



The Thief Who Made the King Fall Silent

Korea and China

There was once a thief so skilful in plundering that neither his victims nor the guards of the kingdom had ever managed to catch him in the act. He reached old age without ever having been apprehended and retained the same steady pulse that had enabled him to earn his living in such a dishonourable way.

However, one day, because he was so accustomed to his reprehensible 'trade,' he became too relaxed, and his good fortune deserted him.

That ill-fated day, as the rogue strolled through the market, he stopped at one of the small spice shops in order to buy some sesame. But instead of buying it, almost instinctively, the old man stuffed the bag of seeds up his sleeve and, nodding to the shopkeeper, left.

However, just as he was about to cross the street, a hand grabbed him by the shoulder and forced him to turn around. It was a young guard.

'I've been watching you,' said the young man resolutely, 'and I saw you stealing a bag of spices.'

But suddenly, the look on the young guard's face changed.

'Wait a moment!' he said with a frown. 'But ... aren't you the thief we've never been able to catch?'

'Excuse me ... but I think you're wrong ...' said the thief, trying to wriggle out of it.

‘No, I’m not wrong!’ said the guard, pressing his claw harder on the old man’s arm. ‘My father, who was also a guard, told me about you many times. How he would have loved to arrest you!’ he added with a triumphant smile. ‘And how proud he will be of me!’

The thief was brought before the judge, and when he learned who the defendant was, he was pleasantly surprised, for everyone knew about the thief, even the king, for the old villain was already a legend in the city.

After the trial, the thief was taken to prison. He was locked up in a small cell, but before the jailer had turned the key that was to seal the door, the old man turned round resolutely and, with a smile on his face, said to him:

‘You don’t need to lock it. I don’t intend to stay here for long.’

The jailer, on hearing his words, laughed at the thief’s audacity. ‘The old man must have gone mad with age,’ he said to himself with a smile of disdain, and then added aloud:

‘No one has ever managed to escape from here.’

And, noisily locking the bolt with three turns of the key, he walked off down the dark corridor.

The next day, when the jailer came to bring him his food, the old man said to him:

‘I want you to ask the king for an audience for me.’

The jailer smirked, but said nothing.

‘Don’t laugh. I mean it,’ insisted the old man. ‘I have a wonderful gift for his majesty. A gift for which he might even reward you, if you tell him ... But only I can give it to him.’

‘The king would have me flogged if I told him you wanted to speak with him,’ replied the jailer, paying no more attention to the old man, as he made his way to the door.

‘All right ... if that’s the way you want it ...’ replied the thief in a whisper, knowing that the jailer could still hear him. ‘What will the king think when he learns that he has lost the greatest gift anyone has ever given him because of a foolish jailer?’

The jailer said nothing. He left the cell and sealed the lock with three turns of the key, as usual. But the old man's words had made him uncomfortably anxious, so in the end he opted to tell the head guard what had been said.

Hardly a whole day had passed when the old thief was brought before the king. The king was waiting for him in the great audience hall, and with him were three important lords. From their appearance, the thief sensed that one must be a minister of state, another the general of the royal armies, and the last, the highest spiritual authority, whom he thought he had once seen in some crowded rite.

'I have been told that you have something for me,' said the king with a stern look. 'But speak quickly, for I have no time to waste.'

The old man bowed in deep reverence and then held out his arms to hand the king a small golden box encrusted with delicate gemstones.

The king looked at the box in surprise and took it in his hands curiously. However, when he opened it, his countenance changed completely.

'A peach pit!' exclaimed the king, vexed. 'Have you asked for an audience to insult me?'

'Please do not misunderstand my gift, your majesty,' the old man hastened to reply. 'This is no ordinary seed. The peach pit you hold in your royal hands is magical. Once it is planted in good soil, in a single day it will grow into a beautiful tree. The next day it will be full of beautiful fruit, and on the third day each peach will be transformed into the noblest and purest gold.'

The king stared at the thief with disbelief.

'That being so,' he said after a few moments, 'why didn't you plant it yourself? If what you say were true, you wouldn't have had to steal, and you wouldn't have ended up in my dungeon.'

'Oh, I would have, your majesty! But the magic of this prodigious seed is that, for it to work, its possessor must have a pure heart. This magic does not accept a heart subject to lies and deceit, much less to theft; nor does it accept those who harm and injure others.'

The thief made a measured silence to lower his eyes in mock regret, then looked at the king again sadly and added in a deep voice:

‘As your majesty will understand, I am a miscreant, a thief, so this magic cannot work for me.’

And a second later, his expression changing radically, he added with a flattering smile:

‘But, sir, you are the king, and I am sure your heart will not be denied this magic.’

The king stared at the seed, and thought of all the times his decisions had been unjust to his subjects; and he also remembered the times he had lied to his people, and other times he had harmed someone with impunity.

And the king’s silence filled the hall with what he was revealing.

Finally, in a rare display of honesty, the king said:

‘No, I am not the one who can sow this seed.’

And he handed it back to the thief without raising his eyes, not even looking him in the face.

