

THE KING WHO STOLE THE CAMELS' EGGS

A STORY BY

ROY TAYLOR

Origins

This is based on an epic poem I started to write when I was 25. I only got as far as line 15. The poem came from a dream of Crazyman's dreamland market where I bought a jewel with a coloured bubble at the centre. When I squeezed the jewel, the bubble changed colour. But what would be Crazyman's reaction when he found out his fabulous market was all just a dream?

The King Who Stole the Camels' Eggs

Copyright © Roy Taylor 1988

This edition was published via the Internet.

The author grants you permission to copy and print this story free for personal and non-commercial purposes only. This story may not appear in compilations without the author's written agreement. All other rights are reserved.

Roy Taylor asserts his right to be identified as the author of this work.

Contact - email: retfiction@aol.com - post: BCM 3754, London wc1n 3xx, United Kingdom



The King Who Stole The Camels' Eggs

Crazyman sat up in bed, woken from a dream of caravans and bazaars, travellers and markets. The same dream as on other mornings. Dreams of merchants selling strange goods from countries so far away that they were known only to the outer reaches of the imagination.

In his dreams he was neither seller nor buyer, traveller nor merchant; he was just a mute observer. People smiled at him and greeted him in unknown tongues. The travellers sold silks of colours that no rainbow had ever seen, and silver bracelets with more than a silver lustre, and amethysts with a coloured bubble at their centre that changed colour when squeezed. He never bought any of the goods in his dreamland bazaar, nor sold them.

The people in his dreams were always happy and contented. Beggars didn't beg, children didn't steal or tease, and stomachs were always full. They bought the dreamland goods with coins of gold that glistened more than gold. They were given change in glittering little diamonds that played rainbow games with the ever-present sunshine. Everyone had money to buy things and the merchants went away only as rich as they came.

People shopped for succulent fruits that were never rotten inside, nor even bruised, and bought bread that was never stale, and meat that was always fresh and tender. Traders sold sticky confections filled with fresh fruit syrups, and spiced rolls of cinnamon pancake that melted in the mouth and left the breath smelling sweet and fragrant.

The King Who Stole The Camels' Eggs

Somewhere, Crazyman knew, this land existed. It couldn't just be in his head at night. It was too real, too substantial, too good to be just a dream. But how could he have such a dream? Was he a learned man, like the priests in the temple, who could read of such lands in their scriptures? He was Crazyman, who people laughed at, and who children teased. Only the gods gave people dreams, to tempt them, or frighten them, but what gods would bother to tempt or frighten a crazyman? None, of course. A priest had told him so one day when he woke from the dream and had rushed down to the temple to divine its meaning. The priest had scolded him and driven him from the temple. What insolence, suggesting that gods would bother with sending dreams to a crazyman.

He would often run down to the market after waking from the dream, to see if the merchants were selling his dreamland goods. He would run from shop to shop, stall to stall, looking for spoons made from hollowed sapphires, ivory-handled knives studded with diamonds, pendants hung with pearls the size of a plover's

egg, and crystal flasks full of ruby wine that never tasted of vinegar. He never found them, just cheap trinkets and bitter tasting wine, bread that wouldn't last a day, and fruit that squashed if you squeezed too hard. He would fly into a rage, and throw himself against the town wall, beating himself and tearing his clothes. People looked on, laughing, urging him to greater excess.

The merchants and shopkeepers would come out to laugh at him again as he stumbled home, his eyes red, his face stained with tears. The beggars smile. Better to be a beggar than a crazyman. The children skipped around him, chanting and teasing. He had lost count of the number of times he had run home and collapsed sobbing into his mother's arms. She would comfort him, bathe his wounds, and wash his tear-stained face. Her neighbours pitied her for having an idiot for a son. She replied simply that the gods had blessed her with a perpetual child. Once comforted, Crazyman would forget his disappointment and go out to play with the dogs and talk to the sky.

But today was different. He woke from his dream

The King Who Stole The Camels' Eggs

and knew who he was, why the dream people smiled at him, and greeted him, why he never needed to buy or sell the goods in the dream bazaars. The light of revelation shone through his eyes and brightened his soul. He bathed himself carefully, trimmed his ragged beard and hair, and anointed himself with a sweet-smelling oil. He found the clean white tunic his mother kept aside for him to wear on feast days and holy days. He found her large coloured shawl, the only memento she had of her long-dead husband. In Crazyman's eyes it had become a noble cloak embroidered in gold and silver and coloured silks of such hues that a peacock would hide its head in jealousy at the sight of it.

