

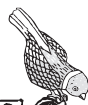
wise WORDS

Family Stories that bring the Proverbs to Life

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CONTENTS

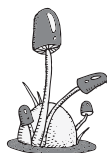


<i>A Preface to Parents (don't read this unless you must)</i> . . .	9
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	15
1 <i>The Three Princes</i>	17
2 <i>Simon and the Fruit Vendor</i>	25
3 <i>The Bleeding Tree</i>	33
4 <i>The Barefoot Messenger</i>	39
5 <i>Robin and the Master's Wife</i>	47
6 <i>The Farmer's Treasure</i>	53
7 <i>The Magical Walnut</i>	61
8 <i>Ivy and the Prince</i>	69
9 <i>The Blind Stranger</i>	75
10 <i>The Fragrant Garden</i>	83
11 <i>The Monster's House</i>	91
12 <i>A Reluctant Rescue</i>	99
13 <i>King Jacob of the Green Garland</i>	105
14 <i>Meribah, the Goatherd's Bride</i>	113
15 <i>A Cloud of Birds</i>	121
16 <i>The Labors of Braxton Hicks</i>	129
17 <i>The King from the Tower</i>	135
18 <i>An Excellent Wife</i>	143



A Preface to Parents

(don't read this
unless you must)



Writing a preface is the literary equivalent of parental doting. New parents assume their obsession with their own child is universally shared. To the enormous irritation of everyone else, they—or rather, we—exult in every colicky grimace, interpret every incoherent coo as a portent of eloquence, analyze every awkward kick and twist to calculate the chances of a future Olympic medal—all as if to say, “Look what we did! Look what we did!” Unfortunately, writers are vulnerable to the same vice. The following pages are written with the bold assumption that you are as interested in how this book came to be written as I am in telling you.

My intention in *Wise Words* was to write stories that would appeal to children as stories; that would challenge parents who read to their children; that would illustrate biblical proverbs; and that would borrow imagery, plots, characters, settings, and themes from the Bible. Whether my stories appeal to children—other than my own, of course, who are deeply prejudiced—or challenge adults is, I suppose, for children and adults to judge.

WISE WORDS

At considerable risk of sounding pretentious, however, I will say a few words about my other goals. I hesitate to expose the foundations on which these stories are built. Every enterprise functions best when there is a division of labor; in literature, it is the reader's job to discover, not the author's. Besides, exposing foundations can cause stories to come crashing down. Given the likelihood that my point may be obscure, I reluctantly offer some guidelines for reading *Wise Words*. If you are the type of reader who does not want someone else to do your work for you, you have my permission to stop reading here and skip to the first story.

I am, by both temperament and training, a theologian rather than a storyteller, and my aim in writing these stories was as much theological as literary. Explaining that assertion requires a brief digression. In the Grimm brothers' story "The Goose-Girl," a maidservant forces her mistress to change places with her, and the maid marries the prince herself. In the course of the story, the old king has occasion to ask the maid what punishment would be appropriate for a maid who takes her mistress's place and marries her mistress's fiancé, and the girl replies ingenuously, "She deserves nothing better than to be stripped naked and put in a barrel that is studded with sharp nails, and two white horses should be harnessed to it to drag her up and down the street to her death." Unsurprisingly, the king answers, "That woman is you, and you have pronounced your own punishment."¹

For myself, the maid's extraordinary combination of stupefying dullness and an impressive talent for designing punishments is not the most striking thing about this scene. Rather, this scene, repeated in other folk tales, is remarkably similar to Nathan's confrontation of David in 2 Samuel 12. Of course, Nathan had the sense to veil his meaning until the appropriate moment. Still, the parallel between the biblical event and the folk literary theme is undeniable.

¹ See Max Luthi, *The European Folktale: Form and Nature* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982), 45–46.

