

The Dog, the Devil, and the King of Heaven

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Once upon a time, there was a king who was so very much a king—so regal, so puissant, so blessed—that his word on occasion became truth, as with the time when a great pale beast of a foreigner came to our court, spouting absurdities regarding the wondrous animals he had supposedly encountered in the course of his extensive travels, including ‘unicorns’ and ‘kraken’ and ‘lions’.

The lion, so he claimed, was a magnificent animal with a proud ruff of hair about its face, sharp claws and teeth, and a deep, throaty cry that set all lesser creatures atremble. It was fierce in battle, he recounted, and likewise fierce in its devotion to its kith and kin.

“Ah,” said the king, nodding in imagined comprehension, “it is very like a dog, then.”

The next morning, thus, many dogs of the realm awakened to find a mane of abundant curls surrounding our faces, our once-tidy paws expanded into ungainly pincushions of unnaturally retractable talons, our formerly-elegant snouts foreshortened into thick muzzles and broad noses, akin to those of tigers.

And the king looked upon us and called the transformation good, and decreed that, thereafter, every temple in the land was to be watched over by a pair of such Dogs of Prosperity—*fu*—who would defend the sanctity of these buildings through their ability to ward off bad energy and discern the intentions of people.

Even a dog's devotion will not permit me to name him a particularly wise king. In truth, he was a bit of a beast himself, strong and large and loud and well-formed, his luxuriant mustaches setting him apart from the common run of smooth-skinned humanity, his prowess in battle well earning him his title 'Protector of the People,' his earnest—if often ill-informed—benevolence toward his subjects garnering him the accolade 'King of Heaven.'

And since his word did always become the law of the land and at times even the law of nature, perhaps wisdom, after all, was not so very crucial a trait that he lacked. More frequently than not, in fact, he did quite well without it.

This is a tale of one of those very times.

Many years ago, a terrible famine swept the kingdom. One might think that the King of Heaven might easily negate such catastrophes with a mere wave of his hand and a lofty spoken edict, but the peculiarity of his gift was such that he had to believe what he was saying in order for it to have a chance of becoming truth.

Alas, the very growling of his belly made it impossible for His Majesty to consider that all was well, and when the king himself is driven to imagine how delicious, how tender, how filling a giant squid might be—if one could only manage to capture a kraken—it is a clear indication that all is not in the least bit well.

Therefore, he issued a proclamation. "Anyone who is able to put an end to this dreadful famine," he announced, before the assembled crowd in his vast audience chamber, "shall win the hand of my beloved niece, the Princess—the Princess—"

Ever alert, I was quick to growl the name in attempted aid of my forgetful master, but as always, he did not hear me over the boom of his own voice.

"My niece the princess," he finished, gesturing grandly toward the poor girl so vaguely mentioned, who endeavored to look as desirable and rewarding—not to mention memorable—as possible, from her place on the dais.

"But, Your Majesty," said a woman, striding boldly forth from out of the multitude, "suppose I have no interest in the hand of your niece?"

“Ah, a woman, are you?” said the king. “Do you say that it is within your power to alleviate this famine?”

“Perhaps,” she said, lowering her eyes in a manner that made every curly hair on my mane stand even further on end—for I knew, from merely the look of her, that she was the very devil.

Now, you must understand that I had previously been, in many ways, a quite ordinary dog. True, I could speak, but that was only a consequence of my having been born from a gourd, which cracked open and revealed me when it was served upon an especially fine porcelain platter during one particular royal dinner—hence my name, Pan Gu. It was when I had grown far enough beyond puppyhood to understand that my name meant ‘plate-gourd’ that I began to realize that my master, for all his other resplendent attributes, was no enlightened sage.

I had thus taken it upon myself as my lifelong mission to protect him from not only physical harm, but also the many perils likely to proceed from the foolishness of his over-generous and inadequately-suspicious heart, however unexpectedly such dangers might be made known to me through my theretofore-nonexistent facility to perceive the black and white of reality behind the glamorous hues of deception.

And that, I assure you—that, and no other—is the reason that I said, “Master, she is not as she seems.”

But he was oblivious, being in the midst of asking, “Then what would you have of me, fair lady, should you manage to do as you say?”

“I would have your hand, instead,” she said, her impudent smile like a knife, “my Lord, my Liege, my Sovereign.”

“But, Master, she is the devil!” I barked, becoming heedless of appropriate courtly behavior in my alarm. Unfortunately, the crowd was all abuzz in astonishment, and the sense of my words was lost in their reverberant murmuring.

“Hush, Pan Gu,” said the king. “So be it.”

That very night, feeling that I had little other recourse, I set out from the palace, armed with no more than my ability of speech, the newfound gifts my master had apparently bestowed upon my race, and my own native canine abilities, which enabled me to readily follow the devil-woman’s scent trail.

I began with a lengthy overland journey of three dawns and dusks, which occasioned some instances of confrontation with ruffians both two- and four-legged, but as it turned out, a dog with the size and vague countenance of a predatory feline—not to mention teeth as large as human fingers—had not much to worry about in that respect. My one concern was how I was to brace the eighteen no doubt well-guarded levels of Diyu, once I arrived underground.

To my surprise and relief, however, my status as a somewhat spiritual being—since I was nominally a temple guardian, as most of my kind had indeed become—as well as, presumably, my recently-gained ability to ward off ‘bad energy’ allowed me to enter and traverse the underworld unmolested by its denizens, if not entirely unharmed.

