

The King's Son and the Son of the Maid

Rabbi Nachman of Bratzlav

Translated by Adin Steinsaltz

ONCE there was a king. In his household there was a certain maid who served the queen. She was not a simple cook who would never be allowed in the king's presence, but a maid-in-waiting of modest rank.

When the time came for the queen to deliver her child, the maid too was ready to give birth. The midwife, for no other reason than to see what would come of it, exchanged the babies. She took the king's son and laid it next to the maid, and she laid the maid's son next to the queen.

The boys began to grow up. The so-called son of the king, who was really the son of the servant, was given much honor and respect. He was raised up higher and higher and became greatly exalted. Meanwhile, the maid's son—that is, the king's true son grew up in the king's household, and both children studied together in the same class. The king's true son was by nature drawn to regal ways, even though he was brought up in the home of a servant. Conversely, the maid's son, who was known as the king's son, was drawn to ways that were not those of a king, but as he was brought up in the house of the king, he had to behave according to the regal manners which he had been taught.

Now women are incapable of keeping a secret, and after a while the midwife told someone how she had exchanged the two infants. As this man had a friend, and this friend also had a friend, the secret naturally became known, and before long everyone was talking about how the king's son had been exchanged. Nevertheless, the people did not speak about it openly, lest the matter become known to the king. For after all, what could he possibly do about it? How could he undo what had been done? Besides, why should he believe such a tale? It might well be false. So, although people continued whispering the story about, it was felt that the king should not be told.

One day someone revealed the secret to the king's false son, telling him what people were saying about his having been exchanged. "Still," this person added, "I think it's beneath your dignity to investigate the matter. I'm only telling you this in case there's ever a conspiracy against the kingdom. The rumor could be advantageous to the conspirators. You ought to think about getting rid of this possible pretender."

The false prince began to harass the father of the other son, who was really his own father. He did the father injury whenever he could, for he wanted to cause him so much trouble that he would be compelled to take his son and depart. As long as the king was alive, the false prince had little power, but he still managed to make life difficult for his supposed rival. When the king grew old and died, the false prince succeeded him. He began to oppress the father of the other son more than ever, though he did this in such a way that no one would know what was going on, for such things would not seem right to the people.

The supposed father of the other son understood that he was being vexed because of the rumor about the exchange, and he told his supposed son the whole story. "I have great pity for you, whoever you are," he concluded. "If you are really my son, how can I help feeling sorry for you? And if you are not my son, but the son of the king, you are all the more to be pitied, for the false king will stop at nothing to get rid of you, God forbid. You must flee from this place."

This upset the youth greatly, but the new king continued to inflict so many hardships upon him that at last he decided to go into exile. His foster father gave him a considerable sum of money, and he departed.

The youth was very upset about being driven from his country for no reason. He considered his situation. "What have I done to deserve exile? If I am the king's son, I certainly should not be treated like this. And if I am not the king's son, I have done no evil, and there is no reason for me to be cast out." In his bitterness he took to drinking and frequenting brothels, desiring nothing more than to spend his time gratifying his desires.

Meanwhile the new king governed the land firmly. Whenever he heard of people who were gossiping about the rumored exchange of infants, he punished them severely and vengefully. He ruled by force and by might.

One day the false king went hunting with his court. They came upon a delightful spot by the river and paused there to rest. The king too lay down to rest, and thoughts of the other son whom he had unfairly driven out came into his mind. Whoever the other was, he had been wronged. If he was really a prince, was it not bad enough that he had been exchanged? Did he have to be exiled as well? And if he was not the king's son, there was also no reason for him to have been banished, for he had done no wrong. The king pondered and regretted what was going on, for such things would not seem right to the people.

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The banished son continued to do as he pleased and squandered all his money. One day when he was walking by himself, he lay down to rest and recalled all that had befallen him. "What has God done to me?" he said to himself. "If I am a king's son, it is certainly not right for me to be an exile. And if I am not a king's son, I also do not deserve such a fate." He considered the matter further. "On the other hand, if God is really able to exchange a king's son and have him suffer such sorrows, does it make sense for me to behave as I do? Is it right to do as I have done?" He began to regret his evil ways, but after he returned home he went back to his life of dissipation.

Nevertheless, thoughts of regret and repentance continued to disturb him. One night he dreamed that a fair was going to be held in a certain place. He was to go there and accept the first task offered him, no matter how difficult and menial it seemed to be.

