



The King of the Valley of Woes

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Tänapäev 2016, 72 pp
ISBN 9789949850204
Storybook, fiction
Age: 8+

Once upon a time in a land far away called the Valley of Woes, there lived people who weren't content with anything. Naturally, they didn't like the ruler who sat on the throne, either. Since the King of the Valley was orphaned as a young child, the country was actually ruled by a regent. Yet when the King became an adult, the regent didn't want to hand over power. The King himself, in fact, wasn't looking forward to taking over, because decision-making is hard work. One day, a university student enters the kingdom. The border guards bring the man, who is carrying a stack of hefty books, before the King. "Books are good companions," the traveller tells him. Just as the monarch is reading one of them, he remembers something from his childhood...

[pp 20–23]

THE LIBRARY

In any case, the King started poking around the castle, searching for books. The guards hadn't been ordered to wander around with him. They sat in their warm guards' room, drinking beer. The King took good care of his servants. People would have been outraged if the King had kept his servants in chambers as cold as his own. He had to make sure they had everything they needed, and couldn't splurge on himself. That's what the King's subjects believed, and they were very satisfied with the way things were going.

The King didn't give two hoots about them, personally. He was the one who was supposed to take responsibility for everything and look out for his subjects, but should never allow himself anything nice. The King's subjects saw that kind of behavior as the monarch living at their expense, which they didn't like one bit.

The King wandered around the castle for days on end. The whole royal family had lived here once: all his aunts and uncles and their husbands and wives and children, and even all their relatives, too. Not to mention the royal court.

But now, the castle was such a cold, damp, mildewed place that no one wanted to spend much time in it. Only the King was required to live there, because he was the king.

Finally, late one evening, the King arrived at a door covered in cobwebs. He opened it, and there it was!

The King had found the library!

The room wasn't far from the King's own living quarters, but it could only be reached by way of a narrow hallway piled high with all kinds of clutter, so getting to it wasn't an easy task. Therefore, no one had stepped foot in the hallway for decades.

Even so, the King wound his way through the junk and found the library, at last!

The King's clothes got all dirty while doing so, and his hands and face were smudged.

But he couldn't care less: he was standing in the middle of the most wonderful library! It was rather stuffy, since no one had opened the windows or let in any fresh air for years and years. So, that was the first thing the King did before taking a look around.

Lining the walls were shelves full of all kinds of books. There were thick scientific and educational volumes. There were colorful picture books. There were exciting tales of adventure. There were fun comics. There was absolutely everything.

And set right in front of the fireplace was a comfy armchair, where one could sit and leaf through a book or two.

However, the armchair was covered in a

thick layer of dust. The fireplace was cold and unlit.

This didn't bother the King very much, all the same: he was accustomed to the damp and cold.

And actually, there was already a stockpile of firewood, kindling, and flint and steel, so the King could light a fire straight away if he wanted to.

So, that's exactly what he did!

THE KING READS A BOOK

The King took the first book in reach and blew the dust off it. Then, he thumped the armchair cushions to be a little less dusty, and sat down to inspect the book.

A fire was already crackling cozily in the fireplace, and warmth started spreading into the room. Fresh air came in through the open windows, and the King started to feel truly at ease for the first time in a long while.

The King had ended up picking out a thrilling comic book about his ancestors' battles. It told of the days when the King's distant forefather laid the foundations for their kingdom. He had to triumph over many enemies in order to do so. It also turned out that the kingdom hadn't always been called the Valley of Woes. Originally, it was named the Valley of Tulips, because an enormous number of gorgeous tulips grew on the valley's sunny slopes. Back then, tulips didn't grow anywhere else in the world—nowhere else but here.

The kings of the Valley of Tulips wanted their kingdom to be famous and admired near and far. They wanted to acquaint people all around the world with their beautiful land, and so they did. Word of their pretty flowers spread quickly, but it only brought them misfortune.

One after another, bands of robbers started showing up in the Valley of Tulips. The thieves dug the tulips up at night and carried them off in secret. One awful day, the king's subjects discovered that there wasn't a single tulip left in the valley. The Kingdom of the Valley of Tulips had become the Kingdom of the Valley of Woes. The only exquisite blossom that remained was the one embroidered on the king's crest—so much for their tulips.

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[pp 38–41]

THE LION

The King couldn't believe his eyes.

Was it truly possible that his dear friend—his childhood playmate from those beautiful times when his father and grandfather were still alive—was approaching just now? That he hadn't been killed, as the King had been told, but was alive and healthy and mightier than ever before?

