

THE BLIND MEN AND THE ELEPHANT

A SCIENTIFIC FAIRY TALE

by Dr. Gopi Krishna Vijaya



Once upon a time, nestled in a valley between the mountains, there was an isolated town of blind men. The women could see, but the men ruled. The women had long since ceased arguing with the men about what they could see – it was a better policy to just go with the flow and work with them as they were. So Braille was mandatory learning for all, the sense of touch, smell and sound reigned supreme, and the laws were all made accordingly. There was no teaching in any school about anything called light, naturally – but all the learned men were experts in music, which was a prerequisite for all higher learning. They could detect a million different variations in texture just through the touch, and had built many instruments to detect texture. They were also very good at calculations, and would have easily surpassed any other man anywhere else in the world in such feats. So in spite of their handicap, they got along quite well and lived a pleasant life.

If you or I had walked into this town, we would have felt very strange indeed. The houses rarely had any windows, and only the women could be seen peeking out of any holes in the walls. Many walls were even made with transparent materials. No doorbells were needed as the men of the house would always feel your footsteps as you got close to the door. Also, through some quirk of nature, there were not many animals except a few insects and birds. You would see that they loved gardens, and instead of road signs you had flowers placed at the corner of each road. If you smelt roses, you can be sure that you have arrived at the road leading to the town's chief – the Councilman. If you smelt daisies, you were on the road to the school. No one bumped into anyone else on the streets, as they were extremely proficient with their walking sticks. Their temple was one of music: every step you took in the temple evoked a melody somewhere, and every surface you touched resonated as if the walls were part of a gigantic drum. It was quite a unique experience.

The regular humdrum of life was rudely interrupted one morning, when one of the town's carpenters encountered a strange experience in the forest. He noticed that there was a heavy "something" that had gotten entangled in the rope he had left lying around the previous night. He came running into the town-square with his announcement:

"I don't know what it is, but it is huge, heavy, and is making sounds I have never heard before! It could be dangerous! I had left my pile of rope there at night yesterday, and it seems to be linked up with it somehow!"

His tone of fear irritated the Councilman. "Calm down!" he said, "Take a group of men with you and bring it here! You say that your rope is linked up with it – so bring it here with the help of more rope. Take care, and off you go!" And off they went, a dozen men, to bring back this strange being. The women lined the streets eager for a look – and as the men came back with a vigorous, trumpeting beast, they whispered to themselves: "Look! What a strange being! It does not look like any of our animals, but how mighty it is! And is that its *nose*?" This was the first time the town had encountered an elephant, which was a young one too (but they didn't know that, as it was still very tall). The poor beast was brought into the town's center, and the rope that it was entangled in was tied to a strong pole. A hush fell over the crowd, punctured only by a few forlorn cries by the elephant.

The Councilman took charge. "All right, settle down! Let us check out what we have here. All of you who came back from the forest – I need you to do one more thing. Reach out and investigate this ... *thing* ... from all sides, and tell me what you think it is, one by one!" There followed a flurry of activity, as the dozen men set about surrounding the elephant on all sides. "And take your time, investigate carefully!" said the Councilman. They took their task seriously, and one of them even ordered his wife to get a ladder, which he proceeded to place on the pole next to the elephant. After she brought it for him, she went back to rejoin the ladies, who had all been eagerly taking in the sight of the elephant. Some were wary of its size and movements, others were feeling sorry for its captivity. But they knew better than to voice any of this to the Councilman or any of the husbands – they knew no one would want their opinion. Women had to be quiet, and not heard, after all. So they whispered amongst themselves:

"That has *got* to be its nose, look at those holes!"

"How does it swing it like that? Poor thing, it is so patient, and it seems to be stressed out!"

"I don't know about you gals, but, I think it looks quite cute."

"Cute? Do you see those legs? And those white pointy things? *And* its size? Are you crazy?"

"You know, I think I remember a friend of mine from the town over the mountains who mentioned something like this..."

And so on and so forth, away from the men.

"All right, halt!" said the Councilman. "That should do, you can all back off. Now, one by one, tell me what you all think. You found it first, so let's start with you, Number One!" (He loved numbering people).

“Mr. Councilman, it feels like a living rope!” said Number One, who had been busy investigating the elephant’s tail. “It fits easily in my hand, and the fibers are coming apart towards the end.”

“I agree, Mr. Councilman, but it is a *thick* rope,” said Number Two, who had been handling the trunk. “Very thick, very powerful, and also a bit soft.”

“Mr. Councilman, I experienced something different,” said Number Three. “It is a big wall. I had to ask my wife for a ladder to climb up to check it, and it seems to check out for at least 5 forearms.” (The men in this town preferred forearms to feet, for measuring.)

“But actually...” piped up Number Three’s wife. “Silence! I will listen to the others after the report is completed,” said the Councilman. “Go on, Number Four!”

[“You fool, why did you interrupt him?” said the lady’s friends. “Let them finish! He may listen to us afterwards.”]

“Mr. Councilman, I am sure it is a waving fan. It flapped at me at least 30 times, and it is just like the one I use at home to keep away the mosquitoes” said Number Four, who had held its ear.

“I agree Mr. Councilman! That’s what it is! It flapped at me 31 times!” said Number Five, who was at its other ear.