The dream made a strong impression on him. Generally when one wakes such things slip away immediately, but this dream stuck in his mind. Even so, it seemed too difficult for him to carry out, and he returned to his drinking as before. But the dream recurred several times, and it weighed heavily upon him.

One night in the dream a voice said to him, "If you know what's good for you, you'll do as you're told." So he set out to obey the dream. He gave what was left of his money and his fine clothes to the inn, and, taking for himself the simple dress of a peddler, he left for the fair. He arrived at the place, and next morning he rose early and went to the fair itself. Quite soon a merchant tapped him on the shoulders, saying, "Do you want to hire yourself out?" "Yes," he answered.

"I have to drive some cattle," the merchant went on. "Come and work for me."

Because of what he had been told in the dream, the youth did not pause to consider the matter; he agreed at once. The merchant immediately started ordering him around in the manner of a master to his servant, and the youth soon had second thoughts. He was a gentle person and not suited for such work, and now he would have to drive cattle and tramp on foot alongside the beasts. But it was too late for him to change his mind, and the merchant continued ordering him about.

He asked his new master, "How can I go alone with the animals?" The merchant answered, "There are other drovers looking after my cattle. You will go with them."

He gave him some cattle, and the youth drove them out of the city to the place where the other drovers were gathered. From there they all moved off together, with the youth among them, driving the animals that had been assigned to him. The merchant rode among the drovers on horseback and treated them roughly, and he was especially cruel to the youth. The youth was terrified of the merchant and feared that he would die on the spot if the merchant struck him even one blow with his stick. He was so soft and gentle that he felt he could not bear it.

In this way they continued, they continued, he with his animals and the merchant riding among the drovers. They came to a particular place and picked up a sack of bread that had been left for the drovers, and the merchant distributed the food among them. The youth was also given some of this bread, and he ate it.

Then they came to a very thick forest. Shortly after they had entered it, two of the animals that the youth was driving strayed away. The merchant shouted at him, and he ran after them to try to catch them. They fled even more, and he pursued them. Soon the cattle drovers could not see one another because the forest was so thick, and the youth was quickly separated from his companions. The farther he chased the animals, the more they ran away. He chased them on and on, until he came to the very depths of the forest, and there he paused to consider his situation: "One way or another, I shall die. If I return without the animals, the merchant will kill me, and if I remain here, I shall be eaten by wild beasts. Perhaps even so I should go back to the merchant. But how can I, without the animals?" He was so afraid of the merchant that he took up his chase once more, and the animals continued to flee.

Night fell. He had never before experienced anything like being alone in the night in the depths of the forest. When he heard the wild beasts howling, as they usually do, he decided to climb a tree. He slept there with the wild beasts' cries sounding in his ears.

In the morning he looked around and saw his cattle standing nearby. He climbed down in order to catch them, but the moment he approached them they ran away. He pursued them, but again they took flight. On and on he chased the animals, and on and on they fled. At times the animals would find some grass and stop to eat. Then he would draw near them and try to catch them, but they always managed to elude him. He followed them into the deepest part of the forest, where there lived wild animals that had no fear of man, so far away were they from human habitation.

Night fell again, and when he heard the wild beasts howling all around him, he became very frightened. He saw a very large tree standing nearby and began climbing it. When he came up into the tree, he saw a man lying there among the branches. He was frightened, but even so it relieved him to meet another human being.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"A man," replied the stranger. "And who are you?"

"A man."

Where are you from?" asked the stranger. The youth did not want to tell him the whole story, and so he said only: "I was a drover, and two animals that strayed from the herd led me here. But tell me, how did you come to be here?" "My horse brought me here," the man replied. "I went out riding, and when I dismounted in order to rest, the horse wandered off into the forest. I chased him, but he kept running away from me, and that's how I come to be here." The two decided to join forces and to remain together always, even when they returned to human habitation. At dawn they heard a very powerful laugh resounding among the trees. It reverberated throughout the entire forest and was so loud that even the tree in which they were sitting shook and trembled.

The youth was very frightened, but the man whom he had met in the tree said: "I am no longer afraid of this sound, because I have already spent several nights here. Every night toward dawn, as the darkness draws back, this laughter is heard, and all the trees shake and tremble."

The youth became very alarmed, and said to his companion, "This place must be inhabited by spirits, for such laughter is never heard in any place where humans live. Whoever heard of a laugh resounding over the whole world?"

