

Short story

A king's cloak for a beggar

A legend by Tony Wilson

In a place I know not where, there is a dusty road. On one side it leads to the countryside and on the other it goes straight to the door of a king's castle. If you travel on that road today you can see people stop by the side of a creaking gate, touch a few scraps of fine, red wool caught on a rusty nail and bow and curtsy... and laugh. Even when the sun is high in the sky they will still pretend to shiver as if it were the coldest day in the year.

I have heard say, there was a king and a queen who had more money than there were stars in the sky, but that didn't stop them wanting more. One windy, October evening in the height of Autumn they decided that they would go out and find someone to give them money. They didn't care who they got the money from, it was nothing to them if they were rich or poor, young or old, they were just so determined that they would not come back into the castle empty handed.

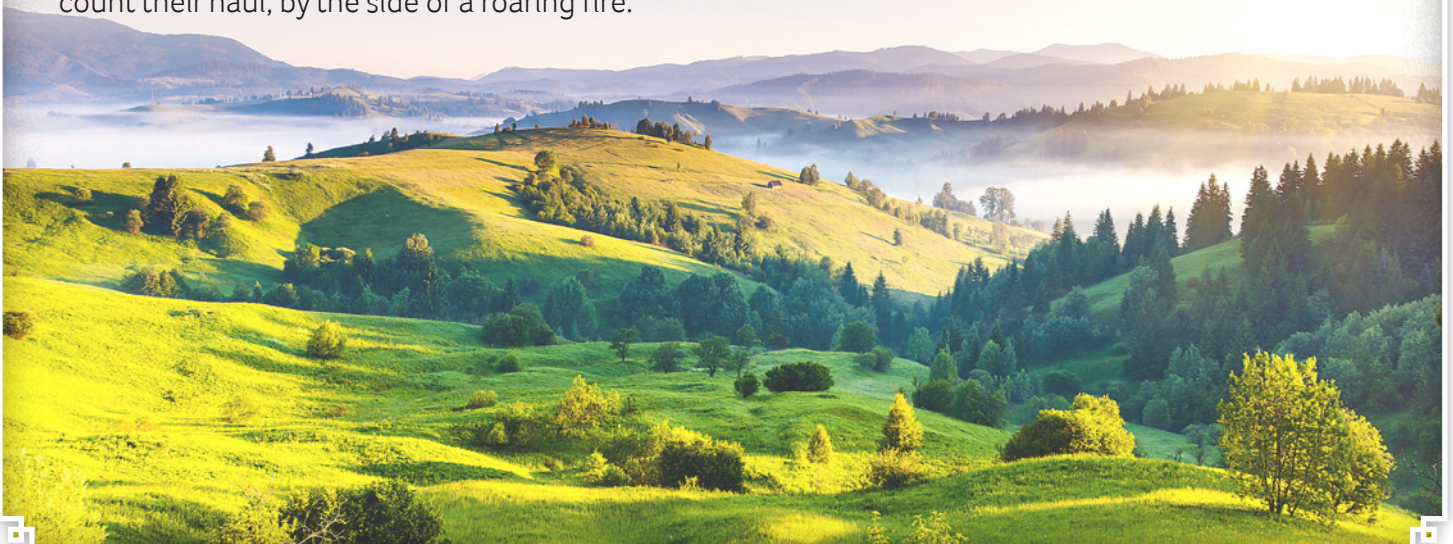
Of course, the regal pair couldn't really walk out in all of their fine clothes begging for money so they hid their fine scarlet cloaks under some raggedy blankets and rubbed some ashes from the pudding pot onto their faces and hands. Then they pretended to be bent-backed, old and weak and sneaked out, sly as foxes, tottering slowly on crooked sticks.

How they laughed to think of the money they would get that night as out they went, their begging arms outstretched in front of them. They cackled as they muttered about how terribly poor they were. *'What is to become of us? We have no food in our bellies these fine three days!'* they chortled.

The people who lived in those parts might not have had much but they would share what little they had with anyone and everyone, and soon, this deceitful pair of royal crooks collected a good haul of money in the soft leather wallets they kept hidden in their beautiful, red cloaks.

Now, in that village, upon that road, there lived a man. A good man. He never had two farthings to rub together but kindness was no stranger to his heart and eyes. He pulled his tight, thin cloth coat to his chin and chest as the cold night clawed at his skin, and made his way towards his home, with the castle at his back. As the autumn evening turned to night he could see something or someone coming towards him and it sounded so pitiful. Such a weeping and a wailing and the words became clearer as the two figures, and he, approached each other.

It was a gruff man's voice that he heard first, *'Tis a terrible thing that this king has so much and we have so little.'* The figure of the woman agreed, *'Aye, I have heard that the queen eats nought but larks' tongues and drinks the tears of unicorns, and still we find ourselves so cold.'* The King and Queen were loving this. All that was left to do was to take some of this last stranger's money before they could sit down and gloat and count their haul, by the side of a roaring fire.



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Pietro was this kind stranger's name, and he stopped then spoke: *'Old dame and sir, it is indeed a great shame that you two are so cold.'* He patted at his near-empty pockets. *'I wish that there was something that I could give you but...'* He pulled out a coin, the size of an otter's eye. *'I have no more than this old coin that I was hoping to use to buy a crust of bread.'*

Now, as we know, the King and the Queen did not care who gave them money or how much, and it was the King who snatched at the coin from out of Pietro's hand, with neither a 'thanks' nor a 'goodbye'. Pietro was shocked but still he smiled. *'It is indeed a strange thing that the King has no need in his heart to help his people... for if anyone needed to be helped in their old age then it is you.'*

You would have thought that the pair would have been glad to have made this the last of their thieving that night but the Queen once again began to weep and wail. *'Oh now I have nothing! Kind stranger, is there nothing more that you could find to give to me... a poor maltreated old dame? The terrible cold is clawing at my skin and I have but this old blanket to keep me warm.'*

Pietro looked at himself. All that he had was the thin, cloth coat upon him but the woman's pleading had been so heartfelt that he did not hesitate to pull it from his back. Again he spoke: *'Old woman, it is so small that I cannot place this upon your back. But we can place it beneath your blanket and hopefully it will keep you warm. I have no more.'*

He reached towards her and made to lift the blanket and help her on with his coat but she screeched, and ran. Her voice changed and she sounded like a woman from the court of a king. *'No it is all right, I do not need your coat.'* As she ran she crashed into her husband whose disguise slipped to the ground. There the King stood there in all of his finery.

The King and Queen scrambled about one another. The more they tried to run away, the more they entangled they became, until they fell in a heap upon the dusty ground. *'We are not the King and Queen,'* they howled. But it was obvious to anyone that they were. *'We are not the King and Queen.'* Their bright red, thick, woollen cloaks were getting caught in the brambles by the side of the road. Pietro just watched as they got covered in scratches and blackberry juice and their voices rose in anger and confusion. *'We are not the King and Queen.'* They kept on shouting as they dropped the cloaks and ran as fast as they could to the safety of the castle.

Pietro looked inside of the cloaks and saw all of the money inside of the leather pouches. He sorted through them all and retrieved his own small coin. From then on, he wandered about with the King's cloak upon his back, sharing the money that he had found with all those who had as big a heart as he. When he grew too old to travel on that dusty road, he hung the cloaks upon a rusty nail on gate by the side of the castle, where they stayed for many years to come. The two old beggars with blankets for cloaks were never to be seen on the highway again.

