

“The Gothamites ”

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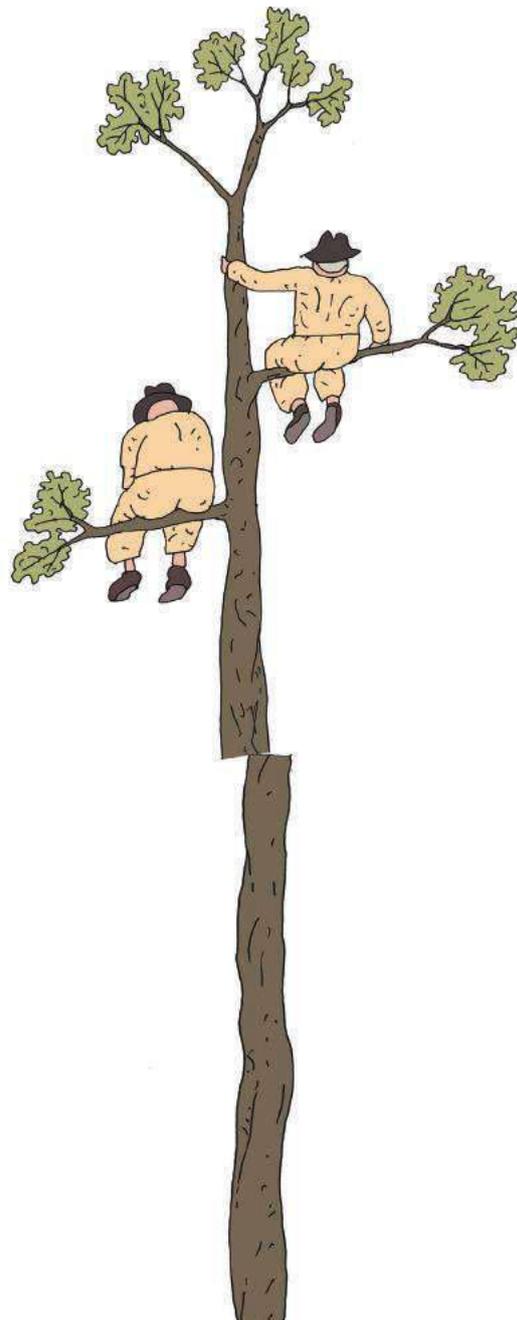
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Far away in Turkey Land live a people called the Gothamites. They are known for their bright intelligence, which means they have endless work to do and lots of advice to give in places far from their homeland. At the same time, this also means that things back in Turkey Land tend to get out of hand! So, in order to be home more often and make it thrive once again, they decide to become the most foolish people around – no one wants foolish advice! Unfortunately, it’s not exactly smooth sailing after that...

Raud’s story retells a work by the classic writer Friedrich Reinhold Kreutzwald, who is considered the father of Estonian literature.

Award:

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Reading sample

BUILDING THE DEBATING CHAMBER

The very next day the Gothamites met again to discuss the types of foolishness with which they should launch this new stage in their lives. First and foremost they unanimously agreed that they should build a new debating chamber at the town council's expense where they could put their heads together and come up with any manner of idiotic, stupid ideas.

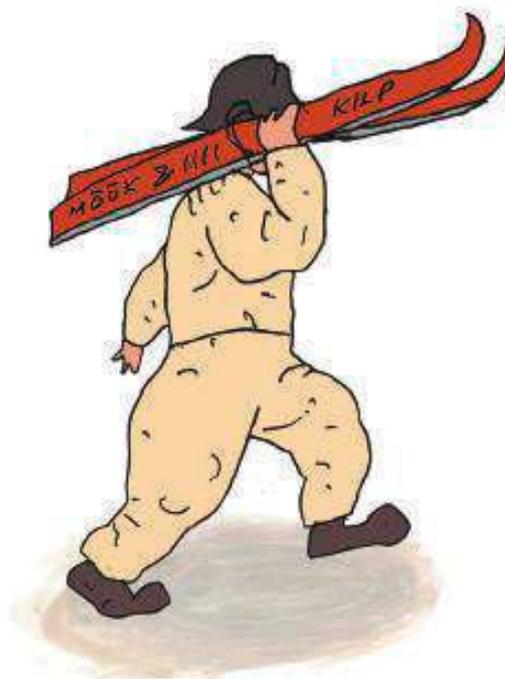
The Gothamites' previous wisdom did not vanish all at once; instead it faded little by little, like a flame dimming as the lamp-oil runs out. So at first they had enough sense to worry about putting logs aside for the building. They set off together for the forest beyond the great hill, chopped down large numbers of trees, lopped off the branches and stripped them bare. They then began to consider how to transport the logs to the construction site. Some thought they should set up a giant crossbow and fire the logs to the right place as if they were arrows. But they couldn't find a crossbow that would do and so they had to drag the logs themselves.