Then suddenly it was day. They looked around and saw the animals of the youth and also the horse of his companion standing nearby. They climbed down the tree and began their pursuit, the youth after his animals and the other after his horse. The animals again fled before the youth as he ran after them, and the horse similarly eluded his master. Meanwhile the two wandered far apart from each other.

In the course of the chase, the youth found a sack filled with bread. Now bread is very important in the wilderness, so he took the sack and slung it up on his shoulder before continuing to follow the animals. On his way he met a man. He was very frightened at first, but even so he was somewhat relieved to meet another human being.

The man asked him, "How did you get here?" The youth returned his question, "How did you get here?"

The man replied, "I, my fathers, and my forefathers were brought up in this place. But you, how did you ever find your way here? No one from where humans live ever comes here." The youth was very frightened, because he realized that this man was not a human being at all. He had said that his forefathers were brought up here, and no one from where humans live ever came here. But the man of the forest did him no harm and was even rather friendly. He asked the youth, "What are you doing here?"

The youth answered that he was chasing some stray animals.

"Stop chasing your sins," said the man. "It is not cattle but your sins that are leading you on. You have already been punished enough, so stop your pursuit. Come with me, and you will come into your own."

The king's true son accompanied him, but he was afraid to talk or ask anything, lest the man open his mouth and devour him. So he followed in silence, and on the way he met his comrade

who had gone in pursuit of the horse. He warned him with signs: "This is not a human being. Have nothing to do with him."

Meanwhile his comrade had noticed the sack of bread on his shoulders, and entreated, "My brother, I have not eaten for several days. Give me some bread." The youth replied, "Here in the wilderness my own life comes first, and I need the bread for myself." The other continued begging and pleading, "I will give you anything you want for it."

The youth answered, "What can you give me in return for bread in the wilderness?"

"I will give you my entire self," replied the owner of the horse. "I'll sell myself to you as a bondservant."

The youth decided that it was a good bargain, and so he bought the other to be his bondservant for all time. His comrade swore that, in exchange for some bread, he would continue to serve him even when they returned to civilization. The only condition was that they would both eat from the sack until it was empty. So the two went on together, both following the man of the forest, with the horseman, who was now a servant, following the true son of the king. Having a servant made the journey a little easier for the youth. Whenever he needed to lift or do something, he would command his servant to lift it or to do whatever it was he wanted. They came to a place that was crawling with snakes and scorpions. The youth was very frightened, so much so that he dared to speak to the man of the forest. "How will we ever get past this place?" he asked him. "Why don't you also ask how you will be able to enter my house?" the man replied, and he showed them his house, which was suspended in midair. They went on with him, and he brought them safely to his house. He gave them food and drink, and then he went away.

The king's true son used his servant whenever he needed anything. The servant was very bitter about having sold himself because of a single hour when he had needed bread. Now he had plenty to eat, but he would be a servant forever. He heaved a great sigh: "What have I come to? That I should be a servant!"

"Why are you moaning so much about being a servant?" asked the youth. "What kind of great position did you have before?"

The servant answered that he had once been a king. There had been a rumor about his having been exchanged and so forth as was related before (for this was none other than the son of the serving maid), and he had driven out the other son. After a while it had occurred to him that he had been unjust, and he regretted it. He kept feeling sorry about the wicked deed that he had committed against the other son. One day he dreamed that the way to right the wrong was to relinquish his kingdom and travel as chance would take him, and in this way he would be able to make amends. He had not wanted to do this, but the dream recurred time and time again and upset him so much that he decided to obey. He abdicated his throne and wandered about until he finally ended up here and now he had become a servant. The other youth listened to the whole story in silence, thinking to himself, "I'll know how to deal with you." In the evening the man of the forest returned and gave them food and drink, and they spent the night there. Just

before the day dawned, they heard the tremendous laugh that made the whole forest tremble. The servant urged the king's son to ask the man of the forest what was going on. So the youth asked him, "What is the great laugh that is heard at dawn?"

"That is the sound of the day laughing at the night," answered the man of the forest. "The night asks the day, 'Why is it that whenever you come, I no longer have a name?' The day bursts out laughing, and the night becomes day. That is the laughter that you hear at dawn...."

This seemed a great marvel to the king's son, that the day should laugh at the night. But he could not ask any more questions, because of the man's amazing answer.

With morning the man of the forest departed again, and during the day the two companions ate and drank together in the house. When night fell the man returned, and they ate and drank and spent the night there. At night they heard the sound of the wild beasts roaring and making strange noises. The lion roared, the leopard howled, and the birds whistled and screeched, each and every beast making its own sound.

