

The Cobbler and the King

by David Borcharding

Once upon a time, in a kingdom forgotten now to all but the most ancient of chronicles, there lived a cobbler and his wife. Although they were poor, they dwelled in a simple yet comfortable cottage, from which the cobbler eked out a meager living making shoes and boots.

By no means an artist, the cobbler nevertheless produced good, sturdy footwear for which he charged a fair price. For this reason, his reputation spread beyond his village to other towns in the kingdom, and eventually all the way to the throne.

One cool autumn day, as the leaves were falling from the trees, a rider appeared in the village. He wore bright blue cloak with the royal emblem embroidered upon it in gold thread, and paused at the inn to acquire directions to the cobbler's home. As he rode on, the villagers followed, for this was an unusually exciting event in their usually boring lives.

Upon knocking at the cobbler's door, rider unfurled a parchment scroll bearing the king's seal stamped in deep blue wax.

"Be it known to all the will of his Royal Majesty," the messenger proclaimed, his voice strong and clear. "This cobbler is commanded to use all of his skills to their greatest degree, producing a pair of boots of the highest quality, by this hour on the morrow, for his Highness, the king."

The rider dismounted then, and producing a small hammer and a pair of iron nails, fixed the decree to the cottage door as the cobbler and his wife stood amazed.

“But,” the cobbler stammered, “But ... I cannot produce a pair of boots worthy of the king in so short a time!”

“That,” said the messenger with a bit of a sneer, “is thy concern, and none of mine. I shall return for the boots tomorrow.”

He mounted and rode off, dry leaves crunching beneath the horse's hooves. The crowd stared at the cobbler for a moment as if they beheld a condemned man, and then slowly dispersed to leave him to his fate.

“What shall I do?” the cobbler cried to his wife. “I have no fine leather suitable for a king, and if I did, I have not the skill required!”

“As long as you are under this order,” his wife replied, pointing to the decree upon their door, “you do as the king wills or you will be cast into his dungeon for the rest of your days. Of your skill, I have no doubt, dear husband. Of the leather, you must take up your bow this instant, go into the wood, and kill a fine doe. Bring the hide to me, and I will prepare it quickly for your use.”

The cobbler could not imagine how his dear wife would manage such a feat, but since she had such faith in his skills, he did not question hers. Taking up his bow and quiver, he entered the forest in search of a doe.

The entire wood was still, and the dry leaves seemed to crunch more loudly because of it. An hour became two, then four. The shadows grew longer as the sun dipped low and finally set, and cobbler as yet had released not a single arrow.

Stars glittered in the moonless sky as midnight approached, and still the cobbler had no deer. Desperate ploys began to form in his mind. Perhaps he could strike a bargain with the messenger to buy

him more time. But then he recalled the man's sneer and knew he would find no mercy in such a cold heart.

Could he take apart an old pair of boots and remake them into a suitable pair for the king? It would take skill such as he had never shown before, but his dear wife had faith in him.

It might be done. No, it would be done!

He turned with renewed hope to retrace the path to his door, and found with a growing horror that the night had covered his tracks. He was utterly lost.

But wait ... what was that, through the trees? A light? Yes, something glimmered away in the dark. His dear wife had put out a lantern for him; that must be it! He ran headlong toward the glow, ignoring the branches that tore at his face and arms. Something lashed his forehead, grit burning his eyes, blurring his vision. Still he pressed on, nearing the light, reaching out for it until he stumbled clear of the wood.

It was not his cottage. It was not a lamp left burning for him by his dear wife. It was, instead, a clearing. And in it, a man. No, not a man; no man the cobbler had ever seen looked like the creature that stood before him now. It had long, straight hair the color of new snow under a full moon. Likewise, its skin was as smooth and as white as marble. The robes it wore seemed made of dew-covered spider silk and did little to conceal its alabaster breast and thighs. Its eyes shone like twin stars.

"Mortal," it said, and its voice made the cobbler's soul tremble. "Why do you disturb our peace? It is late, and you should be abed."