Preface

Nor is this the only literary feature common to Scripture and folk tales. When three brothers are introduced at the beginning of a story, anyone with even minimal exposure to literature knows that the youngest one, no matter how oafish he initially appears, will turn out to be the most clever of all. Replacement of the heir by a younger brother is a common theme in Scripture as well, in Genesis particularly. The Grimm brothers' version of Cinderella ends with doves poking out the eyes of the two evil sisters (see Prov. 30:17). Folk heroes commonly battle dragons and just as commonly kill them with blows to the head (see Gen. 3:15). Having destroyed the dragon, the hero rescues a beautiful maiden (see Rev. 12). The Greek story of Donta recalls the exploits of Samson. Donta, a great warrior, possesses the rare ability to produce fighting men by clicking his teeth together. After one unsuccessful attempt, a beautiful princess extracts the secret of Donta's power, which she promptly relays to Donta's enemies.²

Whether or not direct connections between folk literature and Scriptural events exist we will never know. When I first noticed these analogies, I thought it might be intriguing to attempt some stories that would self-consciously employ biblical narrative techniques and themes. Such stories would, I hoped, be entertaining and might even illuminate the Bible.

The Bible forms the background to *Wise Words* in two ways. First, this collection constitutes, in my own mind at least, an imaginative commentary on the book of Proverbs. In general, *Wise Words* follows what I have elsewhere called "the dramatic structure of Proverbs."³ In the first eight chapters of Proverbs, two women are presented: Dame Folly and Lady Wisdom. The Prince, Solomon's son, must decide which he will embrace as his bride. At the end of the book, we learn that the Prince has resisted the temptations of Dame Folly. Proverbs 31 describes

² See Luthi, *The European Folktale; Once Upon a Time: On the Nature of Fairy Tales* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976).

³ *Biblical Horizons*, No. 43 (November 1992). Available from Biblical Horizons, P.O. Box 1096, Niceville, FL, 32588-1096.

1

The Three Princes



Once upon a time, there was a king who had three sons. Their names were Alexander, Julius, and Joseph. The king's name, of course, was Lothar.

King Lothar lived with his wife, Queen Emma, and his sons in a white castle on top of the highest mountain in that part of the world. From the west tower of the castle Lothar could view his entire kingdom, something he often did after supper in the cool quiet of twilight. His kingdom was as peaceful as the evening, and his people were rich and happy. King Lothar was happy too.

But Lothar had a problem. He was getting old, and he could not decide which of his sons should become king after him. In many kingdoms, this would not be a problem at all, because the oldest son takes the throne when his father dies. In Lothar's kingdom, though, the custom was different. The reigning king was allowed to give the crown to any son he wished.

Alexander was the oldest of Lothar's three sons. Alexander was the most handsome and graceful man in the whole kingdom, sleek as a

WISE WORDS

leopard. When he was very small, he liked to climb onto his father's throne. He would put the crown on his head and gaze at himself in a mirror for hours. When he danced at the royal balls, everyone stared in amazement.

Many of the people wanted Alexander to be king. Visitors would come from all over the world, they thought, just to see the handsome King Alexander. And their kingdom would be known from one end of the earth to the other.

Julius was next oldest, and he was the strongest man in the kingdom. When he entered battle, Julius seemed transformed from a man into a terrifying beast that crushed and trampled his enemies. Julius did not want to rule only the small kingdom of his father. He wanted to conquer other lands. Deep down, his desire was to rule the world.

Many people hoped Julius would be king. He would protect them from their enemies, they thought. And they were sure he could make their small kingdom into a great empire, maybe even the greatest in the world.

Joseph was the youngest. He was neither especially handsome nor especially strong. He spent most days taking care of his father's sheep and goats in the hills around the castle.

Instead of going with Julius to battle in the springtime, Joseph would stay home to help the farmers plant their fields. Instead of spending winter dancing at the royal balls, as Alexander did, Joseph helped repair homes or dig animals out of snowdrifts.

No one could remember whether or not Joseph had ever been in a battle or if he had ever fought with anyone. Most of the people of the land thought Joseph would look pretty silly wearing a crown. No one thought Joseph would make a very good king—no one, that is, except Queen Emma. Joseph was her favorite. She wanted him to be king, and she told Lothar so day and night.

