



Four Piastres a Day

(A story from Sudan)

In the past, there were many powerful kingdoms in northern Sudan. The king of one of them, like many other rulers, used to enjoy wandering around his capital at night in disguise. In this way, he was able to discover how his subjects lived and what they really thought of him.

Generally, he would take with him one of his favourites at court, but this particular night he decided to go alone into the city. As he stood among groups of people or sat alone at a table in a café, listening to men talking among themselves, he came to the conclusion that most people were unhappy in their lives.


“Is this my fault as their ruler,” he asked himself, “or is it simply that people are not usually satisfied with their lives, however comfortable their houses, however fine their clothes and however delicious their food? Even though my kingdom is prosperous and most of my subjects enjoy the good things of life, I notice that there is little smiling or laughter.”

The king walked around the streets of the fashionable area of the city, where he expected to find people enjoying themselves, but mainly he found men and women quarrelling and grumbling- and generally it was about money.

“Is nobody happy and content?” he wondered, and he decided to go to the poorer districts and see if the people there were more cheerful. But there, too, he saw no signs of joy; and there too, it was generally over money that people were shouting at each other.

Then, walking down a dark alleyway, his ears suddenly picked out the sounds of someone singing. “At last,” the king thought, “here is someone who is free of cares.”





The king approached a small house and peered through a narrow window. Inside, he saw a young man seated at a bench and working by the light of a kerosene lamp. The king noticed that the man was busy hammering nails into a shoe he was fixing. Pulling the hood of his cloak over his head and covering the lower half of his face with his shawl, the king knocked gently at the door.

“My son, it seems I have lost my way,” said the king when the man opened the door.

“Come in, come in!” The man greeted his guest and welcomed him into his modest home, not realizing who his guest was. “Let me make you a cup of tea while you rest for a while.” The shoemaker boiled some water and made tea. Then, with his cup of tea by his side, the shoemaker returned to his bench and went on with his work.

“Please excuse me,” he said to the king, “but I have promised to repair these shoes for tomorrow morning.”

Sipping at his tea, the king mentioned that he had heard the sound of singing while he was passing by. “I was curious to see who was singing so cheerfully at this time of night. You appear to be a man who is happy with his life.”

“Indeed,” answered the young man, “thought sometimes I have to work late into the night.”


“And does your work bring you a good income?” asked the king, careful to keep his face in the shadows.


“It provides me with a living,” answered the shoemaker. “From it I earn the 4 piastres a day that I need.”

“Four piastres a day?!” exclaimed the king, unable to hide his surprise that anyone could live on such a miserable sum.

“It is enough for me,” said the young shoemaker. “I eat one piastre, I repay the second, I lend the third, and I throw the fourth in the river.”

The king looked puzzled. “I don’t understand you,” he said.






“It is quite simple,” the man answered, as he went on fixing the shoe. “The piastre that I eat is of course the one that I spend on food for myself and my family. The piastre I repay is the one I give to my aging parents, in repayment for looking after me when I was young. The piastre I lend is the one I now spend on my son. He, in his turn, when I have grown old and he has become a man, will repay it to me. As for the piastre that I throw in the river, that is the one I am spending on my daughter. I do not expect this piastre to be paid back, it is my gift to her. You see, when my daughter grows up she will marry and be busy caring for her husband and children and will be in no position to pay it back to me.”


The king clapped his hands in delight at the way the man explained the riddle of the four piastres. He then took away the shawl from his face and the young man gasped in surprise as he recognized the king. “Here is a gift to you of one thousand gold coins,” the king said. “They are in return for the joyful song you were singing which led me to knock on your door, and for your clever riddle.”

The astonished shoemaker thanked the king, and the king rose to his feet. “I must now return to my palace,” he said, “but before I leave you I must ask you to tell no one of our meeting this night or of our conversation. If you do, then you will lose more than you have gained. Only when you have seen my face a thousand times are you permitted to tell anyone of our conversation.” “I understand, Your Majesty,” said the shoemaker, although he was puzzled by the king’s words.