A great deal more travel followed, past the Chamber of Tongue-Ripping, where gossips were silenced evermore; the Orchard of Iron Cycads, where those who caused discord among families were impaled on the razor-like branches of metal trees; and on through the Chambers of Scissors, of Mirrors, of Steam.

My mane crisped in the Hall of Copper Columns, where arsonists were bound to pillars of red-hot metal. My paws were lacerated, climbing past murderers over the Mountain of Knives. Even my thick coat did not keep me from shivering, beneath the rain of pain and the wind of sorrow that constantly lashed the Town of Suicides.

Still, focused on my objective, I pressed on, beyond the Hill of Ice, the Cauldron of Boiling Oil, the Pool of Blood, the Volcano of Thieves, the Mill of Stone, and the further Chambers of Rock, Saws, Bulls, Pounding, and Dismemberment.

At last I found my way to the devil’s very throne room, where she greeted me with rather startling delight. “How marvelous!” she gloated. “The fool king has actually sent me a gift!”

It was at that point that I allowed myself to entertain the notion that perhaps all sovereigns were slow of mind, or at least slightly mad. It was not as though I was accompanied by an ambassador, to present me, nor was I bearing a royal seal or any other such adornment which might indicate that I had been intended as a token of esteem.

Nevertheless, I resolved to take advantage of the supposed-woman’s arrogance. Spying a tray of liquor nearby, I grasped it in my maw—a thing

that would not have been possible, had my muzzle not been enlarged to grotesque proportions—and proffered it to her, as though in homage.

“A celebratory drink, is it?” She took a glass in hand, with delight. “Indeed, there is much to celebrate. All I need do is wait for the famine I have already countermanded to come to its end. Then I shall present myself to your former master, and become queen of both heaven and hell!” Laughing, she raised the glass to her lips and drank.

And drank. And drank some more, as I plied her with wine and spirits which she was utterly amused to accept, on and on until she finally succumbed and staggered, in decidedly unladylike fashion, to her private bedchamber, where she collapsed into a snoring stupor. I was permitted to accompany her—I was understood to have become ‘her’ dog, after all—which was convenient enough for my purposes, but left me, still, with a quite significant inconvenience to contend with.

The famine, evidently, was no longer a problem, but the promised royal marriage remained a rather substantial dilemma. I had entertained a naïve notion of bodily dragging the devil before my master and revealing her true nature, but I had come to appreciate that this was enormously impracticable, what with orchards and mountains and mills and chamber upon chamber upon chamber to traverse, back into sunlight. As robust and powerful as my new form was, I did not believe I could go through all of that again with a full-sized human in tow, even if it was not, in fact, truly a human.

It is with some shame that I recount what I did next. Surely there must have been some more intelligent, more dignified way to accomplish my purpose, but instead of devising such, I simply bit the devil’s head off and, clutching it in my tremendous maw and sharp teeth, fled.

“AH, MY FAITHFUL companion, where have you been for so long?” the king cried, upon my eventual return to the palace.

This was very like him, to greet me with affectionate alacrity while apparently ignoring the grisly head that I dropped at his feet, panting.

It was only after his niece had uttered a muffled shriek and fainted gracefully to the polished floor that he seemed to take notice. “What is this? Oh, Pan Gu, what have you done to my promised bride?!”

Having had much time and many reasons, by then, to have explored the full extent of my new abilities, I barked three times. The seeming of the beautiful woman—at least, I can only assume that she was meant to have been beautiful—disappeared, to be replaced with the true, hideous visage of the devil, which to this very day I cannot bring my powers of either speech or will to adequately describe.

“The famine was but a plot to marry you and thereafter steal your throne, Master,” I said.

“Pan Gu!” my master exclaimed, with somewhat mortifying amazement. “You can talk!”

Mindful once more of my courtly graces, I replied only, “It is my honor and privilege to do so, Your Majesty.”

“To think that such treachery could come from one so lovely,” he said, shaking his head in sorrow and evident failure, once more, to fully comprehend. “Ah, Pan Gu, if there only existed a woman with precisely your sterling qualities, I should gladly marry her instead.”

And so the next day, after I had fully explained to the king—and, more to the point, his ministers— what had happened, I awakened as a human woman, distressingly long of limb, virtually bare of fur, and worst of all, feebly blunt of tooth.

Perplexingly, I seemed to be the only one troubled by this occurrence.

I hastened, of course, to reassure His Majesty that I would not hold him to his word, but being a man of honor—if not always prudence—he was adamant, stating that, in any case, if there was any one being that he could be said to love above all others, it was surely myself.

For my part, I gazed at him with my new human eyes and saw him clearly for what he was: a fool, a blundering oaf, a great hairy beast of a man who would, with precious little hesitation, give himself and his kingdom away to some stranger he had never even laid eyes on previously.

Yet my heart, which seemed to have remained unchanged, saw him also as good, unflinchingly noble, so caring of his people that he would, with precious little hesitation, give himself and his kingdom away to some stranger he had never even laid eyes on previously, so long as he believed it was for their benefit.

And this, my pup, my cub, my darling girl, is why I am telling you this tale—so that you will know, as you grow from poppet to princess, the most important thing that I learned in my journey from inside a gourd to under the ground, from being an intruder in hell to becoming, eventually, Queen of Heaven.

Listen, then, and remember—some may have more wisdom, and some may have less, but love makes dogs of us all.