



The King's Elephant

Once upon a time there was a King of Benares who was very rich. He had many servants and a beautiful palace with wonderful gardens; he had chariots and a stable full of horses. But his most prized possession was a magnificent elephant called Mahaghiri. She was as tall as two men, and her skin was the colour of thunder clouds. She had large flapping ears and small, bright eyes and she was very clever.

Mahaghiri lived in her own special elephant house and had her own keeper, Rajinder. The King would often visit Mahaghiri to take her some special tit-bit to eat and check that Rajinder was looking after her properly. But Rajinder needed no reminding, for he also loved the elephant dearly, and trusted her completely. Every morning, he would take her down to the river for her bath. Then he would bring her freshly cut grass, leaves and the finest fruits he could find in the market for her breakfast. During the day, he would talk to her and, in the evening, he would play his flute to send her to sleep.

One morning, Rajinder arrived as usual with fruit for Mahaghiri's breakfast. Suddenly, before he knew what was happening, she picked him up with her trunk and threw him out of the stall, breaking his arm. She began to stamp on the ground and trumpet so loudly that it took several strong men all morning to bind her with ropes and chains.

When the king heard about what had happened, he was very upset and sent for the doctor to help Rajinder. Then he called for his chief minister.

"You must go and see Mahaghiri at once," he said. "She used to be so kind and gentle, but this morning she threw her keeper out of her stall. I can't understand it. She must be ill or in pain. Spare no expense in finding a cure."

So the chief minister went to see Mahaghiri, who was still bound firmly with ropes. First he looked at her eyes - they were as clear and bright as usual. Then he felt behind her ears - her temperature was normal. Next he listened to her heart - that was fine too - and checked all over

for cuts or sores. He could find nothing wrong with her.

“Strange,” he thought. “I can find no explanation for her bad behaviour.”

But then his eye was caught by something gleaming in the straw. It was a sharp, curved knife, like the ones used by robbers. Could there be a connection?

That night, when everyone else had gone to bed, the chief minister returned to the elephant house. There, in the stall next to Mahaghiri's, sat a band of robbers.

“Tonight we'll burgle the palace,” said the chief. “First, we'll make a hole in the wall, then we'll steal the treasure.”

“But what about the guards?” someone asked.

“Don't tell me you're still afraid to kill! When will you learn to be a real robber?”

From the shadows, the minister could see the elephant, her ears pinned back, listening to every hateful and violent word.

“Just as I suspected,” thought the minister.

Then he slipped out, bolted the door on the outside so the robbers could not escape, and went immediately to the king.

“Your majesty,” he said, “I think I have found the cause of your elephant's bad behaviour.”

As soon as the king heard what the minister had to say, he sent for his guards and had the robbers arrested.

“But what about the elephant? How can she be cured?” he asked.

“Well, your majesty, if Mahaghiri became dangerous through being in the company of those wicked robbers, perhaps she could be cured by being in the company of good people.”

“What a brilliant idea!” exclaimed the king. “Let us invite the friendliest, happiest and kindest people in the city to meet in the stall next to the elephant.”

“Mahaghiri, the king's most prized elephant, has been in bad company and has become violent and dangerous,” the minister told his friends. “Will you help her to become her old self again?”

“Of course,” they replied. “What do you want us to do?”

“Just meet in the elephant house every day for the next week. Let her hear how kindly and thoughtfully you speak to each other, and how helpful you are.”

So the minister's friends met in the elephant house as planned. They talked together and enjoyed each other's company. Sometimes they brought cakes and sweets to share; sometimes their children came and played happily in the straw. All the while, Mahaghiri watched and listened. Gradually, she became calmer.

“I think it's working,” said the minister. “Soon we'll be able to remove the ropes.”

Everyone felt a bit nervous when the day came for Mahaghiri to be untied. The king ordered everyone to wait outside as, very

carefully, brave Rajinder began to undo the ropes around her ears and trunk. Next he removed the ropes holding her head. Finally, he loosened the thick chains holding her great feet. Everyone held their breath. What if she was still wild?

Mahaghiri looked round shuffling her feet to stretch them. Then she slowly curled her trunk around her keeper's waist and lifted him high into the air before placing him gently on her back. A great cheer went up. The king was delighted.

"Let's have a picnic to celebrate," he announced. "Mahaghiri can come too."

What a great afternoon they all had! Mahaghiri bathed in the lake and gave the children rides. It seemed as though she had now become kinder, gentler and even more trustworthy than ever. But Rajinder never forgot what had happened and was always careful to set Mahaghiri a good example by being kind and friendly himself.