Lothar wanted Alexander to become king, but Alexander was rather proud. Julius made a good warrior, but Lothar was not sure he was smart enough to be a good king. But Joseph? Not Joseph, Lothar

The Three Princes

thought. Still, Lothar did not want to make Emma unhappy. So, he kept putting things off—unsure, as even kings sometimes are, about how he could please everyone and hoping that somehow things would just work out.

Lothar's problem was finally solved by his old friend, Alfred.

"Why don't you have a contest?" Alfred asked late one afternoon between mouthfuls of cheese and bread.

"Yes, yes!" King Lothar was so excited he almost tipped over his wine. "We could assemble all the young maidens of the kingdom. They would choose the next king."

"But then Alexander would be sure to win," Alfred replied, glaring at Lothar. "No, no. Your Highness. If you let the maidens of the kingdom choose the next king, everyone will know you arranged for Alexander to be king. You must think of a fair contest, one that each of your sons will have a chance to win."

Lothar and Alfred fell silent. A moment later, a toothless smile spread across Alfred's wrinkled face. "I've got it! We could have them race. Yes! That would be an excellent contest. They could run around the castle three times, swim the moat, and then climb the wall to the west tower. The winner would be king."

Lothar's face turned as red as his beard. "You always did want Julius to be king, didn't you?"

"Sire, I . . ." Alfred stopped. He knew King Lothar was right. Julius would certainly win any contest of strength. A race would not be a fair contest.

Lothar and Alfred spent the rest of that afternoon and most of that night eating and drinking and trying to think of a fair contest for the three princes. By the time the sun rose the next morning, they had at last settled on a plan.

Later that very day, King Lothar called the gentlemen and ladies to his castle to hear his announcement. The three princes stood in the center of the great hall, dressed in their finest clothes.

WISE WORDS

King Lothar rose from his throne and began to speak. "As you all know, I must choose who shall become king when I die. This is a most important decision. If I select the right man, the kingdom will remain strong and rich and happy. If I make a bad choice, the kingdom will be doomed to weakness and misery.

"Alfred and I have decided that a contest will determine who will be king. The contest is this: Each of my sons will search for the most wonderful, most royal creature in the world. It must be a creature that represents what it means to be a king, and one that will be most useful to a king. I and twelve of the gentlemen of the kingdom will judge who has found the most wonderful and royal creature."

So the next day, Alexander, Julius, and Joseph set off to find the most wonderful creature in the world.

A month later, Alexander returned. The lords and ladies of the kingdom assembled before Lothar's throne in the great hall to find out what Alexander had brought with him. When all was quiet, Alexander clapped his hands, and two servants carried in a cage, covered with a golden cloth.

Alexander began to speak. "I have travelled many miles this past month. I travelled east to Asia, and there I found the most beautiful and royal creature in the world. See for yourselves its magnificent glory."

With that, Alexander pulled away the golden cloth. Inside the cage was a large peacock. The lords and ladies gasped. Several ladies screamed. One fainted out of wonder. It truly was the most beautiful creature they had ever seen. Its breast was deep blue like the evening sky. Its tail was covered with bright yellow eyes. It seemed to be wearing a delicate jewelled crown.

Alexander let the peacock out of its cage. It strutted about the great hall and screeched so loudly that everyone clapped his hands to his ears.

"With this creature at my side," Alexander said, "I will become the greatest king in the world. I will make the whole kingdom as beautiful as this peacock. Kings will come from over the Southern Sea to see

2

Simon and the Fruit Vendor



There was once a young man named Simon who wanted, as all young men do at one time or another, at least in fairy tales, to go into the world to make his fortune. Early one morning, Simon gathered his few belongings and went to say goodbye to his father.

“Father, I am leaving home to go into the world to make my fortune,” he said. Simon used precisely these words because he, like you, had been reading fairy tales all his life.

His father looked out the window, smiling sadly as if remembering some event of the distant past. He drew a deep breath, then spoke. “Very well, son. But stay a moment while I tell you some things I have learned. You may find them useful. You are going to the city?”

“Yes, Father.”

“Then, I must tell you that there are some very dishonest fellows in the city. If anyone tempts you to follow evil, do not go with him. Do you promise?”