His mother was out in the town selling the reed baskets she had made the previous afternoon. She had laid out his breakfast as she did every day. Today it transformed into a feast of exotic figs dipped in spiced honey, hot fruit juices, and thrush eggs poached in herbs picked from mountain passes when the dew was still fresh. Crazyman smiled at the feast around him, and wondered why the gods had kept a veil over his

senses for so long.

"So I wouldn't take it for granted," he mused, and marvelled. "The dream country was here all the time, and I nearly missed it." He slammed his hand down on the table, the grain of its wood dancing and shimmering in the morning sunlight. "I nearly missed it," he shouted at the world, and laughed.

He stood up and looked at the fine house he lived in, the unevenness of the walls now stucco reliefs of great battles from history, the stained ceiling a vaulted dome painted with mythical adventures of the gods. Marble floors rippled out before him where once they had been stone tiles. The chairs and table were now of rare dark woods, their grain patterns filigreed with silver.

"I nearly missed it," he mused, "I nearly missed it."

He took breakfast slowly, savouring each exotic and delicious mouthful. Perhaps he should saunter into town and survey the scene there, now that his vision had cleared. He picked up his old wooden staff, now become a staff of ebony

The King Who Stole The Camels' Eggs

and gold, and walked out into the street. He smiled up at the clean azure sky, nodding to the gods who looked down from their white cloud chariots. A ragged dog watched with wonder when he recognized the man who played like a child. The dog walked over to inspect the apparition, but Crazyman was off down the road to his dreamland market, a benign glow radiating from his face.

Children playing in the dust-blown streets paused and glanced at the strangely familiar figure striding along. With a shock they realised it was Crazyman, but a changed Crazyman. Changed into what they couldn't guess. They followed, but at a safe distance.

Crazyman strode into his dreamland market square. The people stopped and smiled at him, and spoke in strange tongues that sounded strangely familiar. He greeted everyone graciously, and acknowledged their smiles with a nod of his head. He stood and surveyed the scene before him, ecstasy surging through every cell of his body. He decided to move amongst the crowd. After all, it was only right that a man in his

position should take an interest in the affairs of the common people. He grasped his staff behind him and sauntered out into the square, a crowd of giggling street urchins following.

He strolled across the square to a shop, its wares displayed on trestle tables. He cast his eyes over the bangles, bracelets, necklaces, and trinkets of copper and brass. Copper and brass? Trinkets? But where were the armbands of gold, the intricate cascading necklaces of silver and garnets, the fine gold wire threaded with sapphires and pearls? Crazyman eyed the merchant suspiciously. This man was obviously a cheat, keeping his best wares for himself.

"What is the meaning of this?" asked Crazyman, lifting a cheap brass chain with his ebony staff.

The merchant turned indignantly and saw Crazyman.

"What do you mean?" the merchant snarled. The last thing he wanted was a confrontation with the madman. Let him keep his craziness out in the town square for public entertainment.

"This is what I mean," said Crazyman, looking

The King Who Stole The Camels' Eggs

with disgust at the low-grade trinket hanging from his staff.

"That," replied the merchant pompously, "is a fine chain of artistically wrought metal from workshops licensed by the King himself."

"This," said Crazyman, flicking the trinket into the back of the shop, "is an overpriced piece of trash that would disgrace a beggar."

A crowd was beginning to gather around the shop. The merchant, seeing the looks of amusement around him, decided he must win this game. Nobody would shop with a merchant bettered by a madman. The merchant drew himself up to his full height.

"And what exactly was your excellency expecting?" asked the merchant sarcastically.

"The usual wares," replied Crazyman accusingly.

"Usual wares, excellency?"

"Yes, you fool. Salt pots carved from solid amethysts, wine jars blown from iridescent glass and decorated with golden dragons, ivory cups

filigreed with silver and set with diamonds. The usual wares, merchant, that you hide from us."

"Hide, excellency?" queried the merchant, while frantically trying to find a way to master the turn of the morning's events.

"Yes," roared Crazyman, "Hide."

"Um, well," mumbled the merchant. 'Who does this madman think he is,' thought the merchant, 'making a fool of me in front of my customers?' Inspiration came.

"No, not 'hide', your most esteemed excellency, 'confiscated'."

"Confiscated?" queried Crazyman. "By whom? And on what authority?"

"Why yes, excellency, confiscated. All such wares are ordered to be confiscated. Why, only this morning the camel master lost a magnificent egg that his camel had laid in the night."

Someone in the crowd giggled and the merchant grinned.

"But," continued the merchant with a shrug, "it was confiscated."

The King Who Stole The Camels' Eggs

"Confiscated? A camel's egg? But camels don't lay eggs," asked Crazyman. "Do they?"