“I don’t think so, Mr. Councilman. I felt something very different. It is a moving pillar! I could not get my arms around it, but the pillar was at least as tall as I am,” said Number Six, who was near its front leg.

“He’s right!” said Number Seven, who was near its other front leg. “It is the exact same thing for me!”

“I think they are both right, Mr. Councilman! I also felt a pillar, although it only came up to my waist” said Number Eight. He had miraculously avoided being stamped – the elephant was still patient, thankfully.

“I think it is definitely a pillar Mr. Councilman, sir!” said Number Nine excitedly. “I felt the same as the other three!”

“Mr. Councilman, I felt something different. It is like a wall, but a carpeted wall” said Number Ten. “I felt small fibers on it everywhere, it is just like what I have at home.”

“I think it is a boulder, Mr. Councilman,” said Number Eleven, who had carefully stroked its head. “It cannot be a wall, it is rounded. I felt it clearly!”

“Mr. Councilman, I think something is really off. I sensed nothing of what everyone is sensing. It is a moving spear! It is not as sharp as what we use, for sure, but that is what it is, for sure” said Number Twelve, who had come across its tusk. “What do you think, Mr. Councilman, sir?”

The Councilman took his time. He was the chief after all, and making hasty pronouncements would not look good.

“Hmm!” he said. “Thank you all for your input. As you all know, I am very careful with what I say – I feign no hypotheses. Let me investigate for myself.” So saying, he moved forward cautiously, just as the

elephant gave another swing of its trunk. The trunk caught him straight across his feet, sending him tumbling to the dusty ground with a thud. His wife started moving forwards, when –

“I’m all right!” yelled the Councilman. “I don’t need any help!” He was red in the face, and none of the men could see it. But they knew how the Chief sounded when he was angry, and this was unfortunately one of those times, which did not bode well. “Number One! Number Two! Just like the both of you, I felt a rope, one strong enough to sweep me off my feet,” said the Councilman.

While Numbers One and Two sighed with relief, the rest waited with baited breath, as it was an embarrassing moment. And the Chief did not do well with embarrassing moments.

The Councilman pulled himself to his feet and dusted himself down. He must state something now – he thought to himself – else his standing in the town would be threatened. That was quite a whack that he received, from what felt a lot like a –

“I think that based on my direct experience, cross-verified by two other faithful men, I can safely say that we have a type of *Living Rope!*” he exclaimed. “Henceforth, this being made of ropes will be called *Roper!*” he declared, “and that’s my final word!” So saying, he turned and strutted off towards his home, not even waiting for his wife, Mrs. Councilman, to join him.

The townspeople were stunned. It felt like quite the anti-climax. For a few minutes, the dozen men shuffled their feet nervously, wondering if they were going to be blamed for something. The women were used to the Councilman’s outbursts for many things, but this one definitely topped them all. As Mrs. Councilman left the group to pursue her husband, the rest began talking amongst themselves:

“Here we go! He blew his lid again. He should have known better!”

“What can he know? He has to show off for the whole town doesn’t he? Serves him right!”

“Indeed, we will do better to pay attention to this poor animal. Look at it, it is still woebegone and trumpeting, probably separated from its family. Did Mr. Councilman really have to let it be tied up like that? Is he heartless?”

“Don’t say that! Poor Mrs. Councilman. She will bear the brunt of his anger. Perhaps she can tell him that it is some sort of animal, with many parts to it?”

“Hah! That’s a laugh – the man has never listened to her in living memory, just like our husbands, why will he start now?”

“Speaking of our husbands, I wonder what they thought of all this?”

They looked around to see that the men had formed their own huddle a little distance away from the elephant, having their own discussion out of range of the swinging trunk and tail:

“The chief’s angry! And it sounded like he fell down hard. What did we do? I swear I felt a wall...”

“And I swear I felt the rope, just like he said!”

“And that is all very well for you, but we have, what, five different ideas now? Wall, rope, fan, boulder, pillar...”

“A *moving* pillar, don’t forget! And how! Something tells me I barely escaped with my life.”

“I know what you mean... did you sense the strength there? The spear felt very hard. No way that it was just a living rope!”

“I don’t know why I am the only one who felt the carpety surface. Actually, let me go back and see if I can touch it again –”

“STOP! Are you crazy? Didn’t you just hear those two talk about escaping with their lives? And can’t you feel the weight of this thing – the very ground shakes when I hear a movement!”

“He’s right, and from the resonance I hear from its cry, it feels like there is a big cavity somewhere, throbbing with sound. This thing is huge, and probably not safe.”

“Folks, we should be more worried about Mr. Councilman. We have to be even more careful about dealing with him now. Remember what happened to the last man who crossed him?”

“Oh dear, yes. Remember when – ?”

And so on and so forth, away from the women.

In the end, it was decided that they would all go to the Councilman’s home, and assure him that he had the men’s support, no matter how he decided to deal with this new development. And being careful to avoid the vibrating area where the “Roper” was, they made their way to the rose-smelling street, followed by some of the townsfolk.