“Yes, Father.”

WISE WORDS

“Let your eyes look directly ahead of you. Watch where your feet are walking. Do not turn to the right or left. Then you will prosper. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Father.” Simon looked out the window. How late it was getting, and he was still not on the road!

“And there are dishonest women as well. Be careful whom you choose as your companions. Do you swear?”

“I do, Father,” the young man said, though he was only half listening. He waited for his father to say more. After a moment, he asked, “Is that all, Father?”

“That is all.”

“Then I shall be going.” Simon kissed his father, picked up his pack, and left.

The city was a three-day walk to the north. On the first day, Simon passed an old man driving an ox cart.

“Going to the city?” asked the old man. When Simon nodded, the old man said, “Hop on the wagon. I’m going there myself. I’m selling pies at the fair.” There was something strangely frightening about the old man’s crackling voice.

Remembering his father’s words, the young man kept his eyes fixed on the road in front of him. “No. No, thank you. I shall walk.” Without stopping, he walked straight past the ox cart and on toward the city.

The second day, Simon passed a group of men gathered at the side of the road. One, who had a black bag over his shoulder, called to him as he walked by, asking if he were headed for the city.

Simon stopped in the road. “Yes, I am. Why do you ask?”

“We’re going to the city too. To make some money.” Another of the men snickered and the speaker slapped him with the back of his hand. “We need at least one more to work with us, he added, glaring at his companions.

Simon cast a sideways glance. “What kind of work?”

This time the man with the bag over his shoulder snickered, and his fellows joined in. “Aren’t you the curious one? I can’t tell you much. Only that you’ll make money—a lot of money.”

Simon and the Fruit Vendor

Simon remembered his father's words, which for a few moments he had completely forgotten. Looking straight ahead, he answered, "No. No, thank you. I must go to the city myself." He walked straight past the gang of thieves—for that is what they were—and on toward the city.

The sun was beginning to go down when Simon arrived at the gate of the city on the third day of his journey. At the gate were two young women, selling goods from wagons and shouting to everyone who passed by. The young man stopped to see what they were selling.

The first young woman, tall and slender as a tree, wore a ragged dress, gray as dry earth. Small animals and birds huddled at her feet, as if seeking shade in her shadow. Her face was smeared with mud, and she had dirt under her fingernails, as if she had been digging in a garden. "Fruit! Fruit for sale!" she cried when she saw Simon.

"What kind of fruit do you have?" he asked politely.

"I have every fruit you can imagine. It is the most delicious fruit you will ever eat. Come, buy my fruit."

Simon peered into the wagon. The apples and pears looked old and bruised. The grapes were shriveled like raisins, the plums like prunes.

As he looked at the fruit, Simon realized the second young woman had come up behind him.

"My!" he heard her say. "What a handsome man you are!"

The boy blushed and looked at the ground. When he looked up, he saw before him the most beautiful face he had ever seen. Her skin was smoother than oil, her hair black as a raven. She was wearing a purple dress, as a princess might. At that very moment, the boy forgot his father's instructions.

"What are you selling?" he stammered.

"Gold, silver, jewels." Her words were as sweet and thick as brown honey. "Come, look. And buy."

The boy peered into her wagon. It was filled with trinkets and jewelry that sparkled so brightly in the late afternoon sun that he had to cover his eyes.

WISE WORDS

“Do these please you?” the woman asked. When he nodded, she said, “I have many more jewels at home. Would you like to come see them?”

Before Simon could answer, the fruit vendor interrupted, “Don’t go with her! She’s dangerous, and the men who follow her come to great harm!” The boy looked at her with a puzzled frown. “Besides,” she continued, “my fruit is better than gold. Come, buy from me!”

But the woman dressed like a princess answered, “Don’t listen to her. Look at me. Do I look dangerous? Believe what you see. And look at her! She’s dirty and dressed in rags, and her fruit is old and dry. She’s just mad because she cannot sell her rotten fruit, but I sell my jewels to everyone. She’s jealous because I have more buyers than she.”