With a great heave they hauled each log to the top of the hill and carried it down the other side. Finally they were dragging the very last log down the hill when suddenly it fell out of their hands and rolled to the construction site all by itself.

On seeing this one of the Gothamites shouted, "What a bunch of idiots we are! We've done all that hard work and didn't stop to think that the logs could just as easily take themselves down the hill!"

"Not to worry," responded another. "We can put it right. Let's take the logs back up and make our job easier by letting them roll down."

Some days later all the construction materials were in place – logs, stones, lime and all the other items that they might need to raise the building. They wasted no time and set to work straight away, making a three-cornered foundation for the room: a standard square building was not what the Gothamites wanted; no indeed, what they had in mind was



an artistic, triangular construction that would immediately catch the eye of any stranger. The serious nature and common purpose of their work meant the three walls rose quickly and in a short time were ready. Just as quickly the whole building was topped with a wonderful triangular tiled roof. A high, wide gate was fitted in one of the walls.

HOW THE GOTHAMITES GREW SALT IN A FIELD

It so happened that wars were raging the world over and the price of salt rose sharply in Gotham. Now the Gothamites were rightly worried about how they could get hold of precious salt more cheaply. After a great deal of thought they finally agreed that the most profitable method would be to sow salt in a field then cut it down in the autumn when they harvested the rye or the barley. And they wouldn't have to worry about being swindled by sharp traders who might mix dried snow in with the salt and sweeten it.

No sooner said than done. A large area of community land was ploughed and carefully harrowed and sown full of tightly packed salt grains. From then on, the Gothamites took very good care of the salt field. Each corner was guarded by a man with a gun to ensure that the birds didn't peck the seeds away.

It wasn't long before the salt field took on a beautiful green hue. Contentedly the Gothamites would check each day to see that the salt plants were growing straighter and would tell each other that they could hear the salt growing with their own ears. They put even more guards around the salt field to stop the cows and other animals from getting in and ruining their valuable crop. The guards were given firm orders not to take so much as a single step into the field themselves.

One morning something incredible happened. The guards had accidentally fallen asleep and they awoke to find a herd of cows trampling the field.

The guards were flabbergasted. Paralysed by fear they ran around in circles like headless chickens, not knowing what to do. They couldn't drive the animals out because they were all strictly forbidden from entering the field. And anyhow, they realised that the damage would be even worse if the cows were joined by people trampling the salt.

Finally the poor men plucked up courage and scurried into Gotham to tell the others of their misfortune. Their story caused great dismay and shock. The wise men had a meeting and discussed the matter from top to bottom, this way and that, inside out.

Some of them turned grey through the sheer effort of all the thinking when, finally, they reached agreement on how to make their uninvited guests leave. Four wise men used a frame to lift the chief guard onto their shoulders and carried him into the field. The chief guard allowed himself to be dragged from cow to cow on the frame, brandishing a long whip, until the very last animal had been driven out. He had not so much as brushed the surface of the ground or damaged the growing salt in any way at all!

The days passed and finally the time came to cut the salt. All the Gothamites gathered at the field, holding their sickles, rakes and the other tools they needed. But when the first man took hold of the salt crop to cut it, he had to let it go with a cry. The ripe salt was so acidic that that it had burnt his fingers!

Nothing came of the salt harvest because no-one could bear to burn their hands. Naturally, the Gothamites pondered long and hard why the salt in their field had grown so acidic, although they could never quite get to the bottom of it. Some of them finally came to the conclusion that perhaps too much manure had been put on the field in the spring and had made the salt much too strong. So they decided that the following year they would leave one part of the salt field completely manure-free.

With great sadness the Gothamites began their homeward walk. In spring they had sown their last salt in the earth with such great hope and now they had not so much as a pinch. Sighing bitterly they looked for the last time at the ruined salt field. If they had looked more carefully they would have noticed that the only thing growing in it was nettles.

What can you do – the Gothamites had definitely gone soft in the head.

Translated by Susan Wilson