The women noticed them making their way towards the Councilman’s home, and decided to join them. But Number Three’s wife (let’s call her Three-Oh) decided to retrieve the ladder, and a few of the women thought it would be good to give her company, so they decided to hang back with the elephant. Unfortunately, the elephant had meanwhile looped its trunk around the ladder, and was dragging it back and forth on the ground – half agitatedly, half curiously. It also began to tug at the rope that was tied to the pole – the rope that was the cause of all this trouble – with so much force that the pole began to creak. As the women hovered around the elephant uncertainly, unable to see how to handle the beast, Five-Oh noticed that whenever she approached, it stretched out its long nose towards her. It took them all some time to figure out that it was because of the bag of fruits that she was carrying on her back. Once they laid out the contents of the bag on the ground, the elephant began joyfully scooping it all up. This allowed Three-Oh to safely retrieve her ladder, which it was no longer interested in. Marveling at the huge appetite of this creature as compared to their household chickens, the women made their way to join the others at the Councilman’s home.

On the way, they noticed that there were several people leaving the Councilman’s home. Curious, one of the women asked:

“What happened? We realized that our husbands and others are making their way to the Councilman’s home, and are on our way there. Why are you returning?”

“The Councilman is angry that he was followed by the crowd. He has refused to discuss anything so far, and said he won’t say another word until most of us clear out. He has allowed only the dozen men who brought that Roper thing from the forest, to stay. If you are their wives, you may also be allowed.”

So only Three-Oh, Five-Oh, and a few other women made their way to the Councilman’s home. They saw Mrs. Councilman sending away a few stragglers at the gate, with a tensed look on her face. She saw them, and beckoned them towards her. “Ah, there you are!” she said. “Come on in, it will be good to have you while we deal with this. My husband has been abnormally shaken by that blow, and he is still refusing to talk to the men who brought in that animal. He is even refusing to admit that it *could* be an animal. He’s got ropes on the head, that man. I guess a new animal is too much of a jolt for his world. Come, let us see if there has been any progress while I was out.”

The womenfolk made their way into the large home, and Five-Oh could already hear her husband’s voice coming through from the balcony at the back. At least they are talking, she thought to herself, as they entered, where they could see Number Five deep in conversation with the Councilman, while all the others were listening attentively. The Councilman was still subconsciously rubbing his knee, where he had hurt himself when he fell flat.

“When I felt it, it felt *flat*, Mr. Councilman, like a fan. Now that cannot be a *rope*, can it?”

“Why not? Haven’t you felt your flat broom closely, and seen how it is made of fibers, like a rope? It can definitely be – hold on, what is that I hear? Are you back inside, Mrs.?”

“Yes, it is me, and some of the wives of your friends here,” answered Mrs. Councilman.

“Now why did they have to come for all this? Anyway – listen Five, and you too Twelve – I see no reason to see why a flat, pointed, or even a pillar-like structure cannot be made out of rope. I can easily hand you things made of rope that are of different shapes – you can handle for yourself, and test with our texture-o-meters if you want. Yes, even you, Number Three, have probably not grasped large ropes as I have... if you had, some of them can be as thick as a wall.”

As the Councilman was speaking, Three-Oh sidled up to her husband, and whispered in his ear – “It is me, I am back. I have kept our ladder outside. I had heard that he was not willing to speak – how did you manage to get him talking?”

“We all promised him, repeatedly, that we are not basically against his idea of the Living Rope,” whispered back Number Three. “We said we just wanted to clarify a few minor things. That calmed him down, thankfully. And Mrs. Councilman told him that if he was convinced he was right, what is the harm in listening to us?”

“Are you listening to me, Three? Stop whispering and tell me what you think,” continued the Councilman. “I have not worked it all out, but even a boulder is possible – there are rounded rope baskets that I have encountered once before. The most important thing is to notice how we were on the right track immediately – did we not trap it with a rope? It takes one to know one. Unless that thing had the same nature as the rope, how could we have brought it back from the forest using a rope? And did not Number One and Number Two immediately confirm that it felt like a rope? *That*, my friends, is the critical experiment, the *experiment crucis!*”

At this, Number Twelve's wife stirred. She was a quiet woman by nature, but had both a keen eyesight and insight, and what was more, she was a well-known musician and texturist as well, commanding some respect amongst the men. She had observed the entire saga from beginning to end, and had noticed that her fellow womenfolk were quickly getting lost in this discussion. It felt overly technical, and beside the point. What did all this have to do with the discovery of the nature of that new animal? Shouldn't the townsfolk be interacting with the animal, slowly but surely, and getting to know it bit by bit? What were all these abstract ropey discussions in aid of?

"If I might interrupt a bit, Mr. Councilman," she said, after clearing her throat, "This is Twelve-Oh. I heard your analysis, but also wanted to add something to it. I think some of the other women might agree with me." At this she glanced around, and received encouraging glances from most of the other women, who were fiddling nervously or even yawning, wondering if it was a waste of time to even come here. Poor Five-Oh had even dozed off leaning against a nearby pillar. Mr. Councilman raised his head towards Twelve-Oh's voice irritably, and was about to retort something when he felt his wife's hand on his shoulder, and a small voice in his ear – "Listen to her, dear. The ladies seem to have interacted with that thing after you left, it may be of some help."

"My wife is sharp as a tack, Mr. Councilman," piped up Number Twelve, chuckling. "She keeps me in line, she does! I'd like to know myself what she has got to say!"

