

Blind Men and the Elephant - James Baldwin

THERE were once six blind men who stood by the side of a road every day and asked the people who went by for money. One day they heard the sound of many people coming along the road and called out to find out what was happening. A woman told them that an elephant was being brought down the road to work in the nearby forest. They had often heard of elephants, but they had never seen one. How could they have, for they were blind?

They asked the woman to tell them when the elephant was getting close to them. When she told them it was near, they walked out onto the road and called to the owner. They asked if he might stop for a short time so that they could see the great animal. They could not see it with their eyes, but they thought that by touching it with their hands they could learn what it looked like.

The first one happened to put his hand on the elephant's side. "Well, well!" he said, "now I know all about elephants. They must look just like a wall."

The second felt one of the long teeth that were sticking out of the side of the elephant's mouth. "My brother," he said, "you are wrong. It is not at all like a wall. It is round and smooth and has a sharp point at one end. It looks more like a spear than any other thing I can think of."

The third happened to take hold of the elephant's long nose. "Both of you are wrong," he said. "Anybody who knows anything can see that an elephant must look like a fat snake."

The fourth reached out his arms and put them around one of

the elephant's legs. "Oh, how blind you are!" he said. "It is very clear to me that it is round and tall like a tree."

The fifth man was very tall, and he happened to take hold of one of the elephant's big ears. "Even without eyes you should be able to see that this animal is not like any of the things that you name," he said. "It looks like a very big fan."

The sixth man was very old and slow, and it was some time before he could find the elephant at all. At last he took hold of the animal's tail. "Oh foolish men!" he cried. "You can't be thinking right today. This elephant is not like a wall, or a spear, or a snake, or a tree; and it does not look like a fan at all. Any man who sees it must know that it looks just like a rope."

Then the elephant moved on. The six blind men sat by the side of the road all day, and talked to each other about what they thought it looked like. They could not agree, and called each other bad names for thinking something different.

Each believed that he knew the answer, but all were wrong because they only knew part of the truth. People who have eyes sometimes act just as foolishly.