was hard to imagine any encouragement or enticement great enough to prompt them to become suddenly public figures. And then the ass had shown up.

Among the snake's many talents was an intuition enabling her to sense the fundamental personality of other creatures. It was in her nature to observe and consider, for hours if necessary, another animal, and so perceive its weaknesses and strengths. She had thus considered the ass when he had first come into the forest. Her first thoughts about him were less political than practical as regarded her own physical welfare. She reckoned it would not do her well to frighten or make him angry: he needed only to stomp on her once with his sharp, horny hooves and all his thousand pounds, and she'd be mincemeat. Also, on account of his bulk and strength, he could never be considered prey, and was in that respect no more of interest than a boar, a deer, or a box turtle.

But then the snake regarded the ass from a psychological point of view. In this respect he was not only not impressive but absurdly, almost amusingly disappointing. In her many years of analytical observation, the snake had come to understand that there is a direct connection between mind and body, between brains and brawn, and of how the quality of one

was reflected in or developed at the expense of the other. It was as though nature, in creating any animal, started out from a given quantity of clay, as it were, and could never be too generous in one area without detracting from another. A lumbering body and great physical strength nearly always denoted a slow mind; and likewise such animals didn't have to think very much because they got what they wanted through brute force. On the other hand, the smaller animals, who were fragile and physically weak, tended to have the keenest intellects; and likewise they relied heavily on the quickness of their apprehensions. The nature of the ass was entirely in keeping with this rule. Though he was clearly a powerful animal, his vacant stares, his big jowls and low forehead, and his long, lumbering gait were the very marks of dim wits. He could be charming, for he was always eager to pull back his rubbery lips and show off his big ass's teeth in a kind of grin; but he was—to be blunt—so clumsy and stupid that when he was not tripping over fallen branches, or standing in a full-bellied stupor, he was foraging on leaves and berries that almost any other animal would have instinctively known were indigestible. In short, he was one of the stupidest animals the snake had ever seen.

And therein lay the potential for an opportunity uniquely beneficial to the snake, who saw in the ass an animal who could be easily manipulated. One day she followed the ass into a lonely area of the forest. She watched him from behind a clump of grass. Another animal might have sensed that she was present, but he suspected nothing. That was good, because it meant he was relaxed, but that was also bad, because her appearance might startle him. She had to be very careful; she didn't want to be trampled. Therefore, without actually coming right out into the open, she merely called out to him, saying:

“Psssssstttt!”

At the sound, the ass raised his head and stopped chewing. He looked about with set, motionless jaws; looked to the left, to the right, and then a little behind him. Apparently he had not heard the sound clearly enough to pinpoint where it had come from. Then he was uncertain as to whether he had heard anything at all, and he lowered his head and returned to

nibbling on some grass.

The snake called out again:

“Psssssstttt!”

This time there could be no mistake about it: he really had heard something, and it had come from over there, from his left-hand side, somewhere toward the ground. He turned his head in that direction and stared hard. At that moment the snake raised up her copper-colored, red-eyed head, and said simply:

“Good afternoon!”

The ass took a few steps back, his ears forward and his eyes wide. He had certainly seen his share of snakes, and while he was not, like some of his kind, so fearful of them as to take to his hooves at the mere sight of one, neither was he without that instinct to flee which now made him nervous and tensed the muscles in his legs. This reaction was not lost upon the snake. She saw it at once. Wanting to put the ass at ease, she came out of the grass and into the open and assumed the most pleasant, innocuous expression it was possible for a snake to assume. Very slowly she approached him, who, however, took another step back.

“Good afternoon,” the snake said again, her voice even more pleasant than before. “I just happened to notice you were in the neighborhood and wanted to introduce myself to you. I’m one of the snakes in this forest. How do you do?”

The ass only nodded; he still had not resumed chewing his mouthful of grass.