"All right, all right," said the Councilman. "But make it quick, we have spent enough time on this already."

"I'll do my best," replied Twelve-Oh. "After you left, we had to retrieve Three-Oh's ladder, and we noticed from the movements that it was approaching my friend Five-Oh." At this, someone gently elbowed a dozing Five-Oh, who jerked awake. "She had fruits from her garden in her bag, and we laid it out on the ground. All of the fruits seemed to disappear into your Living Rope, Mr. Councilman, leading us to think that perhaps you are dealing with a new animal?"

"She is right, Mr. Councilman, all my fruits were gone in a jiffy," added Five-Oh, now wide awake. "I have noticed that chicken take a long while to finish only a handful of seeds, but this was something else! It was really hungry!"

"Animal, huh? That again!" snorted Mr. Councilman, shaking his head. "Listen, like you just said, Five-Oh, this is something else. Whoever heard of an animal that big? None of the animals we have in our town are higher than our knees. And if you remember, they have thin legs and feathery wings. Even the ones that buzz over the flowers, those bees, have the same form. Have you tried catching any of them with a rope?"

"But, Mr. Councilman," continued Twelve-Oh, "what about its plaintive cries? You could hear that, couldn't you, the deep rumbling and trumpeting sounds? And its swinging movements of agitation that shook the ground?"

"This is why I don't listen to women!" retorted Mr. Councilman "You are always fixating on some subjective criteria. Plaintive? Agitation? Hunger? Can you measure those on the sono-meter or the texture-o-meter, my dear? Who can define those emotions precisely? Just because *you* felt agitated, or

even hungry perhaps, is no reason to project it on to what we encountered today! We have to be *scientific* here!”

“But surely, your trusted friends, including my husband, would not lie to you,” persisted Twelve-Oh. “They all perceived different things, and would not have been deceived. If you could take some more time to examine it yourself, instead of deciding right away...”

“Enough!” shot back the Councilman, furious. “I am not saying that the men intended to lie, but the senses are always deceptive! That’s a basic scientific fact! You should know that – haven’t you come across auditory illusions before? Where the sound seems to come from nearby, but is actually far away? Or even the opposite, when the sound actually comes from far away, but we can hear it close by? Doesn’t our town ventriloquist do the exact same thing, at comedy night every week? And all of you laugh well enough!”

“But, Mr. Councilman, sir –”

“No more buts! Since you think that I need to examine that Roper again, I will do it myself for a full two weeks, and show you how it is done. You will all see my report at the end of it. That’s it, and I do not wish to discuss this anymore. Everybody, clear out, and leave me alone – I have work to do! Yes, you too, Mrs. Councilman – I will be in my study. The rest of you, OUT!”

There was nothing else to do, but to traipse back on to the rose-smelling street, and make their way back to their respective homes. The women waved goodbye to Mrs. Councilman as she shut the gate, and continued to discuss with the men on the way back:

“Phew! That was something. At least there were no punishments meted out. Perhaps you could have been a bit more circumspect, my dear Twelve-Oh?”

“Circumspect? You all were going around in circles already, and if I had been any more circumspect, I could not even have opened my mouth!”

“Calm down, he might still be within earshot. I agree with you dear, we are missing out on a wonderful exploration here. A new animal in town! How exciting, how wonderful! I wonder what its real name is?”

“I am just glad I could feed the poor thing. In fact, I will go there in the early morning and feed it some more fruits, and try giving it a few more items from the garden. I wish I could just cut that rope and let it go free...”

“Five-Oh, don’t say that! Just after the Councilman has decided to study it for weeks? And as your husband, you know what will happen to me if you do that?”

“Do you think he will really study it?”

“He is a smart man, and an excellent scientist. Have you ever come across his library? He has a ton of books, I am sure he will do the best scientific analysis that is possible!”

“Maybe. But you know what really bugs me is, why did I feel a carpet when I put out my hand? Was it a carpet made of rope?”

And so on and so forth, away from the Councilman's house, into the evening dusk that the men could not see.

For the next several days, a visitor to the town would have seen a new ritual added to the townsfolk's life. A young lady, sometimes accompanied by others and with kids too, made her way early in the morning to the elephant in the town center, and brought it foods of various kinds, and water in buckets. The little boys would be amazed as they felt their toys leave their hands near the elephant, and one brave little girl even managed to stroke its trunk. But they would all scatter before the stroke of 10 in the morning, when a blind gentleman with a flashy cane and a brisk gait would confidently stride down the street to check on the elephant. He would sit down on a chair at a distance from it, and take down notes with his Braille-embossing tool. Occasionally, he would get up and probe towards the animal with his cane, encountering its different parts. Upon bumping his cane with its leg, tail and trunk multiple times, he would immediately rush back to his chair to make more notes. The whole process was not always smooth – the elephant had already seized his cane and thrown it away multiple times. When that happened, a visitor would see that a passerby (usually a lady) would retrieve the cane and help the gentleman back to his house. And so it went on, day after day for two whole weeks, with no major injuries.

