

The Blind Men and the Elephant

(A PLAY IN TWO SCENES)

By [P.K. \(Patricia Kathleen\) Page](#)

Editor's Note: This short play is based on a fable by the Persian poet Jalāl al-Din Rūmī (d 1273). The "Blind Men and the Elephant" is a many-layered fable about human ignorance. Each one of the Sight-Challenged men mistakes the part for the whole, just as today's adherents of various religious sects, political ideologies, and economic theories, claim a firm hold on Truth while disparaging or ignoring others. In a parallel way, most people are blind to the Earth, perceiving it only in terms of utility -- as stacks of natural resources, raw materials, background scenery, and other commodities -- rather than as a Living Whole in whose moist air-layer they tumble about as dependent corpuscles. The fable is about men, not women. One wonders whether six Blind Women would not have asked directions, joined hands, done a bit of networking, before declaring that they had Truth by the tail (trunk, ears, belly, or by the etc.)?

Cast: 1st Blind Man; 2nd Blind Man; 3rd Blind Man; 4th Blind Man; 5th Blind Man; 6th Blind Man; Elephant.

SCENE I

(Curtain up on two groups of blind beggars -- three on Stage Left, Two on Stage Right -- sitting in front of or leaning against a sunny wall.)

1st Blind Man: How was begging today, brothers?

2nd Blind Man: Bad, brother, bad. Two miserable coppers. Barely enough to buy bread.

3rd Blind Man: Shake, brother. Only two for me too. But that's two better than yesterday. And who knows? -- if Allah wills -- tomorrow it may be four.

4th Blind Man: (Entering from Stage Right. He is excited and waving his white cane.) Abdul, Ali, Rustam -- are you there? I bring you good news. The circus has come to town!

2nd Blind Man: What's that to us?

4th Blind Man: (Enthusiastically.) Why, we can go to see it.

2nd Blind Man: (Sarcastically) See it!

4th Blind Man: Well, smell it then, hear it. Touch it, even. There are conjurers, fire-eaters, snake-charmers. (Voice rising.) And there's an elephant!

2nd Blind Man: An elephant? What on earth's an elephant?

4th Blind Man: You don't know what an elephant is?

1st Blind Man: No. Tell us, brother. Just what is an elephant?

4th Blind Man: Why an elephant is... (They all look expectant and encourage him with "yes'es" and "is what's.") An elephant is... an elephant is... (Triumphantly) ...just what it says. An elephant is an elephant.

2nd Blind Man: (Sarcastically.) So, an elephant is an elephant. And what, may I ask, is that? Do you eat it? Drink it? Smoke it? Is it animal? Vegetable? Mineral?

5th Blind Man: (Dreamily.) I sometimes think an elephant is like a butterfly -- beautiful. Or like a sunset. Or like a butterfly against a sunset -- the most beautiful thing in the world. I would love to see an elephant!

3rd Blind Man: Then why don't we go?

2nd Blind Man: Money, brother, money! Just where will we find the money to get in?

4th Blind Man: (Thoughtful.) Let me think ... (Suddenly getting an idea) We'll go tonight when everyone's in bed!

6th Blind Man: Do you think it's safe?

1st Blind Man: I'd rather have a good night's sleep myself. (He laughs.) Blind men going to see an elephant. What's the point?

4th Blind Man: (Excited.) We can feel it, brother. Feel it! The way we've learned about everything else.

(All together)

5th Blind Man: (Still dreamily.) I'd really like to know if it's like a butterfly.

3rd Blind Man: Or a wonderful game or...

1st Blind Man: For myself, I think a good night's sleep...

6th Blind Man: Are you sure it isn't dangerous? What if it's a magician who can turn us into snakes or... or ... (Horried) ... stones!

4th Blind Man: (Taking command) That's settled then. We shall meet in the elephant's enclosure. At midnight.

(Quick Curtain.)

SCENE II

(Curtain up on a dark stage. The audience is gradually able to make out an elephant, centre stage, huge; a ladder, stage right; and the 3rd, 5th and 6th Bind Men Stage Left, near the elephant's head.

There is total silence, stillness. Then we see the 4th Blind Man coming over what must be the top of a tent and descending the ladder.)

4th Blind Man: (In a loud whisper as he reaches ground level) Is everybody here?

(They answer, Here, Here, Here.) Ali and Abdul are always late. Try to be quiet. We don't want to wake anyone.

6th Blind Man: (Nervously) Are you sure we're in the right place?

4th Blind Man: Of course I am. Listen. You can hear it breathing.

