

The Squirrel King

Samuel D. Hutton

*“The light of the sun broke forth;
the lowly were exalted and they
devoured the nobles.”*

Book of Esther Prologue 1:10

ONCE UPON A time there was a man named Bert. Everything about Bert was mundane. He was neither very smart nor very handsome. Bert had no friends, a job he hated and he lived alone in a tiny apartment.

He was sick and tired. Tired of his menial nine to five job, of being rejected by women, tired of just about everything in his below average existence.

So one day, Bert just got up and left. He walked out of his apartment, slammed the door behind him and never looked back. He walked for days, eventually finding himself lost deep within in the woods.

He wandered, tired and starving. His old life started to look a whole lot better. Just when he had given up hope and consigned himself to death, he heard it. A joyful singing, hundreds of tiny voices joined in rapturous song. He followed the sound and stumbled upon a clearing. What he saw no man had ever looked upon. It shocked and delighted him.

Bert had found the woodland realm of the squirrels. It was here that the furry folk of the forest lived and worked in harmony. Building homes in the trees and collecting acorns. Here, no squirrel worked for his own greed, but for the good of all Squirrelkind.

The Squirrel King

Bert stood in the clearing watching in slack-jawed amazement as the squirrels went about their daily business. Then the squirrels noticed him. The squirrels knew of men, who built great cities of concrete and steel, who did not live in peace with nature and instead sought to dominate it. But no man had ever discovered their secret civilization, until now.

The squirrels swarmed around Bert, examining the newcomer with trepidation. Bert raised his hands in a non-threatening gesture.

“Fear not!” He exclaimed. “I mean you no harm. My name is Bert, I come from a faraway land, a cold land of greed and malice. A land I fled. I ask that you allow me to join you here, that I might live amongst you in peace and harmony.”

The squirrels tittered excitedly amongst themselves; never before had a man asked to join them.

Then a hush fell over the squirrels and the crowd parted. A single squirrel approached, ancient, stooped with age. Leaning on a gnarled staff, he shuffled towards Bert. As he passed, squirrels bowed their heads in reverence for he was the Elder; the oldest and wisest of the squirrels. He was the one to whom all other squirrels looked for guidance.

“So, Bert the Man,” the Elder spoke quietly and deliberately, so that all strained to hear him. “You wish to join us here. Then you must know, that here in these woods all must work towards the greater good.”

Bert nodded. “I understand.”

The Elder smiled, then turned to address the assembled squirrels. “Brothers and sisters. Today we welcome a new member into the fold. Treat Bert the Man with the same respect that you would treat any other squirrel.” The squirrels cheered.

* * *

Bert adjusted quickly to life amongst the squirrels. He had never quite fit in with his fellow humans, but with the squirrels he felt right at home. They accepted him quickly, showing him the ins and outs of squirrel society. How to climb a tree, where to find the best acorns, and how to avoid predators.

Bert also started to learn something of their society. It seemed Bert had arrived at the most dire of times; the squirrels were starving. Rampant speculation had caused the acorn stock market to crash. The squirrels were in trouble.

Bert's heart sank. He had found a new home only to learn that it was on the verge of collapse. One night a great meeting was called to debate how best to deal with the looming crisis.

There were many shouts that they must abandon their home and find a new one deeper in the woods, while others said they would rather die than abandon the homes of their ancestors. As Bert watched the debate, an idea started to form in his head.

"I have a plan!" he shouted, standing up. The squirrels went silent, and he found hundreds of tiny eyes focused on him.

"What is your plan Bert the Man?" The Elder asked, a quizzical gleam in his eyes.

"In the city from which I hail there is food aplenty, enough to feed all the squirrels here for a lifetime."

"But the cities of men are dangerous places. No squirrel will be safe there!" One squirrel protested.

"Yes, Bert the Man, the cities of men are no place for us squirrels," the Elder said.

"That is true, Elder," Bert said. "But I am no squirrel. I will be welcomed there. I will get all the food I can and bring it back for you."

"Very well," the Elder said. "So be it. Bert the Man will venture out to the city of men and bring back food."

* * *

Days passed and the squirrels waited and waited. At first they thought maybe Bert had gotten lost or that collecting all the food was taking longer than anticipated. But as the days turned to weeks, the squirrels began to worry. Many squirrels began to doubt that Bert would ever return; they suspected he was lying dead somewhere. But at the end of the third week a lone figure was seen stumbling through the forest, tired and disheveled. A cry went up—it was Bert—he had returned. Bert marched into the village carrying sacks laden with foodstuffs from the city of men.

Bert was welcomed back in triumph with much pomp and grandeur. The squirrels flocked from their homes to greet him. Cheering his name, they garlanded him with flowers and showered petals at his feet.

Bert approached the Elder and placed the sacks before him. "I have returned!" he exclaimed. He stood tall and raised his hands triumphantly into the air.