"My apologies, Fae King," the cobbler said, for he knew this to be the creature of which his grandsire had told many tales. "I have

been commanded to fashion a fine pair of boots for the king, and I have no leather. I came to hunt a doe, and have become lost. I beseech thee, King of the Other Realm, to aid me as you once aided my grandsire.”

The Fae King leaned closer, staring at the cobbler as if staring into him.

“We once aided a bootmaker such as yourself, ‘tis true. He struck a bargain with us that allowed us a brief sojourn in your mortal world. We offer to you a similar trade. We shall fashion a pair of boots fitted for your king, without equal in all your land, which you will find in your workshop before the day breaks. In return, we wish to look again upon the mortal world, but we cannot, for we do not have mortal eyes. Give us your eyes, and we shall have an accord.”

“If I give you my eyes, I shall not be able to gaze upon my dear wife, who is most precious to me in all the world.”

“Fear not, mortal. We shall replace your eyes with these stones.” It held up two white marble orbs. “You shall be able to see your wife, and no one shall know the difference but thee.”

The cobbler was loath to sacrifice his eyes, but if he did not, he would be locked in the king's dungeon, never to see his dear wife again. Better to see her through stone eyes than not at all, he reasoned, and so he agreed.

In a flash, the Fae King locked him in a cold embrace. The marble fingers of one hand gripped the cobbler's skull, while its icy fingernails slid into his left eye and plucked the orb from its socket. Just as quickly, the Fae King plucked out his right eye. Then the cobbler felt the hard, smooth stones being forced into place, and screamed in agony. The Fae King dropped him then, his face half frozen from its touch. When he looked up again, all the color had

gone out of the night, and the Fae King was staring at him with his own eyes.

When he returned home, the finest boots he'd ever beheld stood gleaming on his workbench.

His dear wife had fallen asleep before the fireplace, waiting for him to return. He woke her and told her the night's tale, but did not tell her about sacrificing his eyes. She was amazed by the boots and, knowing the king would be satisfied, took him to bed, where they made love until dawn.

The king was, indeed, pleased with the fine boots. How perfectly they fit! How soft, and yet how sturdy! So satisfied was the king that he sent the messenger out again. This time, the cobbler was given a week to create a pair of boots for each of the king's ten generals.

Once again, the cobbler went into the woods at midnight, and once again found the Fae King.

"O wondrous King," the cobbler cried. "The king was so delighted with the boots you made for him, he has commanded me to make ten pair for his generals! I beseech thee, King of the Other Realm, to aid me as you aided me before."

"We shall aid you, but we wish to taste the fruits of your mortal world. For that, we require your mortal lips. Give them to us, and we shall have an accord."

"But without my lips, I cannot kiss my dear wife, who is most precious to me in all the world."

"Fear not, mortal. We shall replace your lips with these slugs." It held up two of the fat, glistening creatures. "You shall be able to kiss your dear wife, and no one shall know the difference but thee."

The cobbler was even more loath to sacrifice his lips, but if he did not, he would be locked in the king's dungeon, never to kiss his dear wife again. Better to kiss her with slug lips than not at all, he reasoned, and so he agreed.

In a flash, the Fae King again locked him in its frigid embrace, while its razor-sharp fingernails sliced his lips from his face. As he felt the cold, squirming slime crawl into place, he shrieked in utter horror. When it was done, he looked up and found the Fae King staring at him with his own eyes and smiling with his lips.

When he returned home, his dear wife was pacing before the fireplace, unable to sleep. Again, he told her of his meeting with the Fae King, but did not mention having to sacrifice his lips. Together, they rushed to the workshop and found ten pair of gleaming boots, each as fine as the pair fitted for the king.

Knowing the king's generals would be satisfied, they went to bed and made love until dawn. This time, however, he could not taste her when he pleased her with his mouth, and his wife gently teased him for his cold kisses.

The king's generals were, indeed, pleased with their fine boots. Why, an army with boots such as these would never tire in battle! They made their case to the king, and once again he sent the messenger to the cobbler's cottage. This time, the cobbler was given a month to create a pair of boots for every man in the king's army.

Panicked, the cobbler went into the woods at midnight, and once again found the Fae King.

"O wondrous King," the cobbler cried. "The king now wants me to make boots for his entire army! I beseech thee, King of the Other Realm, to aid me as you aided me before."