At first the two were frightened, and they did not listen to the sound attentively. Eventually they did begin to listen carefully, and they found that they were listening to a melody. The animals were singing a wonderful song. So marvelously pleasant was this music that the more they listened to it the more agreeable did it seem, till they felt that all the pleasures in the world could not compare with the pleasure of listening to it. They told each other that they should remain where they were in the forest, for there they had food and drink and this wonderful sweet music that surpassed all the pleasures in the world.

The servant urged his master to ask the man of the forest about the music. The youth asked him, and he replied, "The sun makes a garment for the moon. The creatures of the forest are very grateful to the moon, since the dominion of the beasts is mainly the night. Sometimes they have to enter the dwelling places of men, and they cannot do this by day. Because the moon does them the great favor of lighting up the night for them, they decided to compose a new song for the moon. This is the music that you hear."

Now that they knew it was a song, they listened to the music even more intently than before and were more impressed than ever with its wonderful sweetness. But the man of the forest said to them, "Why do you find this unique? I have an instrument made of leaves and colored things that I inherited from my forefathers, who inherited it from their ancestors. Whenever this instrument is placed on any bird or beast, it immediately begins to play this same wonderful melody."

After this, the great laughter was heard again, and it became day. The man of the forest left, and the true son of the king began to look for the instrument. He searched all over the room, but he did not find it. He did not dare go any farther.

The two were afraid to ask the man of the forest to lead them to a place where men lived. However, the man himself said that he would direct them to human habitation. Then he took out the instrument of which he had spoken and gave it to the king's true son.

"I give you this instrument as a gift," he said. "Now you must know how to master it."

The two then asked him, "Which way should we go?"

He answered that they must seek out the country called "the foolish country with the wise king." They asked him in which direction they should set out to begin asking for this country. He showed them the way with his hand, and then he told the real son of the king, "Go to that country, and there you will come into your greatness."

They set out. On their way they looked out for some creature on which they could try out the instrument to see if it would play, but they encountered no living being. Later, as they neared a town, they found an animal. They placed the instrument on it, and it began to play the music. They went on and on in this way, until they came to the country they were looking for.

The country was surrounded by a wall and could be entered only by way of one gate. In order to get to this gate one had to go around the wall for several miles. They went around until they reached the gate, but when they got there they were not permitted to enter. The king of the country had died. Although he had a son to succeed him, the king had left a will in which he had written that whereas the kingdom had previously been called "the foolish country with the wise king," now it should be called the reverse, "the wise country with the foolish king." Whoever restored the former name to the kingdom, so that it would be again called "the foolish country with the wise king" – he would become king. So no one was permitted to enter the country unless he first undertook to restore the former name to the kingdom. "Can you undertake this task?" they asked the youth. He could not, and so the two could not enter. The servant urged his master to turn back, but he did not wish to, because the man of the forest had told him to go to this country in order to come into his greatness.

Meanwhile another man arrived, riding on a horse. He also wanted to enter, but they would not let him in for the same reason. Seeing the man's horse, the king's son took out his instrument. He placed it on the horse, and it immediately began to play the very marvelous melody. The man on the horse begged him to sell him the instrument, but the youth did not want to part with it. "What can you possibly give me in return for this marvelous instrument?" he asked.

The man on the horse replied, "What can you do with this instrument of yours? Perhaps you can make a show with it, and someone will throw you a gold coin. But I know something better than your instrument, something that I received from my forefathers, with which one is able to comprehend from another. If someone says a single word, it is possible, by means of this secret knowledge that has been handed down to me, to comprehend one thing from another. I have not yet revealed this knowledge to anyone in the world, but I am willing to teach it to you if you will give me that instrument."

The king's true son decided that it would indeed be a wonderful thing to be able to comprehend one thing from another, and he gave him the instrument. The man on the horse then taught him how to comprehend one thing from another.

The king's true son then returned to the gate in the wall, for he realized that he could now undertake to restore to the country its former name. He did not know how he was going to do

this, but as he now was able to comprehend one thing from another, he realized that it could be done. Besides, what could he lose by trying? When he told the people at the gate that he would undertake the task, they allowed him to enter.