Simon thought a moment, and then laughed at the fruit vendor. “Your fruit better than gold? I’ve seen better fruit rotting on the ground!” Turning to the jewel seller, he said, “I would like to see more jewels. Please take me to your house.” So taking hold of the wagon, he followed her through the city gate.

As he walked away, the boy heard the fruit seller call to him, “You will come to harm! Turn back!” He was not listening. She cried again, “Remember this day! I called to you and you refused. I stretched out my hand to help you but you paid no attention. Trouble will come upon you like a storm and whirlwind. You should have listened to me! Then I would have given you everything you desired. You should have listened!”

“Don’t mind her,” the jewel seller said when they had turned a corner. “She’s a fool who thinks she’s wise.”

As they turned the corner, she stumbled and nearly fell.

Simon caught her by the arm.

“Thank you,” she said. “I’m afraid I’m unsteady on my feet sometimes. Could you please hold me up?”

Simon held her arm and pushed the wagon as they walked up and down the twisting streets of the city. As they walked, the boy kept glancing at the princess that walked beside him. To think that she was not only beautiful, but very rich! Perhaps, he thought, she will fall in love with me as I have already fallen in love with her.

3

The Bleeding Tree



Once upon a time, an oak tree stood on a hill overlooking a quiet valley. The tree was tall for his age and very strong. His long branches spread in every direction, and his leaves sparkled like emeralds in the sunlight. Where his branches met his thick trunk, robins and gray squirrels built their nests.

On the other side of the valley was a temple of unearthly beauty. It was so wondrous a temple that the tree often doubted that men could have built it. It must have fallen from the sky. Every morning and evening a song drifted from the temple, a song so pure it filled the heart with a painful joy.

The tree gazed each day at the temple of unearthly beauty and listened to the song that filled the heart with a painful joy. He was saddened when night fell, hiding the temple in darkness, and he was delighted when the morning sunlight unveiled the temple anew. He felt lonely in the evening when the song faded to silence, and he thrilled when it began again each day at daybreak and sunset. He dreamed of a world where there would be no night and where the song would never end. He wanted to gaze and listen forever.

WISE WORDS

But the more the tree looked at the temple and the more he listened to the song, the more he knew he would never be content with looking and listening, even if he could look and listen for all eternity. Deep in his heart, he did not want to gaze at the temple. He wanted to become the temple, to surround the hushed space of the inner sanctuary, where even children spoke in whispers. Deep in his heart, he did not want to listen to the song. He wanted to become the song, to spread himself over the valley like a blanket of music softer than silence.

Thinking these thoughts made the tree sadder still. For he was a tree, and he knew he would never be a temple of unearthly beauty or a song that filled the heart with a painful joy. His branches were too twisted, his bark too rough, the voice of the wind through his leaves too harsh and hollow.

So, for many years, the tree stood on his hill, gazing and listening. His heart grew sadder with each passing year. In what seemed like a very short time, he was no longer a young tree. And still he wished nothing more than to become the temple of unearthly beauty and to be the song that filled the heart with a painful joy.

One night, the temple hill was lighted as if it were day. An orange glow flickered against the black sky, growing brighter, then nearly disappearing. Through the cool night air, the tree heard a distant voice cry, "Fire!"

When the sun rose the next morning, the valley was utterly still. The mockingbirds refused to sing. No squirrels scampered chattering through the treetops. Worst of all, where the temple had been there was only a smoking black ruin. Men circled the ruins with their hands thrust deep in their pockets, their heads bowed. Women sat on the grass with their faces in their hands.

The tree was sickened to see what had happened to the temple. Knowing he could no longer gaze at the temple or listen to its song, he felt more empty and alone than ever.

For several days, the men circled the ruins and the women sat on the grass. Then one day, the men stopped circling to huddle together, and the women drew their faces from their hands and looked up.

The Bleeding Tree

The men talked and nodded and pointed excitedly. Smiles crossed the women's faces.

Across the valley, the tree watched with growing wonderment. The next day, he watched the men and women work in the midst of the black ruins, knocking over the remaining walls and picking up charred pieces of the temple's furniture. In a few days, the ruin was gone. All that remained of the temple was a black stain on the green hillside.