“We shall aid you,” the Fae King said, “but we wish to be able to feel your mortal world. For that, we require your mortal hands. Give them to us, and we shall have an accord.”

“But without my hands, I cannot hold my dear wife, who is most precious to me in all the world.”

“Fear not, mortal. We shall replace your hands with these boughs.” It held up two branching oak limbs. “You shall be able to hold your dear wife, and no one shall know the difference but thee.”

The cobbler hesitated to sacrifice his hands, but if he did not, he would be locked in the king's dungeon, never to hold his dear wife again. Better to hold her with wooden hands than not at all, he reasoned, and so he agreed.

In a flash, the Fae King sliced off his hands with its razor-sharp talons. As the rough wood was jammed onto his twin stumps, he howled in agony. When it was done, he looked up and found the Fae King staring at him with his own eyes and stroking his own lips and his own hands. His wooden hands were numb.

When he returned home, his dear wife was weeping in the cold outside their door. The entire house was filled with boots, she said. She had watched as horrible, hairy little men had carried them in, and fled terror when they started to close in upon her.

The cobbler tried to calm her by taking her into his arms, but she complained of his rough grasp. He tried to kiss away her fears, but she said his kisses had lost their passion. He tried to look into her eyes, but she glanced away, saying she could see no love for her in his stony gaze.

All of the king's men were well pleased with their boots, and the king showered the cobbler with gold. The cobbler, in turn, showered his wife with silk ribbons, dresses made by the finest seamstresses in the land, and jewelry befitting a princess. He built her a large house and hired servants to attend to her every need. Yet no matter how lavish the gift, he felt his dear wife withdrawing from him more and more. Finally, on the verge of losing her completely, he went into the woods in search of the Fae King.

“O wondrous King,” the cobbler cried. “My wife sees no love in my eyes. She shrinks from my cold kisses and my rough grasp. I am afraid I will lose her, and then I will die, for she is most precious to me in all the world. I beseech thee, King of the Other Realm, to restore to me that which I have so foolishly traded away.”

For what seemed an eternal moment, the Fae King regarded him in silence, staring at the cobbler with his own eyes.

“We shall restore to you that which you have traded,” it said at last, “but we wish for one night to be able to fully experience your mortal world. For that, we need one last thing. We need that which makes you a man.”

The cobbler stood confused, until the Fae King's glance clarified what it meant.

“I cannot give you that!” he cried, instinctively covering his manhood with his numb, wooden hands. “Without that, I cannot make love to my wife, who is most precious to me in all the world!”

“It is only for one night,” said the Fae King. “Before dawn, all shall be restored to you.”

The cobbler took a step back and prepared to flee into the woods. He knew, however, that unless he returned home with his own eyes,

his own lips, and his own hands, he would never make love to his dear wife again.

Taking a deep breath, he stepped forward. His voice shook as he spoke. "I agree," he said.

In a flash, the Fae King was upon him. It tore away his breeches and clasped his genitals in its icy grip. With one swipe, it cut off his entire manhood. He lost his senses and screamed until his voice left him. When he finally regained control of himself, the terrible king was gone.

He spent the rest of the night in the woods, not daring to return to his dear wife until he was whole again. At some point, sleep overtook him, and when he opened his eyes to the dawn, the forest had its color again. He dug into the loam and felt it on his hands. He brought it to his face and could taste it with his lips. Reaching into he breeches, he found his manhood restored.

Elated, the cobbler raced through the trees toward home. There he found his wife still abed, her tousled hair damp with sweat, her face flushed. She looked up at him with passion in her eyes, and pulled back the covers to invite him in. She was naked.

"Don't dress so quickly, dear husband," she said. "'Tis not quite morning yet. Come back to bed, and fill me again."

"Again?" cried the cobbler. "I have not been home all this night. With whom have you shared your bed, faithless wife?"

"Tease me not, dear husband," she replied. "It may have been dark, but there was light enough that I could see your eyes. And had there not been light, I would have known you by the tenderness of your lips, the caress of your hands, the taste of your manhood and

the feel of it in my womb. Now come back to bed, and let me feel it once more.”