At the end of two weeks, all the residents of the town received two documents in their mailbox. The first was a small note neatly typed up in Braille, and said:

Dear Resident of Blindville,

As promised, I have completed the report on the new arrival to our town, and have attached the report with this note. I have studied it diligently for two weeks, and have checked, and cross-checked my results, and I feel confident that you will all be convinced with the accuracy of my analysis. If anyone wishes to verify the results for themselves, they can repeat my experiments as I have laid them out.

All the best,

Mr. Councilman

The second was a report in booklet form:

PRINCIPIA ROPICA

A Theory of the Rope in Moving Objects

All moving objects in the world are made of tightly bound ropes, in various forms. This explains all the observations that we encounter, including size, shape, texture, sounds, and movements, and the prime example is with the phenomenon in our town: the Roper. As a proof, I shall explain the observations of all the Twelve Observers (Numbers One through Twelve) with the help of this theory, as follows:

Number One: *He observed accurately, that he had a moving rope in his hands. And just as it happens with some old ropes, the end of the rope had lapsed into separate fibers. Hence proved.*

Number Two: *He also observed a rope, even though it was a bit thicker. Ropes come in various sizes, from very thin fibers to large structures, hence this observation is well accounted for. Hence proved.*

Number Three: He observed a much bigger rope, which is why he mistook it for a wall. It was only a short rope, but several forearm-lengths in diameter, possibly covered by another flat layer of rope. Hence proved.

Numbers Four and Five: They observed a flat structure, which can also easily be made by rope. I have discovered with my experiments that it is even possible to make a bed with a thick rope. It is easy to mistake this flatness to be a fan. Hence proved.

Numbers Six, Seven, Eight and Nine. A thick rope hanging vertically can easily be mistaken for a pillar. In fact, a pillar is always fixed to the ground, whereas in this case, there was movement. It has to be a rope. Hence proved.

Number Ten. He has repeatedly insisted that he has felt a carpet. But ropes always have small fibers sticking out of them, and the surface can easily be mistaken to be a carpet. Hence he felt the same thing as Number Three. Hence proved.

Number Eleven: I have made a thorough study of inverted baskets of various kinds, all made with rope. They provide the exact same structure as that described by him, and it is easy to see why he mistook it for a boulder. Hence proved.

Number Twelve: I have also made experiments where, when the rope is made tighter and wound in a spiral, you can make a pointed basket, like the cornucopia basket of Ancient Greece. It is shaped like a horn, and hence can make a resonant cavity to support a sound. That is why a trumpeting sound comes from near what he called the “spear”. It is easy to see that this spear is nothing but another specialized rope. Hence proved.

FRUITS AND GRAVITY

Any good theory must also provide an explanation where one is uncertain of the facts. There have been some rumors from our ladies that fruits kept in the vicinity of the Roper have disappeared. I have created a sub-theory, called the theory of gravity that shows how inaudible and untouchable ropes can pull in objects according to a specific law. The closer the fruit gets to the sensible rope, the faster it disappears due to the force from these insensible ropes. For more details on that, please contact me.

THE SO-CALLED “SNAKE” INCIDENT

Also, coincidentally, my theory provides an explanation for an incident that happened two decades ago in our neighboring forest. One of our older carpenters had encountered the living rope, as such, on the floor of the forest, and being unprepared to handle it, lost his life. His family has told me that they have pursued this incident, and found a description of a pure living rope in some of our historical books, which was labeled as a “snake”. I am not aware of such a thing in my own life, but I am sure that it was a different type of rope, and perhaps the death was by strangulation. My theory is the only one that solves part of this unfortunate incident.

ON THE MATHEMATICS OF SOUNDS AND SHAPES

[This section had several dense pages with a hundred mathematical equations, deriving the precise nature of sounds and shapes that ropes can generate. The mathematical prowess astounded the residents, even though few were able to follow each step of the derivation.]

FINAL REMARKS

*For those who object to my theory, they only have to do one experiment with the Roper. Approach the Roper from the direction of the greatest sound, and you will observe that there are two pointed conical resonant cavities with a thick rope in the middle. You can confirm, again and again, that it is nothing but a flexible rope. That is my **experimentum crucis** that explains both the sound and shape of the Roper.*

Hereafter, my Rope Theory shall be taught in every school, and I will personally write the syllabus and make sure that all the teachers are well aware of its details.

SO IT SHALL BE WRITTEN, AND SO IT SHALL BE DONE.

Thus ended the booklet.

This theory hit the town like a thunderbolt – never before had they seen such brilliance, such mastery of the subject, as was shown in the *Principia Ropica*. The men were entranced by the logical arguments, and realized that the more they thought about it, the more it appeared as if their dear Councilman was correct. What was more, he had even given the solutions to long standing puzzles such as – why does a chicken’s leg have striations? Now they realized the answer: it was a rope! Many cautiously approached the Roper in the center of town, and confirmed the words of the Councilman by performing the *experimentum crucis* a hundred times. They wrote explanatory notes to his theory, for years to come, and all the children came to admire the wonderful theory of the rope that explained almost all moving things in life.

All the children? Well, perhaps not all.

