

A TALE OF TWO SOLDIERS

There were once two good friends who had been soldiers together in a foreign campaign. Each had sworn to always stand by the other, and to share whatever he had. One was tall, slender and fleet of foot, and the other was slow and sturdy. He had become lame through his injuries in battle, and had difficulty keeping pace with his swift comrade. One day, as they neared the end of their journey home, the two friends came to a great forest. They agreed that the quicker of the two should go on ahead. The slower would follow at his own pace, and they would surely meet up later. So, the tall soldier marched forward and his friend soon lost sight of him among the trees.

As night came, the soldier who had gone ahead found that he was still deep in the forest, and needed to find somewhere to sleep. A little to the side of the path there was a huge green spruce tree, under whose thick branches he made a shelter for the night. As he slept, his slow and sturdy friend kept on walking through the night, and passed him by in the dark — long before midnight when the sleeping soldier was awakened by a terrible noise above him.

He rubbed his eyes and silently turned to look up into the branches of the tree. There, sitting together on the same branch were three hideous, leather winged devils, each carrying a flaming torch, talking and laughing loudly. The soldier wasn't afraid exactly, but he knew that it would be best if they didn't know that he was there. So, he laid down again in the shadows and, scarcely breathing, kept very quiet while he listened carefully to their conversation.

“So, my friends” said the first demon to the others “what delights are going to come your way?”

“My best is going to be the rich merchant in the next town.” answered the second. “He is already lying in his deathbed, but still fears more for his money than for his soul or his family.”

“And can nothing be done to save him?” asked the third.

“Bah!” exclaimed the second. “Nobody knows this except me. If somebody were to put a poisonous creature under his bed, then he would be cured immediately. If not, then tomorrow he is mine.” He then turned to the first demon, and asked him “And, what delights are going to come your way?”

“To me?” asked the first. “There is a barber in the second town who is lying in his deathbed. Everyday his soul hovers between life and death, and in a few days he will be mine.”

“And can nothing be done to save him?” asked the third.

“Of course” said the first “but nobody knows this except me. There is a turtle living in the gully in front of his house. This creature can only be caught with

rod and line using a silver hook with golden barbs. If somebody were to catch the turtle, and use its fat as a salve for the barber's chest, then he would be cured immediately. If not then in three days, he is mine."

Then the two demons who had already spoken, asked the first "And, what delights are going to come your way?"

"That is a good question" answered the first laughing. "What do you say to a king who is driving himself to an early grave with anger, frustration, worry and sorrow. The old city wasn't good enough for this proud monarch, so he had a new one built with wide streets. It has many great palaces and monuments, all decorated with marble and gold, but no water. There isn't a single spring, fountain or well in the place. His people and their animals must either die of thirst, or leave him to die alone."

"And can nothing be done to save him?" asked the other two.

"Oh yes, but nobody knows this except me. There is water enough under the great stone in the city square. All somebody has to do is release it, and the king will give him his daughter's hand in marriage and make him heir to his throne. If not, within seven days the king's anger at his own failure will drive him to his own deathbed, and he will be mine."

The three continued their terrible discussion until it started to get light in the east. As the bells in the distance rang for Lauds, they extinguished their torches and stretched their huge leathery wings. Then, with the same deafening noise, of beating wings and wind in the branches, with which they had arrived, the three flew off. When they were no bigger than three tiny birds in the distance, the soldier crept out of his hiding place.

He had walked for only a few hours when he came to edge of the woods. Through the trees, in the distance he saw a town, and turned his steps in that direction. As he crossed the fields he found a viper, which he caught behind the head and carried with him. In the town, he came to a stately house which was draped in mourning. At the door, he asked if it was the house of the rich merchant.

"It is" answered the servant "but we have no time for beggars. My master is dying, and he can do nothing for you."

"No, but I can do something for him" replied the soldier.

"How?" asked the servant. "Every doctor from near and far has been here, and could do nothing for him. Yet, you a poor beggar say that you can."

"Yes I can" answered the soldier with determination, and pushed past the servant.

After some thought, the servant showed him the way. Even if what the beggar tried couldn't help his master, it could no longer do any harm. They climbed the stairs and entered a room with many fine people standing around the merchant's bed. The soldier pushed himself to the front and released the poisonous snake under the bed. When the others first saw what he did, they giggled and snickered, But, then they gasped, as the dying man opened his eyes and looked around him.

By evening, the merchant was on his feet and celebrating his recovery with the soldier. He promised him a great reward and asked him to stay as his guest in house. The soldier graciously accepted the reward, but agreed to stay only one night. It was not possible for him to stay longer because there was a sick barber in the next town who needed his help. If he didn't arrive the next day, it would be too late to save him.

Early the next morning, the soldier, now a rich man in fine clothes, set off for the next town. He arrived at midday and sought out the house of the barber. It was easy to find because the town was small, and the barber was well known, and very rich. When he was presented to the barber's wife, he promised that he could save her husband, but to do so he first needed a silver fishhook with golden barbs. She immediately sent for a goldsmith, who made the required instrument the very same afternoon.

While the goldsmith was making the hook, the soldier prepared a rod and line. He then went outside into the street, found the drain and removed the stone cover. When the hook was ready, he cast his line into the gully. The turtle bit immediately, and the soldier pulled it out.

He then did exactly what the demon had said. He cut the fat out of the creature, and smeared it like a salve on the barber's chest. The barber made a miraculous recovery and rewarded his saviour generously. He invited the soldier to remain as his guest, but the soldier couldn't stay and left the next morning He was needed by the king.