“Actually,” the snake continued, “I wanted to welcome you into the forest before now, but you know how it is: sometimes you get so caught up in your business that certain things slip your mind. Anyway, as I said, I just happened to notice you were nearby and decided not to let the opportunity pass. I’m glad we have an ass in this forest. We’ve never had one before. We have rats and skunks, and of course boars and deer and all kinds of birds: but never an ass. May I say how exciting it is for us to have you here? I hope you’re enjoying your stay here?”

The ass only nodded, he was still suspicious, but at least he started chewing again—a good sign.

“You couldn’t have come to a better forest,” she said. “We have just about everything here. The climate is pretty good, all things considered. In the spring there’s just enough rain and sun to make the plants grow well, and by the beginning of summer the vegetation is so dense you can hardly make your way through it. As you can see, we also have a very nice river with the best, purest water you’ve ever tasted. We have a few freezing weeks in winter, but the worst of the winds are blocked by the thick growth of oaks and pines on the north end. As you also undoubtedly know some very exciting things are going on among us animals here. I suppose you’ve heard all about the elections for a head animal?”

The ass nodded affirmatively. He was no longer ill at ease; the snake’s sociable manner and confidential tone of voice had disarmed him of the worst of his suspicions.

“Any idea whom you might vote for?” the snake asked.

“I’m not sure,” the ass said, with a shrug of his withers. “I’m afraid I’m not too current on what the issues of this forest are.”

“Oh, I can tell you that in a sentence,” the snake said. “The issue is really just making the life of every species as pleasant as can be. You know: more food, more shelter, safety from hunters—things like that.”

The ass nodded. He looked down at a growth of an especially bright green stalk at his feet. At the moment he was much more interested in that than in talk about elections.

“And tell me,” the snake said, “have you ever thought about running?”

“Running? You mean for President?”

“Yes—why not? Have you ever thought of getting in the race yourself?”

The ass pulled back his big rubbery lips and exposed his big ass’s teeth in a self-deprecating smile. “A few of the boars asked me that already, but it’s not for me. I don’t know anything about it. I wouldn’t be any good as a President.”

At this the snake laughed hissingly, rocking her upraised head from side to side, and looking at the ass with an expression both mirthful and respectful. “Oh, you’re such a modest ass!” she said, admiringly. “No wonder everyone likes

you! Yes, they really do like you! I've heard it again and again from all kinds of animals! But you shouldn't shortchange yourself. You're just as qualified as anyone else to be the President. In fact, if you ask me, I think you're rather more qualified than most. You certainly seem very intelligent, and that's what we need—someone with brains, not to mention good values. Besides, since you're living here now you have as much a right to campaign as the eagle, skunk, or fox, all of whom, as you probably already know, are candidates."

The ass could no longer resist the stalk at his feet, and now lowered his head, tore it up, and began chomping on it. "Well, that's nice to hear," he said, chewing. "But I'm really not political."

"Oh, that's your modesty again! But let's not take that stand too far. When you come right down to it, everything is politics. And you're smart enough to know that, right?"

"Well ... uh ..."

"Of course you are. And the thing is, everything is going to become politics more than ever. But you're right about one thing: it does take a certain flair to be a good politician—a certain special kind of personality—a certain *savoir faire*."

The ass looked blankly down at the snake; he didn't remember having said any such thing. But he continued to listen, and the snake went on:

"Do you want to know what the strangest thing about politics is? I'm sure you already know this, but I've noticed it too: That those who could be good politicians, and help their fellow animals the most, are usually the ones who don't want to do it."

"Really?" said the ass.

"Well, for instance. I'm sure you're aware that one of the candidates is skunk?"

"Oh, yes," the ass said, nodding. "I met him yesterday, in fact. He came by to make my acquaintance. Talked to me about what he intends to do as President. Seems like a very nice animal."

"You think so, eh?"

"Well," the ass said, "he did stink a little. But he can't help that—he's a skunk."