The Squirrel King

The Elder bowed low. "Bert the Man, you have returned to us bearing great gifts in our hour of direst need. You have put the needs of others before yourself. It is because of this that you have been judged right to reign over us for as long as you shall live. Bert the Man, you are hereby proclaimed The Squirrel King." The accolades were deafening.

A great feast was held that night in honor of the new king. The squirrels feasted and danced, their old worries forgotten as now their new king would lead them into a bright and golden age.

* * *

For a time, it was good. Bert proved to be a just and noble king. Under his guidance the squirrels returned to their old prosperity. There was food in abundance and every day the squirrels gave thanks for their great king.

Bert ruled them from a palace built in the heart of the greatest tree in the woods. He dressed in the finest raiment and wore a crown of woven twigs. Every day a tribute was presented to him in the form of the most delectable foodstuffs. The squirrels would feed him succulent morsels and wash his feet.

One day as Bert lounged on his throne, he turned to the Elder and spoke, "I hunger. I can no longer sustain myself on this paltry tribute, I shall require more food. The size of my tribute must increase."

The Elder bowed meekly. "My King, your tribute is donated by every squirrel in the realm, it comes from their own tables. It is a gift for your greatness, but to sacrifice more would mean that each squirrel would have to work much harder to collect the extra food."

Bert dismissed him with a wave of his hand. "A little extra work will harm no one."

"As you say, My King," the Elder said as he left the room.

Days passed, and when the Elder next entered the throne room he found Bert staring out the window. When the king saw him, he beckoned the Elder to approach.

"Tell me, what do you see?" he asked the Elder.

The Elder looked out the window. "I see the realm, My King. I see the homes of our people. I see families and friends living in harmony. I see the beauty and bounty of the world."

Bert frowned. "But you see nothing of me. Nothing to mark my greatness. Nothing to show the future of my achievements."

“My King, the squirrel’s praise you every day, your deeds are the stuff of legend. They will tell their children of you and you will live on in their hearts and memories.”

“It is not enough,” Bert said. “There must be some monument. Something to mark my great and glorious rule. I have decided that a great statue shall be raised in my honor, to commemorate my triumphs. Every squirrel in my realm shall help in its construction. It shall tower over the tallest tree, so that I will be honored for all time.”

“My King,” the Elder began, worry in his voice, “such a vast undertaking would take countless hours of labor. There would be less time to forage for food. You would have to sacrifice the bulk of your tribute.”

“Enough!” Bert snapped. “I will hear no more of your excuses. My statue will be built and I will have my tribute doubled. Any squirrel that shirks their responsibility shall be punished. I am the King and my word is law!”

The Elder hung his head and let out a long weary sigh. “As you say, My King.”

The good times had passed. The squirrels labored day and night to construct Bert’s great monument. Bert’s demand for tribute grew greater, the squirrels were left with nothing but scraps while Bert grew large and corpulent on the fruits of their labor. Any squirrel that spoke out against Bert’s cruelty was never heard from again.

One morning, Bert awoke to find all the squirrels gathered before his palace. This stoked his wrath and he stormed out to meet them.

“What is the meaning of this?” Bert growled. “All of you get back to work!”

The Elder approached Bert and bowed. “My King, we beg your forgiveness, but we are unable to work any longer. We are starving. Perhaps if you gave us more time to forage rather than build your statue . . .”

“Silence!” Bert shouted. “I am your King and you will do as I command!”

“My King,” the Elder protested. “We cannot keep on like this! How many more must die before you see the folly of your ways!”

Bert snarled and lashed out, striking the Elder down. The Elder fell into a heap, for all the squirrels to see. Silence fell.

One young squirrel walked forward and placed a hand on the Elder’s chest. “He’s dead,” the squirrel said with tears in his eyes. He turned to Bert. “You killed him.”

The Squirrel King

Bert scowled. "Yes, I did. Let that be a lesson to you. Now get back to work."

None moved, they just stared at Bert with small accusing eyes. Then the floodgates broke.

"He killed the Elder!" Shouted one.

"Death to the tyrant!" Shouted another. And soon the cry filled the air.

"Death to the tyrant! Death to the tyrant!" A squirrel launched itself at Bert, he caught it and tossed it aside. It was followed by another and another. Bert backed away, his foot caught on a root and he fell backwards, his crown falling from his head. The squirrels swarmed around him, a furry tide of vengeance and anger.

"Stop this!" He shouted in a voice rich with fear. "Stop this now! I am your King! I AM YOUR KING!"

Then, they were upon him.

* * *

In the aftermath, the squirrels gathered to bury the Elder, they sang songs of mourning and wept for all they had lost. Bert's palace was abandoned, his statue torn down. Never again would the squirrels trust a man. The squirrels had learnt their lesson.