The chief ministers were informed that someone had come who would undertake the task, and the youth was brought before them. They told him, "Know that we also are not fools, God forbid! It's just that the former king was a very great sage, and in comparison with him we were all fools. That is why the land used to be called 'the foolish country with the wise king. With the passing of the king, his son, who is also a sage, has taken over the throne. In comparison with us, however, he is not at all wise, and therefore the kingdom is now called 'the wise country with the foolish king.' In his will the old king stated that when we find a man so wise that he can restore to the country its former name, we should make him king. Such a man must be so wise that by comparison all of us are fools. When he becomes king, the country can again be called 'the foolish country with the wise king. The former king made it plain that his son was to relinquish the throne and turn over the kingdom to such a man when he appeared. Know then what you are undertaking."

The ministers went on, "The test of whether you are such a sage is this: there is a garden that was left by the former king. It is a very wondrous garden, in which grow vessels made of metal of silver and of gold. But it is impossible to enter this garden, for whenever someone enters it, he is immediately pursued. He is pursued and he cries out-but he doesn't know or see who is pursuing him. In this way he is pursued until he is driven from the garden. This is how we shall see how wise you are: we shall see whether you can enter the garden." The young man asked whether the person who entered was beaten.

The ministers answered, "The main thing is that he is pursued and doesn't know by whom, and he flees in great terror. So we have been told by those who have entered the garden."

The youth went out toward the garden. He saw that there was a wall around it, but the gate was open and there were no guards. To be sure, there was no need to watch over this garden! As he approached, he looked about him and saw a man, or rather the statue of a man, standing near the garden. He looked again and noticed an inscribed tablet stating that this man had been king hundreds of years ago, and that in his days there had been peace, but before his time and after it there had been war. Since the son had learned to comprehend one thing from another, he realized that everything depended upon this man, and that if he entered the garden and was pursued, there was no need to flee. All he had to do was to stand near this man and he would be safe. Moreover, if this man was moved and placed inside the garden, it would be possible for anyone to enter safely. The king's son entered the garden, and as soon as he felt that he was being pursued, he went over and stood next to the man just outside the gate. In this way he came out in peace and unharmed. Others who had entered the garden had become terrified and fled as soon as the pursuit began, and so been vanquished. The king's son, by standing next to the man, came out in peace and unharmed. they had

The ministers saw this and were astonished. The young man then gave instructions to have the statue moved into the garden. When this had been done, all of the ministers entered the garden and came out of it in peace.

Then the ministers told the son, "Although we have seen what you have accomplished, you cannot yet be given the kingdom. We shall give you one more test. The throne of the former king is very high. Various birds and beasts all carved of wood stand around it. In front of the throne there is a bed, next to the bed there is a table, and on the table is a lamp. Many roads, all paved in stone, extend in all directions from where the throne stands. No one knows the meaning of this throne and the roads. At a certain distance out along one of the roads there is a golden lion which opens its mouth and devours anyone who approaches. The road continues beyond the lion. It is the same with all the other roads, each of which leads in a different direction. On the second road there is a leopard-also made of metal. And so it is with all the other roads, which extend throughout the entire country, each with its metal beast. No one understands the meaning of the throne or the objects on the road around it. You will be proven by whether you can comprehend all these things."

Then they showed him the throne, and he saw that it was indeed very high. He approached it and examined it more closely, and he noticed that it was made of the same material as was the instrument that the man of the forest had given him.

He looked again and noticed that on the topmost part of the throne a rose was missing. He understood that if this rose were in its place the throne would have the same power as the instrument which played music whenever it was placed on an animal or a bird. He looked even more closely and saw that the missing rose was in fact lying beneath the throne. Were it picked up and set back on high, the throne would have the power of the marvelous instrument. The former king had arranged and hidden everything with such subtlety that no man could understand it, until such time as a very wise man came. He would understand it all and be able to put everything back in its place.

In the same way, the king's son realized that the bed had to be shifted a little from where it was standing. The table also had to be moved a little, and also the lamp. In addition, each of the birds and the beasts had to be put in its proper place. One must take this bird and put it in that place, and so with all the other beasts. The king had arranged everything with cunning and wisdom, in such a way that no one would be able to comprehend it all until that wise man came who would restore things to their proper order. The lion at the turning of the road also had to be set elsewhere, and so with all the other beasts on all the other roads.

The young man commanded that everything be put back in the proper order: the rose was to be picked up from beneath the throne and set back on high, and all the other things were to be moved around and arranged in their proper order according to his directions. When all was done as he had instructed, everything began to give forth the sweetest and most marvelous music. Each object did what it was supposed to do. Then they gave him the kingdom.

And the true son who had now become king said to the son of the maid, "Now I understand that I am indeed the true son of the king, and you are the true son of the maid."