"Oh what an egg, excellency," effused the merchant. "As big as your head, the shell of purest mother-of-pearl, and in the centre an uncut ruby as big as your clenched fist."

The crowd had grown bigger, and sniggered in appreciation of the merchant's inventiveness. A beggar at the front of the crowd giggled noisily.

"Silence," commanded Crazyman, pointing his staff at the beggar's chest. The staff had become a sword of Damascus steel, its handle encrusted with sapphires.

The beggar looked down at the staff jabbing his chest. He looked along the staff, and followed the line of Crazyman's arm to the madman's eyes. What the beggar saw there froze the smile on his face. He expected to see the empty stare of a madman, but instead he saw the soul of a king blazing out at him. The beggar bowed low and backed away into the crowd. If there is one thing that all beggars know with certainty, it is that you never laugh at a fool who wants to be

king. Win or lose, such fools will separate the head from the body of those who laugh. Better to be a live beggar, than a dead fool. The merchant, unaware of the beggar's keen perceptions, continued his performance.

"Why, your magnificent excellency, think of the baubles we could have made with such an egg."

"Confiscated you say?" mused Crazyman. So that was why his dreamland market had disappeared.

"Alas, your esteemed magnificence," said the merchant bowing low in mock obeisance.

The crowd mumbled in appreciation. 'When this nonsense is finished,' thought the merchant, 'I'll have this crowd buying every piece of rubbish in the shop.'

"And who exactly confiscated this, um, camel's egg?" queried Crazyman.

"Soldiers of the King, excellency."

"But I'm.." stuttered Crazyman in confusion. He remembered issuing no such command.

"What king?" he demanded of the merchant.

The King Who Stole The Camels' Eggs

"The King who lives on the other side of the palace wall," said the merchant, pointing towards the high palace wall at the top of the town.

Crazyman decided to leave the merchant to his trinkets. There were more important things to do. He pushed his way through the crowd and made for the palace to expose this impostor who stole the camels' eggs. The crowd, now grown considerably larger, surged after him as he took the road up to the palace. The merchant smiled at the thought of the profit he would make when the crowd returned to tell him of the fun that lay ahead.

Crazyman strode up the steep road. A priest, who was strolling down the road, saw the crowd with Crazyman at its head. Thinking that the crowd had some mischief planned for the poor demented fellow, the priest walked over to protect him. However, Crazyman grabbed the priest's arm and dragged him along.

"Come, priest, we go to arrest an impostor," said Crazyman.

"Impostor?"

"Yes, priest," said someone in the crowd, "an impostor who steals camels' eggs."

The crowd laughed and pushed the priest along.

"What nonsense is this?" demanded the priest, his dignity offended by the rough treatment. "Camels don't lay eggs."

"Maybe not," replied another, "but this is more entertaining than your temple festivals."

"So, blasphemy as well as nonsense?" said the priest, wondering how he was going to explain his involvement with this rabble to the High Priest.

Someone behind him cut off further thoughts with a cuff to the back of his head. The crowd laughed again. Crazyman, the priest, and the crowd reached the square in front of the palace gates. The square was large enough to accommodate the entire crowd, now grown to several hundred. The atmosphere was like a carnival, Crazyman providing the entertainment.

The two young guards at the gate nervously watched the strangely dressed nobleman at the head of the crowd. Noting the presence of the

The King Who Stole The Camels' Eggs

priest, they relaxed. After years of peace, the palace guard was more of a ceremonial duty than a defensive one, and was usually assigned to new recruits like the two young men who faced the crowd. The crowd, however, was now a little more cautious. Grabbing a priest was one thing, but palace guards drew their authority directly from the King. The crowd hung back. Crazyman took hold of the priest's arm and dragged him forward.

"Open the gates, we come to arrest an impostor," demanded Crazyman.

"Arrest this man!" shouted the priest.

The crowd was stunned into total silence when the guards, thinking that the priest meant the impostor inside the palace rather than Crazyman, promptly opened the gates. They edged forward in disbelief as Crazyman, an infuriated priest, and two young guards strode through the outer gates of the palace. They entered a wide tunnel through the palace wall towards the inner gates. The crowd came forward to the outer gates in utter silence.

The two older guards at the inner gates eyed Crazyman's party suspiciously. The leader of this party was obviously a man used to command, despite his strange appearance. Neither guard recognized him as a regular visitor to the palace. They half raised their swords, which, although elaborately decorated for ceremonial effect, could inflict serious injury if used in anger.

"Give entrance," commanded Crazyman. "We come to arrest an impostor in this palace."