The king left and returned through the deserted streets to his palace. He was so impressed by the young man’s riddle that he decided to try it out on his ministers the following morning. So, the next day, seated on his throne at the court, the king ordered complete silence.

“A man earns four piastres a day,” he told his ministers. “He eats one piastre, repays the second, lends the third, and throws the fourth in the river. In what way does he spend the four piastres? Think about it and tell me. I give you all three full days to solve the riddle.”





If you have not done so by then, I shall consider none of you fit for the positions you hold. I shall throw you all in prison and appoint new ministers in your place.”

With these words, the king addressed the shocked men of power in his kingdom. Then he rose and left his ministers to think about the riddle and what their fate would be if they failed to solve it within three days.


By the evening of the second day, not one of the ministers had succeeded in guessing the solution, though they had racked their brains and consulted together. “We have just one more night,” the Chief Minister told them. “Then we all lose our jobs and end up in prison.”

The ministers were in a state of panic as they searched their minds in vain for the answer to the riddle. The Chief Minister, though, suddenly had an idea. He remembered that the king has told him on the evening before he has called the ministers together that he wished to wander around the city in disguise on his own.

“No doubt,” he said to himself, “it was on that evening that the king heard the riddle which he told us the next morning. Let me find the person who told him the riddle!”

So the Chief Minister waited till the king and all those in the palace had gone to sleep before creeping out into the streets of the city. For a long time he wandered in vain, asking people here and there about the riddle but receiving only blank stares in answer. If the ministers could not solve the puzzle, how could ordinary citizens be expected to?

Then, like the king before him, the Chief Minister was attracted to some singing he heard coming from the home of a simple shoemaker who was still at work late into the night. The Chief Minister knew that the king much enjoyed listening to a good singing voice, so he knocked and entered and found the shoemaker sitting surrounded by shows. He then asked the shoemaker about the riddle the king had given them to solve.





The shoemaker made him tea.

“If we fail to find the correct solution by tomorrow morning, all of us will lose our positions and be thrown into prison,” the minister said, “Please help us, for I feel you have the answer to this riddle and that it was you to told it to the king. Please have pity on us all and tell me the answer.”

The young man was thoughtful for a while. He felt sorry for this man. He then answered the Chief Minister, “Yes, you are right in thinking that I know the answer, but I have one condition to make before telling you.”

“And what is that?” asked the Chief Minister.

“That you do not let the king know who it was that told you.”

The Chief Minister promised not to give away the secret. He then listened with joy to what the shoemaker had to say.


“Thank you,” he said, and in gratitude he took off a valuable rung from his finger and made him a present of it...


Next morning at the court, the Chief Minister stood up and announced to the king that he had solved the riddle. When he heard it, the king immediately exclaimed, “Tell me who told it to you! It could only have been the shoemaker!”

The Chief Minister tried to deny it, but in the end, when he saw how angry the king was, he has to admit that it was as the king had said. “He told me only after I had promised not to tell Your Majesty,” pleaded the Chief Minister.

“Please, Your Majesty, do not punish the young man. “I warned him,” said the king. “Now he must pay the price for breaking his promise to me. Bring the man to the palace immediately!”

Sometime later, the shoemaker was dragged like a criminal before the king. He saw at once that the king was in a rage. “Did you not promise to say nothing about our meeting? Did I not warn you that, if you talked, you would lose more than you had gained from me? And what do you have to lose, except your head?”





The young shoemaker looked fearlessly at the king. “Did Your Majesty not say that I should not speak of our meeting till I had seen your face a thousand times?”

“But it was only 3 days ago that we met!” interrupted the king.

The shoemaker then took out from under the gown he was wearing the bag of coins the king had given him. He poured out the coins in front of the king, then he held out one of the coins to show that it had on it the picture of the king.

“When I told the Minister the solution of the riddle, I had already seen your Majesty’s face on these thousand coins. Did I, then, do anything wrong?”

“You are right,” admitted the king. “And we are in need of brains like yours, “the king told the young man and immediately appointed him to an important position in the court.