‘I see ... your majesty,’ muttered the old man.

And, without lingering in the silence, so as not to disturb the king, the thief changed register again and, addressing the important lord on the king’s right, said:

‘Perhaps, then... you, sir...? Could you sow this peach seed and make it do its magic?’

The thief was addressing the king’s right-hand man and finance minister, who stared at the seed silently with a frown, thinking of all the times he had taken bribes and changed the kingdom’s budgets to benefit his family and friends... and of all the times he had cut taxes for the richest to burden the artisans, small merchants and labourers in the fields.

After another awkward silence, and not even taking the seed in his hands, the minister in charge of the kingdom's finances and taxes said, not without a blush on his cheeks:

'I'm afraid I'm not the right person either.'

'Oh, dear me!' exclaimed the old man pretending to be surprised. 'Then, your majesty,' said the thief, turning to the king as if to ask permission, 'perhaps the general of your armies, the bravest and most respected of the soldiers of this kingdom ... could make it grow?'

And he reached out to hand the peach pit to the stunned general.

Taking the seed, the general stared at it without even daring to raise his head, and the faces of enemy soldiers who had died under the blade of his sword came to his mind. He evoked the grief-stricken gaze of mothers, wives, old men and children who, because of his actions and decisions, had lost their loved ones. The general, ashamed, hastened to hand the stone to the thief, saying in a low voice:

'No, I am not the man to plant this tree.'

'Do you really feel you can't do it?' asked the crafty old man, raising his bushy eyebrows, keeping silent until the general shook his head. 'Then, I have no choice but to turn to you,' said the thief handing the peach pit to the distraught minister of rites and religion. 'Perhaps you, a man of such high morals, with a pious heart, can make this amazing tree bear fruit at last.'

And the highest spiritual authority in the kingdom stared at the peach pit that the old man had placed in his hand, and could not but think of all the money he had kept in his coffers, instead of using it to relieve the hunger of the poor. He could not get out of his mind how often he had treated with contempt the hungry beggars who had come to him for alms.

After another awkward silence, the minister of rites said:

'No ... I'm not the one who can make this tree grow,' he said in a whisper, averting his eyes.

And, adopting a studied gesture of surprise, the old thief said:

‘I am truly confused, my lords. The four most distinguished men of this realm cannot make this humble seed unfold its magic ...’

He paused, and put aside the performance to speak to them directly.

‘However, you live surrounded by opulence, wealth and luxury ... while I, a distracted old thief, am condemned to spend the rest of my days in a dark dungeon for stealing a sachet of sesame seeds.’

And, looking back at the king, he added:

‘Does this seem fair to Your Majesty?’

Silence fell over the room with the last echoes of the old man’s voice, as the four great lords looked at each other and at the thief uncomfortably, wringing their hands.

Finally, the king, regaining the poise due to his authority, straightened up in his seat and, in an authoritative voice, said:

‘You are right, old man. This is not fair. It is common knowledge that you have been a thief for many years, but I must bow to the evidence and honour your wisdom. You have taught us an important lesson today, and that makes you worthy of freedom. You may go home.’

When the thief came out of the courtroom, he saw his jailer standing next to the head guard. Apparently, they had been listening to what was said in the audience while guarding the door. As he passed by his jailer, the old thief said in his ear with a mocking smile:

‘I told you I wasn’t going to stay here for long.’ □

Adapted by Marta Ventura and Grian A. Cutanda (2024).

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Comments

This tale, although apparently originating in Korea, has also spread to China and other Far Eastern cultures. This is because, as with all stories

that are passed down through different countries and cultures, it deals with a theme and a problem that cuts across them all: the tremendous injustice that those who steal billions of dollars or murder tens or hundreds of thousands of people often stand a good chance of getting away with it.

This is one of the reasons why we insist on the need for ‘a shared vision of basic values to provide an ethical foundation for the emerging world community,’ as the Earth Charter points out.

No matter how many laws are issued, no matter how many police and judges are appointed in any culture and society in the world, there will always be ‘wrongdoers’ who manage to evade justice, no matter how much harm they have done to their fellow human beings. This is why an ethical and values framework such as the Charter is needed, leading to a change in our collective worldview. This will be the only way for justice to finally prevail in the world, when every human being carries the common code of ethics in their heart.

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Sources

Keding, D. (2008). The thief. In *Elder Tales: Stories of Wisdom and Courage from Around the World* (pp. 27-29). Westport, CT: Libraries Unlimited.

Associated text of the Earth Charter

Preamble – Universal Responsibility: We urgently need a shared vision of basic values to provide an ethical foundation for the emerging world community.

Other passages that this story illustrates

Preamble – The Challenges Ahead: Fundamental changes are needed in our values, institutions, and ways of living. We must realize that when basic needs have been met, human development is primarily about being more, not having more.

Principle 14d: Recognize the importance of moral and spiritual education for sustainable living.

Principle 16f: Recognize that peace is the wholeness created by right relationships with oneself, other persons, other cultures, other life, Earth, and the larger whole of which all are a part.