The guards didn't move, looking first at Crazyman and his expression of authority and righteous determination, then at the priest with his expression of outrage and furious indignation.

"Who is this impostor you speak of?" asked one guard.

"He stands in the King's own court," answered Crazyman. "Open these gates."

"Ar.. arres.. ARREST HIM," shrieked the priest almost incoherent with rage.

The guards, taken by surprise at the ferocity of

The King Who Stole The Camels' Eggs

the priest's outburst, assumed that he meant the impostor, not Crazyman. They threw open the gates, bowing low to the nobleman. The priest groaned and sank to his knees. He covered his face with his hands, muttering incantations for his protection. He was only two years away from promotion to assistant officiator at temple ceremonies. He prayed fervently to the gods, any gods, to transport him away from this mess.

Crazyman beckoned to the guards to follow. The party stepped out into the palace grounds. The leading edge of the crowd moved forward, incredulous at the events that had started with the merchant's joke. Others further back in the crowd pushed forward for a better view. The crowd began to spill into the forbidden grounds of the palace.

A squad of guards rushed out of the main palace building. The senior guard in Crazyman's party shouted hasty explanations in the high language of the court. The other squad hesitated, regarding the party with suspicion. Crazyman screwed his eyes shut in blind anger, raised his face to heaven and opened his eyes. He saw the

faces of the gods peering down at him from the clouds.

"BEGONE!" roared Crazyman, "I have business here!"

The gods, seeing the result of the dreams they had sent Crazyman, decided that discretion was after all the better part of valour. They jumped into their white cloud chariots and scudded away across the sky. The squad of guards assumed that Crazyman was roaring at them, and who were they to disobey the orders of such a fearsome noble? Half of them led the way into the palace, the other half stayed to deal with the crowd.

The crowd, now mostly inside the palace grounds and numbering close to a thousand, stared with increasing amazement at the sights around them. They lived their lives in the dust-blown streets of the town. They drew their water from a muddy river that flowed past the bottom of the hill, and teased meagre crops from the poor soil of the surrounding countryside. An apparition of paradise confronted them.

The King Who Stole The Camels' Eggs

The high stone wall had concealed a vision of immaculate green lawns, where golden sprinklers sprayed rose-scented water across the grass. Miniature deer grazed among bushes of fragrant red and yellow flowers. Paths meandered through this paradise, looping around fountains of pure white marble. Sprays of clear water made rainbows in the sunlight. Peacocks, and birds of even brighter plumage, flew and ran around on the lawns. The palace buildings were faced with slabs of black marble veined with gold. At the centre of each slab was set a golden rose whose petals revealed a fiery ruby the size of a child's clenched fist.

The guards in the palace grounds moved forward cautiously toward the crowd, their swords drawn. They did, however, respect the size of the crowd, now well over a thousand and still growing. Their swords would be useless if a crowd of that size turned on them. The squad leader, a mature man who had gained his position after a life of ceremonial duties, reached the nearest member of the crowd. It is one of those unfortunate accidents that bedevil history

that the first person he spoke to was a simpleton.

"Come on now," said the squad leader with good humour, "you've seen the grounds, now let's all go home again."

The simpleton, however, was totally absorbed by the splendour around him.

"No, wait," said the simpleton. "Where did all this come from?"

"Well," mumbled the squad leader, "I suppose the King built it with all the taxes and commissions we pay."

"What? All this?"

"I suppose he's also a very rich man, being the King."

"No," said the simpleton, "Nobody could be that rich. Maybe the merchant was right."

"Never mind the merchant, let's all go home, we don't want any trouble, now do we?" insisted the squad leader, gently pushing the simpleton toward the palace gates.

"Hey, don't push me, we've a right to see where our camels' eggs go."

The King Who Stole The Camels' Eggs

"Camels' eggs? Camels don't lay eggs. Now don't waste my time, go home."

"I said don't push me. I'll bet you were one of the soldiers who stole one this morning, like the merchant said."

"Don't talk rubbish, camels don't lay eggs, so how could I steal one?"

The squad leader was getting more angry, and the simpleton more stubborn. Until now the crowd had been listening with amusement, but some of them were beginning to agree with the simpleton. If camels don't lay mother-of-pearl eggs with rubies the size of a man's fist at the centre, then where did all this wealth come from? Certainly not from their taxes. Yes, there was sense in what the simpleton said, and hadn't they heard the merchant say the same thing? And hadn't Crazyman led them here to put a stop to it? To stop the theft of their camels' eggs? The crowd was beginning to wonder.