(In the silence we hear loud breathing.)

3rd Blind Man: (Excitedly.) Then ... it's alive.

6th Blind Man: I'm leaving. I remember now. Elephants are only about the size of mice but they breathe very heavily. And they're deadly to man. The least bite and you're paralyzed.

(During this speech the 4th Blind Man collides with the front leg of the elephant. He lets out a cry.)

4th Blind Man: (Marvelling.) Oh. I touched it. I touched it!

All: What's it like? Tell us. Tell us.

(There is silence as the 4th Blind Man feels the leg.)

4th Blind Man: (Astonished.) Why, it's not alive. There's nothing to fear. An elephant is a great pillar. A column. A tower. Higher than I can reach.

5th Blind Man: Here, give me the ladder (He props it against the leg.) Let me feel. (He climbs the ladder and grabs the elephant's ear.) Brothers, brothers, this is no pillar. No column. No tower. It's an enormous fan. Large enough to fan the Sultan himself.

4th Blind Man: (Patient but firm.) It's a pillar, I tell you. I touched it. I ought to know.

5th Blind Man: (Still dreamily.) Brothers, it's a fan. A beautiful fan. Like the wing of a giant butterfly. I give you my word.

4th Blind Man: (Suddenly exasperated.) Is your word better than mine? I touched it tell you, with these very hands.

(During this argument the 6th Blind Man reaches up and feels the tusk.)

6th Blind Man: (Ominously.) Brothers, you are both wrong. I too have touched the elephant. It is a sword: curved, sharp and terrible.

4th Blind Man: I'll sword you. The very idea! It's a pillar, I say.

(Meanwhile the 3rd Blind Man enters. Stage left. As he feels around he encounters the elephant's tail.)

3rd Blind Man: (Delightedly) Brothers, brothers, you are all wrong. A pillar, a fan, a sword! (He laughs) Why, I have an elephant in my hand at this very moment and it is nothing more than a little hanging rope such as children swing on. (He grabs tail and swings.) Whee! Whee! Whee!

(4th and 6th Blind Men continue arguing.)

5th Blind Man: (Dreamily.) A fan -- like the wing of a giant butterfly. I dreamed it would be so. I knew it all along...

(3rd Blind Man continues to swing and cry, Whee!)

1st Blind Man: (Appearing on the elephant's back.) You, down there -- you're nothing but simpletons -- stupid as well as blind. An elephant is a table, a floor, a bed. (He lies down.) A perfect place for a snooze.

(During the foregoing the 2nd Blind Man has been feeling about. He encounters the elephant's trunk.)

2nd Blind Man: (Very alarmed) Look out, everyone! Stand back! Take care! An elephant is a serpent. A great thick snake, muscled and strong.

5th Blind Man: (To himself.) A beautiful fan! I felt it myself. I know what I feel. My senses don't lie.

(The 4th and 6th Blind Men are still arguing. They join the 2nd near the trunk and continue.)

4th Blind Man: A pillar, I say. Tall and straight...

6th Blind Man: A sword. A scimitar -- curved and sharp.

2nd Blind Man: It's a snake, I tell you. I felt its body.

1st Blind Man: (From overhead.) A perfectly lovely bed. A lovely.... (Snore. Snore.)

(As 'Pillar,' 'Sword,' 'Snake' and 'Fan' argue and as 'Rope' swings back and forth and 'Bed' snores, the elephant gives a mighty trumpeting. The first Blind Man is thrown to the floor and the 3rd lets go its tail and joins the others. Then the elephant lifts its trunk and sprays them all with water. There is pandemonium for a minute or so. Then a short silence. And the refrains begin again.)

4th Blind Man: It's a pillar. I touched it..

6th Blind Man: A sword, I say.

2nd Blind Man: A venomous snake.

1st Blind Man: A bed.

3rd Blind Man: A rope.

5th Blind Man: A beautiful fan!

(And so they continue as the curtain falls. They may even be arguing still.)

THE END

...Now illuminated, the blind men no longer needed to beg. With such specialized knowledge they were qualified to establish a school of elephantology. The whole world would beat a path ... as they say.

But how to present to that world the arcane laws of elephantology to which they were privy -- a pillar, a bed, a fan, a hose? They asked themselves. They asked each other. Chaos resulted.

Co-operation was impossible. They must separate.

To this day, if you want to learn about elephants you can enroll in one of the many schools: The Pillar, The Bed, The Fan; The Hose -- although already The Hose has split into two schools, bitterly opposed to one another: The Hose and The Whip.

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