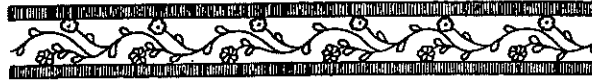


The Wooden Sword

AFGHANISTAN



Once there was a king whose worrisome thoughts swirled around his head like a storm. He feared that his armies would lose battles. He fretted that his treasury would one day be empty. He suspected that his ministers were disloyal. He had no peace.

One day as the king stood at his window, gazing at the crowds in the marketplace beyond the palace walls, he wondered, "How do common people find happiness? Do they worry as much as I do?" He sighed and said to himself, "I wish I were a bird who could fly off and listen to their daily conversations."

Suddenly, the king's eyes brightened with an idea. He called his servants to bring him the crudest cloth they could find. He ordered royal seamstresses to assemble a suit of rags and a hooded cloak. When servants delivered these clothes to the royal chamber, the king sent everyone away and eyed the rough attire. Standing before his mirror, he carefully removed his crown, smudged his face with ashes, and dressed himself in the ragged clothes. He appeared every bit a beggar. Pleased with this disguise, he crept from the palace. Even the guards did not recognize him.

The disguised king walked freely through the crowds in the bazaar all day, observing the ways of common people. It was nightfall when he passed a rundown cottage at the edge of the city. Peeking through the window, the king saw a man sitting at a crude wooden table, eating a loaf of bread. The man's smile lit up the dingy room. The king eyed the meal and the humble

surroundings. He wondered, "Why is this poor man so happy?" Unable to quell his curiosity, the king knocked on the door.

"I am a poor beggar," the king said in his humblest voice. "Can you spare some food?"

"Certainly!" said the poor man. "A guest is always a welcome blessing in this house. I do not have much, but what I have is yours."

The poor man's generosity dumbfounded the king. After the two seated themselves, the poor man piously blessed and cut the bread. The king accepted a share of the loaf and watched the man gaily chew the bread as if it were the finest meal.

"Why are you so happy?" the king asked.

The poor man replied, "It was a good day! I am a cobbler who repairs old shoes. Today I fixed enough shoes to earn a loaf of bread."

"But what if tomorrow you do not earn your bread?" the king inquired.

The poor man looked deep into the king's eyes. He saw how the strain of worry had furrowed his brow. The poor man smiled and simply replied, "Day by day, I have faith. All will be well."

The king mused over these words and thought to himself, "This man's faith brings him happiness. He is naive. I wonder how happy he would remain in times of difficulty."

The king left the cottage planning to test the man's faith.

The next morning when the man went out to ply his trade as a cobbler, he discovered that the king had issued a new law. A large sign in the marketplace read, "It is henceforth illegal for anyone to repair shoes. When shoes wear out, people must buy new ones."

The poor man sighed and assured himself, "All will be well." He glanced about the market and noticed an old woman struggling with a bucket of water at the well. He rushed to assist her, and for his trouble, she handed him a coin. As the poor man fingered the coin in his hand, his faith in the future shone brightly. He carried water for people all day and by sunset had enough money to buy himself dinner.

Curious to see if his new friend could be happy without a meal, the king,

again disguised as a beggar, returned to the poor man's house. To his surprise, through the window he saw the man eating bread and drinking a glass of wine.

He knocked on the door, and the poor man brought him immediately to the table. The king asked, "How is it that tonight you drink wine and eat bread? I have seen the new law posted in the market, so surely you did not fix shoes today!"

"No, indeed, I did not," explained the poor man. "Today I earned more than before by carrying water for people. The loss of my first profession has made room for my new one!"

"What if no one wants you to carry water tomorrow?" asked the king.

The poor man looked into the king's eyes and simply replied, "Day by day, I have faith. All will be well."

The king left the cottage, bewildered by the poor man's faith. "He has not tasted hard times," thought the king.

The next day when the poor man went to the well, he saw that the king had made yet another new law. The king's messengers posted a sign on the well: "It is now illegal for anyone to carry water for others."