Then the men slung belts filled with shining tools across their shoulders and started down the hill toward the forest where the tree stood watching. They disappeared into the valley, and then reappeared near the tree. Soon they were circling the trees with their hands in their pockets.

The tree was startled by a shout that came from somewhere near his trunk. "This one looks ready!" a man cried to his friends. In a moment the tree was surrounded, and the men were running their hands up and down his bark. It tickled, but the tree was afraid to laugh.

The men talked and nodded. Then all but one ran back into the forest. The remaining man took a stick with a bright metal head from his belt, stamped his feet, twisted his back away from the tree, and swung the stick.

The blow shook the tree from his topmost branches down to his roots. In shock and surprise, he cried out, but no one seemed to hear. He felt a stinging pain low on his trunk as the shining tool made another gaping wound, then another. Strips of bark peeled away like the skin of an apple. The tree felt sap flowing from his wound.

"Look at this," the man cried. "This sap looks red. Like blood! I've never seen anything like this before. It's a bleeding tree!" The other men came closer and circled the tree with their hands in their pockets, nodded, and then scampered back to their hiding places in the forest.

The man swung his shining tool again and again. After a while, he became tired, and another man took the stick and began swinging it on the other side of the trunk. The tree shuddered in agony with each blow. He felt himself weakening as his trunk was slowly cut off from his roots.

All the men took turns striking the tree with the shining tool. Finally, the tree could no longer stand and began to sway. The men cried out

4

The Barefoot Messenger



One day, a king summoned his chief servant to his throne. When the servant appeared, he had been burning leaves in the king's forest. His clothes smelled so strongly of smoke that the king's eyes began to water.

Wiping his eyes with a silk handkerchief, the king handed the servant a scroll. "Deliver this to the king on the other side of the high mountains," he commanded. "It is a request from my son the prince to marry the king's daughter. If the king and his daughter agree, you shall stay to prepare her for the wedding. Teach her our tongue and customs, guard her until the wedding, and then bring her back to present her as the next queen of this realm. If they do not agree, you will return immediately to give me their answer. To get to the king's castle, you must walk straight toward the rising sun."

"Sire, I have heard of that kingdom," the servant replied as he took the scroll. "It is a very long journey."

"Yes. It is a very long journey," answered the king.

WISE WORDS

“And the way across the high mountains is too steep for any horse to travel.”

“Yes, you must walk.”

“Then, Sire, I will need an extra pair of shoes,” the servant said.

“No, you do not need another pair of shoes. You need no shoes at all. Walk barefoot on the narrow footpath that leads around the great forest.”

“Your Highness, I have heard about that footpath. It is narrow and hard, full of sharp rocks.”

“Do as I say. Take no shoes with you. You will not be harmed.”

The king gave the servant two bags. “In the first is money to help you along the way,” he said. “In the other are rings and necklaces to adorn the princess. Protect these with your life. Tell no one why you are travelling. Swear to me that you will do as I say.”

“I swear it,” the servant said.

“Then go,” the king said as he filled the servant’s hands with the two bags.

The servant bowed, took the bags, and left the king. Walking barefoot around the great forest and over the high mountains was not very appealing to him. But he was a servant, so he reminded himself that his duty was to obey the king. Leaving his shoes behind, he started off toward the rising sun.

He walked all day along the footpath. By evening, his feet were sore and bleeding. The big toe of his right foot was swollen where he had stubbed it on a rock, and the little toe of his left foot was bruised from an encounter with a tree root. When it was too dark to go on, he limped to an inn, asked for a room, and sat down to eat.

While the servant was eating dinner, a small man with a pointed hat and a patchy beard sat down next to him.

“You are travelling, are you not?” the man whispered to the servant, leaning close. His breath smelled so strongly of onions that it made the servant’s eyes water.

The Barefoot Messenger

"I am. I have an important message to deliver to the king on the other side of the high mountains," the chief servant said, forgetting the king's command.

"I see. A message from whom?" When the little man smiled, the servant saw he had only three teeth, two of them dark brown and the other a shade of green the servant had never seen before.