“Precisely my point!” the snake said. “That’s just goes to show you the force of personality, how it makes up for even things that might be regarded as insuperable shortcomings. Skunks are political animals. They’re good at schmoozing and making all kinds of species feel good about themselves. They almost don’t even have to work at it, it comes so naturally to them. But what if I were to tell you that the same is true about you?”

“Me?” The ass pulled back his head and seemed about to scoff.

“Oh, yes, you, ass! Ever since you’ve come into this forest the animals have been saying nothing but good things about you. If that isn’t natural, inborn political talent, I don’t know what is.”

“You think so?”

“Absolutely. I’m telling you all this in the strictest confidence, and only because, even though we’ve just met, somehow I feel that I’ve known you for years. But yes, everyone does like you. Everyone talks about how charming you are, not to mention how brilliant.”

“They say I’m brilliant?”

“In so many words.”

The ass tilted his head, opening his eyes wide, thoughtfully, reflectively—and with a newfound pleasure.

“You’re someone,” the snake continued, “they look up to. And that’s what got me thinking about your potential.”

“What potential?”

“For becoming President, of course!”

“Ohhhhh,” the ass said, shaking his head, “I could never be President—”

“Tut tut, there’s that modesty again, and it just won’t do! I supposed all asses are that way? But then again, that’s why someone like you would make the perfect candidate: everyone loves modesty! My, my, how I wish I were an ass like you for just a few weeks!—I’d have the election all wrapped up. And if I were an ass,” the snake said, her voice suddenly becoming confidential, “I wouldn’t hesitate to run for President, if only because I wouldn’t be able to resist all that fresh grass, all those luscious fruits, all those crunchy, nutty, tasty grains!”

The ass's long ears perked up. "Fresh grass? Fruits? Grains? I don't understand."

"My dear ass," the snake said, shaking her head as though with amusement at his naiveté, "surely you're aware that whoever becomes President is going to have all his needs taken care of?—and then some? The dignity and power of the office will automatically carry with it certain very attractive benefits, not the least of which is the guarantee that one will be always purveyed with the delectablest fare, the best shelter, and anything else that will redound to the office-holder's comfort and well-being. In short, the President will never have to worry about struggling for survival. Let's face it, why do you think so many animals would like to become President?—to help the other animals? Well, there may be an element of that in their ambition, but by far the biggest reasons are selfishness and egotism; or say rather, a certain shrewd understanding of the benefits that come with the office. And given the difficulties of regular, anonymous animal life, you really can't blame an animal for wanting to rise above it."

"Well, if I were a candidate, I really would try to help the other animals," the ass said, simply.

"Of course you would!" the snake replied. "And that's why, though I might have approached any animal in this forest, I've decided to approach you and try to get you to run: because I saw at once that you have the good, public-spirited values that we both share and which will make for a good President."

"But then why don't you just run yourself?" the ass asked.

"Ass," the snake said, shaking her head, "let me be totally frank with you. I'm a snake, right? Now, how many animals do you know like snakes? Eh? That's right: you can't even name one. You yourself, just a few minutes ago, before you realized how really harmless I am—you yourself were nervous about me, right?"

"Well, uh ..."

"Now, don't try to deny it, my friend! I saw how you backed up when you first saw me."

"Well, maybe a little ..."

"You don't have to apologize. It's quite all right—I understand totally. I only mentioned it because you asked me

why I didn't want to run, and now you have your answer. But an ass like you? You'll appeal to everyone."

"You seem pretty confident about that," the ass remarked.

"I'm more than confident," the snake replied. "I'm positive! There's not even the shadow of a doubt in my mind about it. And just think of what a wonderful life you'd have then: all that fresh grass delivered to you every day! All those nuts and berries just dropped in front of you out of appreciation for your leadership! But of course in order to win the election you'd have to campaign, and that means you'd need an effective campaign manager."

"A campaign manager?"

