

Son of the Tribe Story

The African youth listened eagerly to the instructions. It was the most important moment in his life—the rite that was to make him a man. He had reached puberty, and now to be accepted into the tribe as a full-fledged adult member, he had to pass the traditional test that would show he was strong, sensible, responsible, and trustworthy. If he failed the test he would continue to be a child for another season, in the shame of his failure and the impatience of the long wait. That is why he was listening with rapt attention, ready to carry out with prompt exactness the secret orders given by the elders of the tribe.

These were the instructions: he had to walk alone into the jungle, without bow and arrows, without spear and shield, and wander and roam through it till he saw, and was seen by, a lion, a rhinoceros, a python, and an elephant. In no case would he defend himself or run away, and he would take no food, however alluring the fruits of the trees he saw. Once he had achieved the four goals he had to come back immediately and report to the tribe. That was all.

The young man departed at once, and directed his steps toward the high-grass prairies where he knew lions waited for their prey, and where it would not be difficult for him to see the king of the jungle and be seen by him. Soon he saw a lion lounging under a tree in the care-free majesty of his lofty presence. He held his breath and waited till the lion would deign to look at him. At last the lion lifted his head, swept the horizon with his gaze, and fixed it for an instant on the svelte erect figure of the motionless youth. Their eyes met, the candidate for manhood and the king of the jungle were eye-to-eye, face-to-face in mutual recognition. The young man made sure that the lion had looked at him in order to be able to attest it before the tribe, and moved back slowly into the jungle, knowing that he had already achieved the most difficult part of his mission.

Deep in the jungle he saw a large python wound around a tree, and held its gaze without blinking. He also knew the haunts of the rhinoceros, and watched him, and knew that he himself was watched in the tense air of mistrust and warning that surrounds this dangerous creature. Now only the easiest part of the job remained, the elephant. There were many around the place, and it would not be long before he would meet a herd or a lonely male,

and make himself prudently seen. He knew that the elephant does not attack unless attacked first, and so there was no special danger. It was enough to find one and the task would be over.

But he could not find any. He went through all the likely places, searched for footprints, scanned the horizon, waited at water holes, but he did not succeed in sighting a single elephant.

For the first time he began to feel hungry. Till that moment he had not counted days or nights, had not felt hunger, but as the search prolonged itself and fear of failure began to rise in him, he began to feel weak. How long could he keep up this search? What would he do if he did not find an elephant? He would prefer to die of hunger in the solitude of the jungle, and so save his dignity if he could not save his life; but the orders he had received commanded him to return alive to the village and report truthfully on all that had happened.

He held on to the very last moment, but he did not succeed in sighting an elephant, and he came back sad and crestfallen to tell the tribe his misery. After listening to him, the chief spoke: "You have passed the test. We knew that you would not meet an elephant because we had beforehand scared them all away from the whole region. The test was not seeing the animals, but telling the truth, and you have said it. From this moment on you are one of us in full dignity and right. You are a son of the tribe."