"I cannot say." The servant was suddenly afraid of the little man. He stood up and began to move to another table.

"I see you are limping," said the small man. "And no wonder. You have no shoes."

"I need no shoes," the servant answered, though his answer sounded more like a question.

"No? I think you do. And you are in luck. I am a maker and seller of shoes."

The servant sat down again. "Are you?" he asked, a little too eagerly.

"My shoes are the best shoes in the world. They are comfortable. They never wear out. I even have some shoes with magical powers. But, since you need no shoes. . ."

"Magical powers? What kind of magical powers?"

The little man with the onion breath leaned close. "I have a pair of shoes that will guide you through the darkest parts of the great forest in the dead of night," he whispered. "Even if you are not able to see where you are going! You tell the shoes where you wish to go, and they will take you there."

"How wonderful!" The servant was almost giggling. What great good luck to have stopped at the very same inn where this shoemaker was staying!

The man found a pair of shoes that fit the servant perfectly, and the servant pulled his moneybag from his belt to pay for them. "My, that is a fine-looking purse," the little man said.

"Oh, it is nothing really. I have a couple of them." The little man smiled his ugly grin and nodded knowingly.

5

Robin and the Master's Wife



Once upon a time, there was a young man named Robin who served a great prince. The prince lived in a mansion with many rooms and passageways and owned much land.

Robin had charge of all his master's gardens and lands. Day after day, he rode from one end of the estate to the other, making sure that everyone and everything was working. When a mule died, the master sent Robin to market with a bag of silver to buy another, and Robin returned with most of the silver, as well as a fine new mule. At the beginning of each month, the prince sent Robin to collect rent from the peasants who worked in the fields. If some of the rent was missing, Robin would have to pay the difference himself, but none was ever missing.

On the master's estate, no servant was given more responsibility nor was any servant more faithful than Robin. No one, that is, save the prince's very old Chief Steward.

Soon after his ninetieth birthday, the Chief Steward died, and the prince had to choose someone to take his place. He called Robin to his chamber, along with another servant, whose name was Joseph.

WISE WORDS

“My Chief Steward, who served me faithfully for many years, is dead,” the master began. “Now I must choose another Chief Steward in his place. I want a Chief Steward who will free me from every care for my house and my estates, so I can spend my time in reading and study and hunting. I have decided to choose one of you two as my new Steward. Do you wish to help me decide whom to choose?”

“I am quite certain that Joseph would make a fine Chief Steward,” Robin answered quickly. “He has been a faithful servant for—how long has it been? Nearly four years?”

“It has been only two, as you well know,” Joseph answered. “But Robin has been a servant much longer. It is true he knows very little about the house, its needs, or its servants, but he would be a splendid Chief Steward nonetheless.”

“I am honored you hold me in such high esteem,” Robin said modestly. “And, though Joseph has never worked in the fields, and though he might have a difficult time buying a mule from the traders in town, he would, I am certain, be the best Chief Steward in the land.”

Robin and Joseph went on and on for some time, giving each other compliments that did not quite sound like compliments.

“Enough!” cried the prince. “I have made my decision. Robin will be the new Chief Steward.”

Robin could scarcely believe his ears. Through all his years of service, he had had a secret ambition to be Chief Steward of the prince’s estates. Now his dream had come true.

“But Joseph is right.” The master’s voice interrupted Robin’s pleasant thoughts. “You have never lived in the house and have much to learn. Come, I will show you around and explain your duties.”

At the kitchen, the prince stopped and said, “Whatever you wish to eat from the kitchen, it is yours. Whatever food or drink you wish to buy in preparation for my feasts, you may buy.” He showed Robin the garden in the central courtyard and said, “I give you all the flowers and plants, to decorate the house and lawns as you desire.” He presented Robin before the guards and servants and said, “You are in

6

The Farmer's Treasure



A farmer was once plowing his field when the plow hit something buried in the earth. Pulling his horse to a stop, the farmer knelt to examine it. He dug until he uncovered a round, hard object. When he had pulled it from the ground, he rubbed the top with his shirt until he could see he was holding a golden globe that shone like the sun.