The poor man considered this predicament for a moment and looked about the marketplace. He noticed men carrying wood from the forest on their backs. He approached a woodcutter and asked if he needed an assistant.

"Certainly!" was the reply, and the poor man spent the day cutting and carrying wood to market. By nightfall, he had earned enough to buy bread, wine, and cheese for his dinner.

When the king, again dressed as a beggar, arrived at the cottage, the poor man invited him to come inside. To the king's surprise, the poor man shared an even finer meal.

"How did you earn your keep today?" inquired the king.

"I am a woodcutter now," said the poor man, smiling broadly. "As I told you, I have faith. As you can see, things are getting better all the time!"

The king grumbled as he left the cottage. "I must be far more clever in testing this man. Surely when he cannot buy food for his belly, his faith will waver."

The next day when the poor man went to join the other woodcutters, he found them surrounded by palace soldiers. The captain loudly announced, "The king has commanded that all woodcutters must report to the palace gate to become guards."

The captain shuffled the poor man off with the rest. The poor man, now dressed stiffly in a colorful uniform with a sharp sword in a sheath at his side, stood guard all day at the palace gate. As the sun set, he went to the captain of the soldiers to request some pay so that he could buy his evening meal.

"Palace guards are paid once a month," the captain curtly replied.

With a sigh, the poor man set out for home. As he passed the pawnshop, an idea came to him. He sold the metal blade of the sword for enough money to buy food for a month. "With what I earn by the end of the month as a guard," he thought, "I can easily buy back the sword and return it to its rightful place."

The poor man rushed home and set the table with a fine meal. Before he ate, however, he busied himself carving a wooden blade to fill the now empty sheath he would wear at his side the next day.

The king, once again disguised in rags, returned to the cottage and saw the food on the table. "How did you buy this food?" he asked in amazement, knowing that the man could not possibly have earned any money that day. The poor man explained, "I sold the metal blade of the sword for enough money to buy food for a month."

Never suspecting that the ragged beggar who stood before him was in fact the king, the poor man showed the wooden blade he was carving. "This will replace the blade I sold until I earn enough money to buy it back again."

"That is not so clever of you," said the king. "What if you must draw your sword tomorrow?"

Once again the poor man just replied, "Day by day, I have faith. All will be well."

"I have him now!" the king chuckled under his breath as he left the cottage. "His faith will not be so strong in the dungeon!"

The next day the poor man stood in uniform once again, guarding the palace gate. The captain of the king's soldiers, followed by a noisy crowd,

dragged a man accused of being a thief. The captain led the thief up to the poor man at the palace gate and gruffly said, "This thief has stolen a melon. The king has ordered you to cut off his head immediately."

The thief begged for mercy. He fell to his knees weeping. "Please do not kill me! I had no food and my children were hungry."

The poor man, guarding the gate, stood tall in his uniform and calmly considered the awkward situation. He thought, "If I pull out my sword to kill this man, I, too, will be beheaded. Everyone will see that the royal blade is missing!" He pondered a bit more and then solemnly reminded himself, "All will be well."

As the large crowd watched, he lifted his arms to the heavens and cried out, "Blessed be the Most High! If this man is truly guilty, give me the strength to serve the king's command. But if this man is innocent," he said, gripping the handle of the sword at his side, "let the blade of my sword be turned to wood!"

Dramatically, he drew his wooden sword and thrust it high above his head. A gasp went through the crowd. "It's a miracle!" people exclaimed. Immediately, the man accused of theft was set free.

At that moment, out of the crowd stepped the king. He approached the poor man in the guard uniform and said, "Do you recognize me?"

The man replied, "You are the king."

"No," replied the king, "I am the beggar whom you fed each night."

The poor man's face spread with a smile, for he recognized the king's furrowed brow.

The king smiled in return and said, "Tonight and every night, my friend, you will dine with me! Your light of faith can help me chase away my dark fears of the future."

And so it came to pass that the man, who owned little but was rich in faith, became the wise and trusted adviser to the king.