"Now don't make me lose my temper," said the squad leader losing his temper. "Clear off back home. Camels don't lay eggs, and nobody steals

them."

A woman in the crowd broke off a golden lawn sprinkler.

"Then how do you explain this?" she demanded, hurling the golden object through the air.

It is also an unfortunate accident of history, that objects, or even words, carelessly thrown into the air can come down as deadly weapons. As did the golden lawn sprinkler on the squad leader's head, felling him fatally on the spot. Now this was something the guards could understand - deadly assault on the squad leader - and two of them leapt into action, hacking the poor woman to death. People screamed and ran out of the way. The crowd became a mob as news of the woman's recent demise was relayed from mouth to mouth. Others broke off golden lawn sprinklers, picked up ivory-handled garden tools, and pieces of gold-veined black marble from flower beds. They proceeded to bludgeon the guards to death. The guards acquitted themselves well, taking fifteen members of the mob to the eternal paradise beyond. No doubt they continued the fracas with whatever garden

The King Who Stole The Camels' Eggs

implements are available there.

Some of the more worldly members of the mob believed neither the simpleton, nor Crazyman, least of all the merchant, who had a reputation for being a cheat at the best of times. But, in the general mayhem that ensued, they thought that a golden lawn sprinkler could be put to a better use than as a weapon to bludgeon innocent palace guards. Like, for instance, to buy themselves a better life in another town, or to pay off their gambling and drinking debts, or to hide under a loose floor tile until all the fuss had died down. Looting was added to the general mayhem.

The merchant was blissfully unaware of the consequences of his joke, until excited children rushed back through the town spreading the news. At each telling the news became more exaggerated, when at last it reached the ear of the merchant. He blanched through all the shades of fear to ashen grey terror. Screaming at his wife and servants to pack, he rushed into the shop and scratched at a loose floor tile. The tile concealed a leather pouch of gold coins, hidden

for an unexpected occasion. This was just such an occasion. Within the hour, an unobserved caravan of panic-struck travellers galloped out of town. It was headed for anonymity in another town, or country, or anywhere. Just so long as it was out of reach of retribution once calm was restored.

Inside the palace, things were under slightly better control. Crazyman's party, now grown to nearly thirty angry and well-armed guards, ran through the palace corridors. It collected more guards who were given more distorted and exaggerated explanations and orders. They now believed, and the noise outside confirmed it, that the King was under attack from an impostor who had led an uprising amongst the people, promising them camels' eggs as a reward. Two courtiers were caught and questioned rather brutally. Seeing the size and anger of Crazyman's party, they agreed with everything that was said. They told the guards that there was indeed a plot to steal the King's eggs and that the miscreants must be apprehended immediately. The guards, taking the courtiers'

The King Who Stole The Camels' Eggs

knowledge to mean complicity, promptly chopped off the courtiers' heads.

The party of guards led the way across the inner courtyard to the King's day chambers. Two of the King's personal bodyguard blocked the way, swords drawn. They took orders only from the King, and the King had certainly said nothing about admitting a bedraggled nobleman and a disorderly rabble of guards. No, orders were orders, and nobody was going in. One of the guards at the back of the rabble objected to being told he was a member of a rabble. In fact he had come to protect the King against someone who was going to smash the King's eggs. He raised his spear and hurled it over the rabble and impaled the bodyguard to the wall. The other bodyguard was quickly cut down.

Crazyman burst through the doors and into the presence of the King. At the time, the King and his court were being entertained by the court players acting out one of the lesser known battles of mythology. The King, thinking that Crazyman's entrance was part of the entertainment, smiled indulgently. Disgust rose

like bile in Crazyman's throat. Having lost his staff in the melee outside, he grabbed the sword from a startled bodyguard and made his way across the floor. The King signalled nervously to a nearby guard as Crazyman screamed:

"So, here's the impostor who would steal a camel's egg!"

Crazyman leapt over a prostrate and terrified actor, and plunged his sword deep into the heart of the astonished King. A bodyguard leapt into action, too late, and cut Crazyman down on the spot. For a few brief moments, the blood of a crazyman mingled with that of a thousand year dynasty, with that of the King who stole the camels' eggs.

* * * * *

It is rumoured, in some archaeological circles, that the ruins of an ancient city were found in the sands of a great Asian desert. In that city was found the remains of a tomb. Of the tomb little survived but a commemorative slab of black marble veined with gold, on which was inscribed, in an almost forgotten language:

The King Who Stole The Camels' Eggs

"Here lies the King who stole the camels' eggs.
And the gods were so dismayed at the result of
their mischief, that they forbade any camel from
ever laying another egg."