You see, Twelve and Twelve-Oh had a young boy. Let us call him Thirteen. Just like all the boys in that town, he was born blind, but Thirteen was one of the most sensitive children in town. He had an innate genius for music far surpassing his mother’s, and had already created several poems and songs by the time he was sixteen years old. He was very deft with his hands as well, and his clay toys were the envy of all the town children. He did not know much of mathematics, but he was acutely aware that not everyone in town bought the “rope story”, as he called it. Most of the women and little girls still called the Roper an animal, and one young girl had even screamed “It is an animal!” at the top of her lungs before disappearing from town. He also knew that the girl’s father, Zero, had noticed at the risk of his life that at the bottom of the four “pillars” of the roper there were a number of small flat plates – which never received a clear explanation by the rope theorists.

By the time Thirteen reached manhood, the Councilman had long since passed away, and even poor Roper was much more lethargic in its movements. But the Rope Theory had taken complete root in the town, and by some accounts had even traveled across the mountains to other lands. Some of the women had also come to place great faith in the Rope Theory, encouraged by their husbands, and the particularly devout ones had even begun to lose eyesight and resort to the cane like the men. Thirteen had been “shown the ropes” especially vehemently by his 6th grade teacher, who could smack the desk particularly hard whenever Thirteen would raise objections regarding the theory. One fine day in school, his teacher

lost his temper when Thirteen told him that many women knew better about the Roper than the Councilman (may his soul rest in peace), and sent him to the Principal. As he wrote his lines in detention (*I will not insult Mr. Councilman's knowledge ever again*) he resolved to say nothing about it to anyone at school.

Well, not completely. There always has to be an exception. He would share his thoughts with his close friend Fourteen, who humored him even if he didn't agree with his crazy ideas. Fourteen accompanied Thirteen as Thirteen spent hour after hour with the "animal" in the town center – caressing it, talking to it, and even singing to it now and then when no one else was within earshot. Fourteen knew his friend was nuts, but in a good way. And so the years passed peacefully, and Thirteen became the best musician in town, and an extremely skilled architect as well. Until, that is, Thirteen hit the age of thirty, and generated his own thunderbolt.

It happened this way. Thirteen and Fourteen were on one of their usual evening walks to the center of town. Fourteen was deep in conversation with Thirteen about a mathematical theorem just as they approached the animal and sat themselves down near it:

"No, Thirteen, it is important to solve this equation even for you as an architect, it will help you structure your arches in a more efficient way!"

"On *that* I agree with you dear Fourteen, it may well do so. But when you claim, skilled as you are, that your equations will replace the *entire* study of architecture, well, there I have to draw the line. I can feel – *within my bones* – whether a given structure will stand or fall. It is an art my friend – architecture is just frozen music. And music moves everything, doesn't it, Eli?"

Eli was Thirteen's name for the elephant, who harrumphed his agreement. It always surprised Fourteen how Thirteen was able to gain a predictable response from his "Eli". As far as he knew, that response was not predicted by the *Principia Ropica*. Perhaps it was a modified echo? While he pondered about this, he felt the rustle of his friend getting up and approaching Eli, and heard him croon a song to Eli as usual. "This is always his favorite!" remarked Thirteen, and continued his singing.

Then, abruptly, Fourteen could hear the song stop.

A few footsteps, and then no sound. And then, just as abruptly, the clink of the walking cane being thrown away.

"Thirteen! Are you all right? Did your cane fall down?"

Silence.

"Stop the games man, I can hear you breathing!" said Fourteen, getting up in his turn and reaching out his hand. Finding Thirteen's shoulder, he shook him. "Hey! Did you fall asleep on your feet? What's up?"

"I saw him."

"Eh? Saw? What's that again?"

"I swear to you, I *saw* him. It was just a quick clap, I admit, but I *saw* him with my eyes!"

“Your eyes? You mean these on your face? Ok, you have officially lost it, my friend. You have been poring over those old books again, haven’t you? About those who could supposedly “see”? I have told you a million times that those are just fairy tales to control people, but do you listen?”

“No Fourteen, listen, I am serious. I saw a shape, a large shape. There was some activity in the front, I couldn’t say what it was. The shape was right where I just was, singing to Eli. The shape *was* Eli. I SAW HIM!”

“Okay, calm down. Do you see anything now?”

“No.”

“And you are sure you didn’t get a knock on the head right? It is amazing what a knock on the head can do – ”

“And I will knock *you* on the head if you go on preaching. It was not an illusion, and I am not making it up. Listen, I have told *you* a million times that I suspect the women in our town have another sense. My mother herself has mentioned it to me when I was young. It just happened when I was right in the middle of my song. Perhaps I should get into the zone again – ”

“The only thing you are getting into is the doctor’s office. Come with me, Thirteen, it is getting late anyway. Let us get you checked out quickly, at least once.”

Disregarding Thirteen’s protests, Fourteen dragged him to the local doctor, who promptly diagnosed a case of “abnormal phantasie” and asked him to increase his sleep by three hours per night as a treatment. “Your friend is not getting enough sleep, so he is dreaming during daytime” said the doctor to Fourteen. “A few weeks of ten-hour sleeps should take care of his problem of ‘seeing his ideas’.”