Once, long ago—back in the golden

days when the land was still ruled by the King's grandfather, and his father hadn't yet drunk from the poisoned chalice, which a treacherous hand placed on the table before him as he sat by the fire one evening—a group of hunters found a tiny lion cub up in the mountains. Someone had shot the cub's mother to make her coat into an impressive pelt for their floor.

The lion cub was as thin as a rake. Out in the wild without his mother's care, the creature would have been doomed. The hunters brought the cub back to the castle, where the young prince nurtured him. The future king fed the baby lion milk from a bottle, and started giving him bits of ground beef as he grew.

The cub became the prince's dearest friend. They were inseparable: swimming together, running together, playing together. Every night when the prince went to bed, the lion cub would curl up on a rug at his feet.

And so, the pair grew up together, until an awful change occurred.

After the deaths of the prince's grandfather and father, a regent took power. The cub was taken away to a zoo, because the regent didn't like the idea of a young lion standing at the future king's side. Only creatures that were loyal to the regent himself were allowed to surround the King.

And so, the prince grew up to be a helpless king, and the cub a zoo lion.

A flood brought them back together again.

The lion made his way through the terrified crowd, bounded up the castle steps, several at a time, and dropped down at the King's feet. The King bowed down and hugged the lion's mighty mane with tears in his eyes.

A strange sigh rippled through the crowd—one filled with honor, relief, and amazement.

And that is exactly how a people should look upon its king.

THE KING RECALLS EVERYTHING

The King started remembering the games he and the lion cub had once played.

They would often disappear into the mountains for hours on end. The pair would go on long hikes, sit on clifftops overlooking the valley, make small campfires on the plateaus, drink ice-cold water from gurgling mountain streams, and howl at the top of their lungs to hear their voices echo back.

The prince wasn't actually allowed to go rambling around the mountains on his own, of course. He and the lion went hiking in secret.

A secret passageway—one that had been dug centuries ago, when the King's ancestors sat on the throne—led from the castle into the mountains. It had been long forgotten. The tunnel was a true secret, and only a handful of trusted individuals

knew of its existence. All those people had passed away a long time ago. The regent had taken special care to ensure that no one loyal to the former king remained in the castle.

All the while, the prince grew up unguarded and alone, like a prisoner in his own castle; a prisoner in his own country. Everything that happened around him was like a dark, murky dream.

Even the King had forgotten about the secret passageway.

Yet, the lion remembered everything as clear as day.

The lion reared up onto his hind legs, placing his front paws on the King's shoulders, just like he used to. This made the King stagger, because the lion had grown up to be very large indeed, and was decently heavy to boot. Nevertheless, the King didn't topple over.

Then, the lion settled back down on all fours and padded through the open castle door.

The King suddenly remembered the secret passageway. Perhaps he could use that very tunnel to lead his people to safety! That is, of course, if water hadn't already filled the passageway.

Now, it was the only chance left. Maybe it would be their escape.

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[pp 43–44]

IN THE MOUNTAINS

The King remembered clearly where the key to the door had hung.

He went up on tiptoes and stretched out his hand to lift the key down from the peg, but there was nothing on the rock wall. The King frantically waved his hand back and forth over the smooth, empty surface. There was no peg to be found, not to mention any key.

The King started to panic.

Oh, I'm such a hopeless, helpless, useless guy, he thought miserably.

The King dropped to his knees in despair.

As he did so, his hand slid down along the wall.

And all of a sudden—what was that?!

It was the key, hanging far below where the King had been searching!

And then, he realized something.

The King had grown much taller over the years! Of course he no longer needed to stand on tiptoes to reach the key, like when he was just a little boy. The key actually hung much lower.

The King squeezed the key firmly in his palm while he trailed the fingers of his other hand across the surface of the door, searching for the keyhole. Once he found it, the King stuck the key into the lock, and turned.

The metal groaned, as the lock had rusted

tight over the years. The King had to use all the strength he had to turn the key. He strained and strained, and finally, the door unlocked.

With the help of the King's subjects, they pulled the door wide open.

Fresh air and the wondrous light of the mountains flooded through the opening.

They had emerged on a mountaintop high above the heavy rainclouds, where the sun was shining brightly.

The King's subjects poured out through the secret passageway. They were astounded.

"Long live the King!" someone shouted.

"Long live the King! Long live the King!" cheered everyone who had emerged from the dark tunnel into the sunlight.

The King stood high up on the peak, his hand burrowed into the lion's mane. At that very moment, the King was happy.