Leaving his horse and plow in the field, the farmer rushed back to his small cottage to show his wife, who stood at the stove stirring soup. “Look! Look!” the farmer shrieked as he crashed through the door. “I found it in the field!”

Startled by her husband’s cries, his wife dropped her spoon into the soup. Her apron caught the handle of the kettle and when she turned around, soup spilled over the kitchen floor.

“Look at what you made me do!” she said angrily. “Why did you come in here screaming like a madman?”

Too excited to speak, the farmer held up the globe. Even in the dim light of the kitchen, it seemed to glow. The farmer’s wife stopped in the middle of a sentence and stared in wonder.

WISE WORDS

Holding it as gently as a wounded bird, the farmer set the globe on the kitchen table, while his wife found a rag to clean it. After a few moments of scrubbing, she stepped back. Neither had ever seen anything like it before. They thought it must be something from a king's palace, though they had never even been close to a king's palace.

The globe sat on a small platform. The gold on the top half was as bright as a slice of the sun. Set in the gold were jewels that sparkled like stars and carved birds so white they looked like chips of the moon. The bottom half was dark green, covered with colorful paintings of strange animals and trees and flowers. The platform was deep blue, decorated with fish and porpoises.

"It's a world," the farmer gasped.

"Yes. And it's all ours," his wife answered.

For hours they sat examining every detail of the globe. When it was almost midnight, they agreed they would sell it to the jeweler. They would then have enough money to build a big new house in town, and they would never again rise before the sun to milk the cow, never again sweat in the fields through long and hot afternoons, never again lose a night's sleep looking after a mare giving birth. Their miserable little lives with all their miserable little duties would be gone forever. They would live like a king and queen.

Neither the farmer nor his wife got any sleep that night. Before the sun had risen the next morning, they were out of bed and dressed. The farmer harnessed his horse to the rickety carriage and set the globe, carefully wrapped in a sheet, on the seat.

When they got to town, the farmer tucked the globe under his arm and went to see the jeweler. His wife walked up and down the streets looking in shop windows.

The jeweler's shop was not open. After the farmer banged on the door ten or twenty times, a pointed face peeked through the curtained window.

"Read the sign," came a squeaky voice. "Not open until nine. Come back then." The pointed face disappeared.

The Farmer's Treasure

The farmer banged again. "Please! I have something very valuable. I want you to look at it!"

"Come back at nine!" answered the squeaky voice.

"Of course, I could go to the jeweler's shop on the other side of town," the farmer said in a loud voice as he turned to go.

Behind him the farmer heard the lock turn and the bell on the door jingle. The jeweler stepped out wearing a striped nightshirt. "Come in, come in," he said. "Won't hurt to get an early start today."

Inside the shop, the farmer put the globe on the table and slowly unwrapped it. The jeweler picked it up carefully. He pinched a pair of glasses on his thin nose, and looked closely.

"Hmm." When the jeweler said "Hmm," it sounded like a mouse snoring. "Very heavy. Can see why you were in such a hurry to see me. Hmm." He held his ear close to the globe and shook it.

"Well?" The farmer was impatient. "Is it gold? Is it worth something? How much will you pay for it?"

"Have to look at it very carefully. Don't want to give you the wrong answer." The jeweler smiled a sour-looking smile.

"Come back next month. Will tell you what I think."

The farmer's heart sank. "Next month!? Can't you tell me sooner?" The jeweler shook his head, still smiling his sour smile. "Then I will have to come back next month," the farmer said sadly.

When the farmer got back to the carriage, he found his wife surrounded by packages wrapped in red, green, and yellow paper.

"What is all this?" the farmer demanded.

"Oh, just a few dresses, a few hats, a few new pairs of shoes, a few new . . ."

"A few new pairs of shoes!" the farmer exclaimed. "You have never had more than one pair of shoes before."

"That is true, husband. But now we are going to be rich. Remember, the 'world' is ours." She giggled like a child. "I told the merchants we would be able to pay them soon. Very soon." She giggled again.