Over the next few days, the only ones who responded positively to Thirteen were Twelve and Twelve-Oh, his parents. His mother realized that her early lessons were bearing fruit at last, was particularly proud of him, and told him to continue his pursuits. The others in the town were not too happy – all they saw was the young man, who was formerly so active, creative and industrious, spending day after day whiling away his time in the town square, humming to that Roper thing. They could hear him abruptly stop, walk around (sometimes without his cane), and then commence his mad crooning. “What a waste!” they said, shaking their heads. “He has snapped completely. Why doesn’t his family or friends take care of him?” Fourteen had been instructed by Twelve-Oh to leave her son alone, and he had reluctantly agreed, on the condition that he was allowed to check on the physical condition of his friend once daily.

And that is how he realized, one rainy day, that Thirteen was missing. Not in the town square, not in his room, workshop, or even in the library.

And astonishingly, Eli was missing as well. Gone, without a warning.

The news set the whole town abuzz. What had happened to them? Thirteen’s parents seemed annoyingly unperturbed. Observations and opinions came thick and fast – he had been last noticed to be sitting in the town square late on the previous night, even in the rain, but no one had paid attention as this had become the trend over the past several days. Someone else noticed that the rope to the Roper had been cut, and that there were flat plate-like grooves in the wet mud leading out into the forest. When the rain finally

stopped, a team waded out and explored as far as they dared, while tracing the tracks in the ground. They had to abandon the search once they hit rocky terrain, where there were no more prints.

One day followed another, and yet no whisper of Thirteen or the Roper. Fourteen was nearly beside himself with worry. Sometimes, lying awake at night, he thought he “saw” glimpses of the ceiling. “Worrying about that idiot, I am going mad just like him,” he thought. Days turned into weeks, weeks turned into months, and Fourteen continued visiting the Twelves. It was nearly three years later, when almost the entire town of Blindville had given up hope of Thirteen ever returning, that it happened.

It started with a slight rumble of the ground at the crack of dawn, when the cocks had just finished crowing. People woke up hurriedly, hardly believing their feet, when they noticed that the rumbling was accompanied by a cacophony of sounds. Some of them recognized one of the sounds as the trumpeting of the kind that used to issue from Roper, but there were so many others – crashing, thumping, growling, screeching, puffing and every other kind of sound mixed in.

Fourteen ran straight to the house of Thirteen’s parents, calling at the top of his voice:

“Mr. Twelve! Mrs. Twelve-Oh! Do you hear that? Do you think this has something to do with Thirteen?”

“Calm down kid, just go and get that ladder from the Threes’ house. We will all go up on our roof, it is closest to the town’s gate,” said Mrs. Twelve-Oh. Fourteen went off to do as asked, and before long, all three of them were on the roof. “Have you been doing those exercises like I asked you to? How long do your glimpses last now?” she asked. “They last about five ticks of the clock, Mrs. Twelve-Oh!” responded Fourteen. “The din is only increasing, let me try and get into my zone and focus”. “Do so, and describe what you see, especially for my husband. I can do it, but I would rather hear it from you,” said Mrs. Twelve-Oh. And so Fourteen began to describe.

“My goodness, what a sight! There are so many moving shapes, and those ones are lifting their rope like extensions accompanying those trumpeting sounds, Mrs. Twelve-Oh!”

“That is a herd of *elephants*, Fourteen. Eli is one among them. Go on!”

“A herd? No wonder the ground is shaking like this. See how they are getting closer to the town’s boundary! And that is not all, there are other creatures, shorter, with hair surrounding what I think are their faces, thick hair – ”

“Those are *lions*, male ones too. The ones without hair are the females. Go on!”

“Yes! I don’t understand what you have taught me about these things called colors yet, but I see some darker creatures, with a *lot* more hair, and huge mouths!”

“Those are the *bears*, dear. What more do you see?”

“I see some types of chicken but with big wings, flying in the air, some shapes on the ground with horns of different types, and what look like wriggling ropes (are they snakes, I wonder?) near the feet of somebody else who is in front of them all... two people...”

“Yes, those are eagles, deer and snakes. The people – do you recognize them?” asked Mrs. Twelve-Oh.

“I am sure I know who one of them is,” said Mr. Twelve from behind. “Look, and confirm for me!”

“Indeed Mr. Twelve, one of them is Thirteen! That fool, that crazy, crazy guy, look at his hair! It hasn’t touched the scissors for years – HEY YOU! DUMBO!” roared Fourteen, waving his arms wildly. “He sees us, Mrs. Twelve-Oh, he is looking straight at us! Ah drat, I need to focus again...”

“Fourteen, you’ll take my ears off. What is the point of learning to see and then going deaf? Now tell me, do you recognize who is next to him?”

“One minute Mrs. Twelve-Oh, one minute, my eyes are adjusting again... ah. Now I see, a young woman. Wow, what a young lady she is! Her hair is blazing in the sunlight, her face is – ”

“Before you wax eloquent, young man, tell me... can you recognize her?”

“Sorry Mrs. T – no I don’t. Actually, I think I do, but I am not sure. She is vaguely familiar. Do you recognize her?”

“I do Fourteen, but that can wait. Let us go down and greet them, quite a crowd has gathered and I think they will all need some guidance pretty soon. Can you help us get down the ladder again?”

Seeing in small snippets, and abandoning his cane completely, Fourteen guided his friend’s parents down to the road, and made his way to the front of the crowd. Upon seeing them all come down, Thirteen, who had complete sight just like his mother, made a quick wave with his hands while the girl next to him shouted something. All the animals behind them came to a halt at that sign and sound, and a hush gradually descended, punctured only by a few swings of trunks and a few scraping sounds.