The new city had wide streets and many great palaces and monuments, all decorated with marble and gold, but it had no water. There wasn't a single spring, fountain or well in the place. All the water which people needed to wash, to cook — and to drink — had to be brought in from elsewhere in huge barrels. The king had offered every reward which he could think of, including his daughter's hand in marriage, but it was no use. The city remained dry, and every day became more and more empty as the people moved out. And, as each person left, the king's spirit broke a little more. When the soldier arrived in the city, the king had little hope but still sent for him. He not only promised his beautiful daughter's hand, but also to make him his heir if he could give the city water.

With this promise, the soldier marched to the great square in the centre of the city. In the middle of the square he found a large round stone. He put his shoulder to it and rolled it to the side. As it moved, a puddle of water appeared

where it had stood. He pushed it further, and more water bubbled up. A little further, and a fountain of water shot up into the air and then fell back. When the soldier had finished, there was a steady stream of clear cool water flowing across the square, from the spring at the base of the large rock.

When the king saw what the young man had done, he hurried into the square and took him into his arms as if he was his own son. Then he led the soldier back into the palace where he presented him to his daughter. Happily, the beautiful princess liked the tall, handsome young man, and it wasn't long before she agreed to become his wife.

The old king called on all of his heralds to go through the wide streets and narrow lanes of the city to announce the coming wedding of his daughter to the hero who had brought water to the city. Everywhere the heralds went, their trumpet calls were met with loud cheers, the banging of drums, the tapping of barrels, singing and dancing. Later that same day, the princess and the soldier were married. The celebration carried on throughout the night until the next morning with an unending supply of the finest dishes and choicest wines. The whole city celebrated with a festival which is still remembered to this day.

In time, the tall handsome soldier and the beautiful princess became king and queen. The old king had given up his crown and continued to live peacefully and contentedly for many years afterwards in the beautiful city which he had built. Even at his passing, no devil ever came to claim *him*.

One morning, as the young king was walking alone in the palace gardens, he was approached by a cripple begging for alms. The king reached into his money bag, pulled out a bright silver Taler, and placed it in the beggar's hand. The poor man thanked the king profusely and limped away, while the young king returned to the palace and thought no more about the meeting.

Two days later, when the young king was again walking alone in the palace gardens, the beggar returned. The king was a little annoyed that the lame man had returned so soon, and asked him curtly "Didn't I give you a silver Taler not two days ago? Why are you here asking for more?"

The poor man replied, humbly and quietly "Indeed, it is true you majesty. Not two days ago, you very kindly gave me a silver Taler. But" he continued "I have used more than half of its worth for my own needs, even though I had sworn to share everything equally with my comrade. I am here, to ask you for another coin, which I will keep safe until I meet him again."

Something in the beggar's story reminded the king of the promise he had made with his friend, who was also lame — in the same leg. Indeed, his voice and manner were just as he remembered. He wished to know more, and asked "Then, why didn't you wait until you could bring your comrade with you?"

“Because I don’t know where he is” answered the other. “One afternoon, as we came to a great forest, he went on ahead and I haven’t seen or heard anything of him since. But, since that day, I have kept my word to him, and keep a half of everything I receive until we meet again.”

The king laughed and took the beggar in his arms, saying “Then you should give it to me, my old friend. I am the young soldier who went on ahead and you are my slow and sturdy friend who I lost in the forest. Now we have found each other again.” He then led him into the palace, where he dressed him in fine clothes and held a celebration in his honour.

The next day as they walked together in the garden, the king told his friend what happened to him when they parted that day in the forest, and how he came to marry the princess and become king. He finished his story by telling his friend “Now, you must remain here with us and share our wealth. I will immediately make you a privy councillor, and later a prince.”

The other shook his head, and answered “No, we have to keep to our oath. We have sworn to share everything, and that includes your throne. —”

“Unfortunately, that won’t work. There can only be one king, and the queen can only have one husband. These you must find elsewhere, but a half of everything else is yours.”

“Then I must travel further” said his friend. “But, if I am to find my own throne, then I need to know how to find the three devils and their tree.”

His friend described to him exactly where the tree was and what he did on that night, but he was sad. He had a feeling that it would not end well, and that he would not see his friend again in this life.

The slow and sturdy soldier then took his leave of his friend and made his way to the forest. In the town, he heard the tale of how a miracle healer saved the life of a rich barber with the fat from a magic turtle which he caught with a silver fishhook with golden barbs. In the next town, he learnt how a rich merchant had risen from his deathbed after a beggar threw a poisonous viper under his bed. On the seventh day, he reached the forest, and, as the sun was setting, he found the huge green spruce tree whose branches provided shelter for the night. He made himself a bed — and waited.

At midnight, he saw a bright red fire streak across the pitch black sky. There was a deafening noise of beating wings and wind in the branches, and on the same branch above sat three hideous, leather winged devils, each carrying a flaming torch. But, they were not talking and laughing loudly. Instead, the first whispered

“Is there here listening a sneak,
Who’ll steal our gleaning this week?”

Then, all three demons spread their huge leathery wings, raised their torches in front of them, and flew around the tree. They searched everywhere, from the tip of the trunk to the ends of the roots. And, as they looked under the branches, on the ground by the trunk, they found the slow and sturdy soldier. Without mercy, each grabbed him and flew away with a different part of him. As they flew, they sang and laughed because they had revenged themselves on the scoundrel who had cheated them out of the merchant, the barber, and the king.