

THE KING, THE HERMIT, AND THE TWO PRINCES A TALE OF BIDPAI

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In the kingdom of Ardos there lived a wealthy old King, with his two sons. Now, when the father found that he was soon to die, he was greatly troubled about his riches. He had been a wise and prudent man, and had gathered his wealth by industry and thrift. His sons, however, cared only to spend their days in making merry, and let more money slip through their fingers in a week than the King could save in a year. Therefore he feared greatly to leave his store of pearls and gold to them, and thus it was that, on his death-bed, he called to him an old friend, a Hermit, and said to him,—

“My good and trusted Friend, here are my riches. I beg you to take and bury them in your hermitage, for I fear to leave so much wealth to my sons. They both have a portion of their own, and when they have spent that, let them first taste of want and poverty. Then do you bring forth the treasure and give it into their hands. It may be that after they have once known a little hardship, they will live more wisely.”

The Hermit did as the King bade him, and a short time afterwards the King died.

The two sons no sooner heard of their father’s death than they began to quarrel over the kingdom. As the older son was the stronger, he overcame his younger brother and drove him from the city gates. The younger brother, now homeless and penniless, bethought him what to do. At last he remembered the Hermit. “He was my father’s friend,” the Prince said to himself, “and a good man. I will go to him and ask him to teach me to live a noble and unselfish life as he has done.”

So he betook himself to the hermitage. But when he entered the hut, he found it deserted, for the Hermit had died. Thereupon the Prince resolved to make the hermitage his own and follow the example of his father’s friend.

Although hitherto he had always lived as a prince, he now started to lay the fire with his own hands, and then went out to fetch some water. He lowered the bucket into the well, but when he drew it up, it was empty. “Alas! the well is out of order,” he sighed; “I must bring a ladder and go down and repair it.”

As he reached the bottom he saw that it was not a well, but a pit, and near at hand was an entrance into a passage through the rock. The Prince quickly brought an axe and hewed upon the passage. There before his eyes lay piled his father’s treasure.

In the meantime his brother, who was now King, was feasting day and night in the palace. "When my own portion is gone," he told his nobles, "there is my father's wealth. We shall have no need to do aught but eat, drink, and make merry until we die."

But when he went to the spot where his father's treasure had always been hidden, he found that it was gone. That same day a neighboring monarch declared war upon the city. The King was greatly afraid, for his soldiers needed arms, and there was no money in the royal treasury with which to buy them. The enemy drew near, and at last the King's army had to defend the city with such weapons as they had at hand. In the end the enemy was victorious, and both kings were slain in the battle.

When peace was declared, the generals gathered together to choose a new King.

"The new King must be a man of peace and not of war," said one.

"He must be prudent and not spend the wealth of the kingdom in merrymaking," added another.

Then they remembered the Prince who was living as a hermit. With one accord, they proclaimed him their King. They formed a long procession, and, marching to the hermitage, led the Prince back with flying banners to his father's throne.

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