Thirteen and the young woman came striding forward, smiling radiantly. The women who could still see, and the little girls waved happily at them, and were surprised to see Thirteen – a man – return their greeting. The entire crowd knew that something immense was happening, but had no words for it. They could feel that they were in the presence of an immense, throbbing ocean of life. Meanwhile, Thirteen had greeted his parents and his friend, scolded him (“Still think I am off my head, eh? So my mom taught you to see a bit, did she?”) and clapped his hands to get everyone’s attention. And he spoke.

“Good morning, to you all. I owe you all my apologies for disappearing for all these years, but I am sure you will understand why pretty soon. I had always felt that there was more to things than what I was taught, and that we can actually learn to *see*, like they used to call it in the old days, and I am glad to tell you that I have achieved it – I can now *see* all the time!”

Gasps from the men, mutters of “preposterous” and “fairy tales” and “madness!” filled the air, while all the womenfolk merely smiled.

“And it is not just me, but the ladies in this town can also see – a fact that they gave up trying to convince us men about ages ago,” continued Thirteen, “and it was thanks to them, and also Mr. Councilman’s treatment of poor Eli here, that my eyes were literally opened. All those days that you thought I was going crazy in front of this animal – yes, these are *all* animals that you just heard – I was training myself, by focusing my singing and my mind to the point that I could see Eli clearly in front of me. And when I saw, *truly* saw, I could not take it for one more moment, and hence I cut the rope binding Eli and brought him into the forest.”

He paused for breath, looked around at the young woman next to him, and continued.

“And when I got deep into the forest, I ended up meeting this young lady standing next to me, who became very dear to me over the years, who also once belonged to our town. Remember the girl who once screamed ‘It is an animal!’ in the town square, and disappeared, much to the chagrin of her now departed parents? She is before you here, right now!”

A murmur of recognition swept through the crowd. “*That’s* why you looked so familiar!” burst out Fourteen, “I knew I had seen you before, you’re Zero’s daughter! I must say, I have forgotten your name, though...”

“My name is Sophia,” said the woman, in a clear voice. “That is not the name you previously knew me by, but that is what it is now. I rashly left home all those years ago, as I could not bear the nonsense that was being spread by Mr. Councilman and his followers. Instead of welcoming the first real animal that had crossed our path, which could have opened our doors to all this teeming variety of life, everyone got fixated on the rope, and began building fantasy worlds propped up by mathematics and completely lost their way. Their minds were chained even more than poor Eli here.”

“I thought I had achieved something tremendous by learning to see,” said Thirteen. “But I realized that Sophia was far ahead of me. She had learnt the *names* of the animals, and learnt to *speak* to them, all by herself. And what’s more, she also learned to *tame* them, as many of them will not spare your life if you startle them in the forest. She had developed that skill, and she taught it to me as well, over the last three years, though I must admit I am still learning.”

“As am I,” said Sophia, smiling at Thirteen, “but you were on the right track for a long time. It is my understanding that when we pursue something sincerely, new abilities always open up. Isn’t that what happened with you Fourteen? Did you not desire to really know whether your friend was alive?”

Fourteen was speechless. “Y-yes” he gulped finally.

“Anyway, we are both here now,” continued Sophia “and we will teach you how to see, and how to interact with all these friends behind me. All of you can do it! It is easy, yes, but sometimes – the easy is hard.”

Applause rang out from the crowd – they did not know why they were clapping yet, but it had dawned on everyone, down to the youngest child, that something momentous had just happened.

“Thank you,” said Sophia. “I will now send most of my friends back into the forest, and invite a few of them at a time into town. Remember this scene! Remember these sounds, and this life!” So saying, Sophia went around selecting Eli, a lion, a deer and a snake, to enter the town. Thirteen selected a monkey, which lodged itself on his shoulder. Sophia then waved once more and gave another call, and the rest of the entire retinue turned around to head back to the forest. Their ruffling, trumpeting, thudding of feet, and scraping of hooves continued to sound for a while, as that gigantic army returned to its home.

Thirteen walked on with Sophia into the crowd, embracing and clasping hands with his friends, family and other townsfolk. A breath of fresh air entered the town, as the selected animals were also led, one by one, inside. Pretty soon, the temple and the town center became the centers of a new kind of activity –

everyday the entire town got to meet a few new animals. The rope went back to being used in its humble role – to bind an enclosure that could serve as a new school. Mr. Councilman’s *Principia Ropica* served only as a warning in the curriculum to the excesses of intellectual fantasies.

One by one, the residents of the town began to see. Under the guidance of Sophia and Thirteen, they even learned to speak to the animals in the surroundings of the temple. And each one slowly began to speak its own story – about how it made the journey to earth, how there are yet more worlds that they could learn to see, the secrets of the stars and the planets, the language of the snow and the sunlight, the history of the earth and its metals... each animal opened up a new library of insight for the townsfolk. A new School of Knowledge bloomed, which also led to the townsfolk inventing wonderful new instruments.

And that is how a new chapter began in Blindville. In a few years, they changed the name to Lightsville, and that is how you know – that they all lived happily ever after.

THE END