

A CATERPILLAR'S VOICE

(a Maasai legend, East Africa)

Once upon a time a caterpillar crawled inside a hare's house when the hare was away, and set about making himself comfortable. When the hare returned home, he noticed new marks on the ground going into the cave. He called, "Who's in my house?"

The caterpillar boomed out in a loud voice, "It is I! Yes, I who crushes rhinos to the earth and tramples elephants into dust!"

The hare hopped about, crying, "What can a small animal like me do with a creature who crushes rhinos and tramples elephants?"

He soon met a jackal, and asked the jackal to talk to the terrible creature who had taken possession of his home and to convince him to leave. The jackal agreed, and when they reached the place, he barked loudly and said, "Who is in the house of my friend the hare?"

The caterpillar replied in a voice that rocked the earth, "It is I! Yes, I who crushes rhinos to the earth, and tramples elephants into dust!" On hearing this the jackal thought, "Certainly I can do nothing against such a creature," and he quickly left.

The hare then fetched a leopard, and he begged the leopard to help him. The leopard assured the hare it would be no trouble at all. On reaching the spot, the leopard bared his claws and growled, "Who is in the house of my friend the hare?" The caterpillar replied in the same manner as he had done before. The leopard was alarmed and thought, "If he crushes rhinos and elephants, I don't even want to think about what he could do to me!"

Next the hare sought out the rhinoceros. "No doubt, I am the most fearsome of beasts," grunted the rhino. The rhino marched to the hare's cave, where he snorted and pawed the ground with his massive feet. But when the rhino asked who was inside and heard the caterpillar's booming reply, he thought, "What, he says he can crush me to the earth?" And the rhino thundered away, crashing through the forest.

Growing frantic, the hare tried the elephant, and asked him to come to his assistance. But like the others, on hearing what the caterpillar had to say, the elephant knew that he had no wish to be trampled underfoot like dust, and stomped off.

In despair by this point, the hare asked a frog passing by if he could possibly make the creature who had frightened all the other animals leave his house. The frog went to the cave door and asked who was inside. He received the same reply as had been given to the others. Then the frog went nearer and shouted, "I, who am the strongest of all, have come at last. I am the one who crushes those who crush the rhinos! I am the one who tramples underfoot those who trample the elephants!"

When the caterpillar inside the hare's cave heard this, he trembled. He sensed the shadow of the frog coming nearer and thought, "After all, I am only a caterpillar!" And the caterpillar inched out of the hare's den along its edge, trying not to be noticed.

The animals who had collected around the hare's house seized the caterpillar and dragged him out. "What, you?" they all cried in disbelief.

"I would never dream of staying in that cave!" said the caterpillar with his nose in the air. "An echo like that is far too crude for a refined creature like myself!" As he sniffed away, all the other animals laughed at the trouble he had given them.