"Of course: someone who could guide you, coach you, as it were, in the ways of this forest. That only goes to reason since you're rather new here and don't really know the kinds of animals here and the problems they'd want you to solve."

The ass puckered his lips; considered; agreed, with a nod. "But where would I get a campaign manager?" the ass asked, then.

The snake made a show of uncertainty about the answer to the question. She squinted her eyes and looked away in thought. For a moment she even rested her head on the ground, as though needing every ounce of vital energy in order to puzzle out a solution. Then she raised her head and in a rather resigned tone of voice, as though she were committing herself to something against her better judgment, she said:

"Oh, all right! I'll tell you what. I would be willing to help you."

"You would?"

"Yes, I would. It'll be hard on me—I'd have to make sacrifices—but then again it would be for the greater good and because I believe in you. I think you would really be the best candidate. I can tell that about you already. So—yes. I'll help you!"

"Well ... thanks," the ass said.

"Don't mention it. Now, the first thing we have to do is announce your candidacy. I'll just climb up a tree and mention it to one of the magpies. I'll even tell him that we don't plan to announce your candidacy till next week and that it has to be

kept a secret till then: that'll ensure that everybody knows about it before nightfall, since those magpies can more keep a secret than I can fly. But I do think there is something I ought to warn you about," the snake added.

The ass was all ears; once more, he had stopped chewing.

"You know, politics has its good points and its bad points. The good points you know about. But I'm not so sure you know about the bad points. And one of them is, that once you become a candidate a lot of people are going to try to confuse you, especially your opponents."

"Confuse me? Why would they want to do that?" the ass asked.

"Why? Why else!—because they want to make you look bad, so that you don't get the votes! You have to understand something, ass: this is a very serious contest. Your opponents want to be President more than anything in the world. They know as well as you do that if they become President they're going to have a great life and get all kinds of goodies; and unlike yourself, they have no scruples about squashing their opponents with the most outlandish lies and defamation. Believe me, I've lived with foxes and skunks all my life, and I can assure you that they don't hesitate to use dirty tricks to get what they want. They won't think twice about dragging your name through the mud."

"But I never did anything wrong," the ass said.

"Oh, really? Never? Not even once? Not even one tiny thing? If you have, they'll find out about it and blow it out of all proportion. Let me repeat it: To their minds you're the enemy, and they'll say and do anything to bring you down. And do you know how they'd probably try to do that first?"

The ass shook his head, no. He was listening now intensely, as though he were being shown something dangerous and which he would not have willingly exposed himself to.

"By trying to defame me. That's right, *me*. I can almost assure you that if they ever found out I was your campaign manager, or involved in your campaign in any way, they'd spread the word to all the other animals and capitalize on the prejudice against me in order to discredit you. But that's why we have to be smarter than they are and not even tell them

that you and I are friends and really want to help the other animals.”

“Well, I would never, ever tell them,” said the ass, in a solemn tone of voice as he shook his head. “Don’t worry about that.”

“I didn’t think you would,” the snake said, looking up at the ass in wide eyed appreciation, “because as I said I knew you were an animal of character and principle. My dear ass, I can’t tell you how refreshing it is for me to find someone with your high-minded ideals! Not to mention your intellect, which almost leaves me speechless! I can tell that you’re exactly the kind of animal I’ve been hoping to help become President. You’re a true leader!”

“You think so, eh?” the ass asked, but it was clear from the way he raised his head a little proudly that he had already come to see himself in a different light.

“Absolutely. You’re just the President this forest needs! But right now,” the snake continued, “we ought to discuss our campaign plan. You just can’t announce your candidacy and expect everyone to vote for you as a matter of course; you just can’t go out there and speak about any old thing. There are certain basic principles on which any campaign that hopes to be successful must be based, and we might as well go over these now.”

As the snake spoke, the ass listened intently, now and then nodding, puckering his lips, and impressed with what seemed to him an incessant stream of wisdom from the little creature leisurely curled up only a few feet below and before him.