

## The Fool

One day the king summoned all of the wise men in his court to see if they had yet discovered the secret of life. When they had all assembled in his majestic hall, he asked them one by one:

“Have you found it yet?”

“No,” replied the first wise man. “We have searched diligently for it. We have sought it in Truth. We have sought it in Beauty. We have sought it in the Common Sense of the people. And each time we were disappointed. It is not revealed on the somber plains nor in the tranquil seas. And no one, of course, knows what lies beyond the mountain’s top. So we must regretfully inform you that we have not been able to find an answer in either heaven or earth!”

All of the other wise men echoed his reply. They were honest wise men. That is why they were called “wise men.”

But the king was angered by their inability to provide him with an answer. He cried out with a loud voice:

“I have given you Philosophy! I have given you Science. The writings of the Poets were at your disposal! You have heard the words of the Prophets, listened to the songs of the Bards. All Knowledge has been placed in your hands, yet you still cannot tell me the secret of life!”

The king summoned his guards and ordered them to cast the wise men into the deepest cell of his dungeon, saying, “These men are not wise. They are fools! They have failed to provide an answer to my question. Even though I have riches, power, and authority, I do not as yet know the meaning of life!”

The king then added, “And whosoever now occupies the deepest cell of the dungeon, bring him up. I wish to see if he might be able to provide an answer to my question!”

The guards did as they were told and returned from the dungeon carrying a thin and bony old man in their arms, the very man who had been languishing in the deepest cell of the dungeon. Despite his frailty, his arms and legs were bound with chains. After they had sat the man down in front of the king’s throne, the king asked him, “Why are you unable to walk on your own?”

At first the man did not understand the king’s question.

“I am sorry,” he said haltingly. “But it has been so long since I have heard a human voice that I cannot comprehend what you are saying. It is difficult for me to speak as well.”

The king repeated his question slowly and loudly.

“Ah, now I understand,” the man replied. “The reason why I am unable to walk is simply because I have not used my legs for such a long time.”

“Look at me when you are speaking!” the king shrieked.

“Certainly I would if I could,” the man said. “But I am no longer able to see either.”

“So you are both lame and blind,” the king said.

“That’s right,” one of the guards interjected. “He can no longer walk or see. His mind has gone as well. He’s nothing but an idiot!”

“Speak only when you are told to,” the king reprimanded the guard. Then turning back to the man, he said, “How long have you been in the dungeon?”

“People measure time by the rising and setting of the sun. But ever since I was cast into the dungeon, I have not seen even one drop of sunlight. How do you expect me to be able to tell time under such circumstances?”

“Then when did you first enter the dungeon?” the king asked.

“As a youth.”

“On what charge?”

“I can no longer remember.”

“And since that time you have never been outside of your cell?”

“Not even once. I have spent my entire life within the dungeon’s cold stone walls, in a cell where no rays of light could possibly pierce the inky darkness.”

“So you do not even know how old you are.”

“How could I?”

“At least you can tell me your name,” the king said.

“I do not have a name.”

“What do you mean you have no name? Everyone has a name!”

“I had no parents to give me one,” the man answered meekly. “And neither do I have any friends to call me by one.”

The king scrutinized the man carefully, then said, “I can see why the guard says that you are a fool, but I shall nonetheless state my business. I will put a question to you and should you answer it to my satisfaction, I will release you from your chains and give you your freedom.”

The old man looked confused and made no reply.

The king continued, “My kingdom is known throughout the world for its wealth and prosperity, for its knowledge and technology. I have built monuments to the gods and palaces for the people. I have bestowed upon them both treasures and entertainments. Everyone in the realm is well taken care of. I have gathered together the wisest men living on earth, from all parts of the globe. Yet their so-called ‘wisdom’ is a curse to me for they are unable to give a reply to the one question which I desire most to have answered. That is why I have had them thrown into the dungeon, into the very cell which you have occupied, and why I have called you here. If you are able to answer my question, then I shall set you free. You may go wherever you want and do whatever you like. Should you fail to answer my question, however, then your fate shall be worse than that of the wise men, for I shall have you executed!”

The king’s voice had been growing louder and louder as he spoke and the old man was trembling by this point.

“I am not sure I will be able to answer you,” the man said. “I have completely forgotten my former life and know only what my cell has taught me.”

“Nonetheless, I should like to present my question to you. No one, not even the wisest men in the world, have been able to give me an answer! May I ask it of you?”

The old man was thoughtful for a moment and then said, “It is not necessary for you to ask me your question.”

“If you do not accept my challenge, then you shall be beheaded!” the king screamed.

“You misunderstand,” the old man said. “You do not need to ask me your question because I already know how to reply.”

“And how might that be?” the king asked.

“If there be no answer, there can also be no question.”

A gleam of light flickered in the king’s eyes. He sprang from his throne and knelt humbly before the fool. Bending his head, the king’s lips touched the man’s mangled feet.

“You alone are wise!” the king exclaimed. “You alone possess the secret of life!”

The old man was astounded at the king’s rejoicing.

“It’s hardly a secret,” he mumbled. And then he thought to himself, “I really don’t know what this king was looking for in the first place.”

The king arose and motioned for the guards to remove the man’s chains.

“I hereby set you free,” the king said. “Pray tell me the desires of your heart. Any wish you make, I shall grant it.”

Perplexed the old man replied, “I only wish to be returned to my cell—and to be given a pot of tea to take to the wise men who are waiting there for me.”

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