



The abbot of la real

The kingdom in which this story took place is not clear: it could as easily have been one place as another. What is certain, however, is that the king of that country didn't talk much, ate very little, and never smiled. He didn't have time for that, he was too busy ordering people around and keeping an eye on each and every one of his subjects, cows and hens included. And his subjects were beginning to get pretty fed up with having to work so hard all the time.

Well, in fact, not all of them were overworked. The abbot was an exception. His only activity on any given day was to get out of bed and sit down at the table to eat. He never missed one of his five meals, nor his three recommended naps. The abbey was an oasis of peace and tranquility and the monks, who kept track of the abbot's diet, were thoroughly satisfied.

One day, the king, in his usual bad mood, ran into the abbot who was strolling in the garden calmly savoring some grapes. That made the King extremely uncomfortable; his head began to throb and he developed a knot in his stomach. In his irritation, he asked the abbot what he was doing there while away the time so unproductively. The abbot wryly answered that eating grapes was a productive activity, and that the King needn't get so upset, that official duties could always be put off.

The King, now infuriated - and not altogether without cause, one must admit - demanded to know what he knew about official duties and whether or not they could be put off. And, furthermore, if the abbot thought he was so smart then he should be able to answer three questions: "What dark worries kept the King awake at night?", "How could he solve his problems?" and, last of all, "What was he thinking?"

He said that those were three very simple questions for a man as intelligent as the abbot. If he could answer all three, the King would give him his weight in gold, but if he couldn't he would receive a hundred thrashings. The King would give him until the next day at dusk to come up with the answers. Do you want to know how he did it? Then listen to the story of "The Abbot of La Real".

At suppertime, the abbot, with a knot in his throat and slightly trembling legs, decided to explain to the congregation what had happened, and ask for their advice. The monks put their heads together and in no time at all, arrived at two conclusions: first, that the abbot could have waited for dessert to break such bad news and, second, that no one knew the answers to the King's questions.

Well, not exactly no one almost no one knew the answers.

The congregation's cook, the youngest and shyest of the monks, piped up in a little voice from the back of the room, saying that he could answer the King's questions. But he would only do that under one condition: that they allow him to put an idea into practice-that all the monks should help out a little to lighten his job in the kitchen, make it a bit easier. The monks absolutely refused, saying that they'd rather the abbot receive his thrashings than lift a single finger to help the cook. The abbot thought differently, and considered the cook's request fair and reasonable.

The next day, the King, in the presence of the court, and without feeling the least bit embarrassed, asked the abbot the first question: "What dark worries kept him awake at night?" Without hesitating the abbot answered that the thing that most concerned the King - being the good sovereign he was - was looking out for the well-being of his people and that this task, handed down to him by his father and to his father from his father's father, was his greatest concern.

The King, blushing with embarrassment, was tempted to send the abbot away, but because of the court's positive reaction he had to carry on with the show and ask the second question: "How could he solve his problems?"

The abbot quickly and wittily responded that the King need not make such sacrifices for the good of his people. He insisted that His Majesty could take a vacation from time to time, because working so hard without a break was not a good idea.

The King, now furious and eager to put an end to this fiasco, asked the third question:

"What am I thinking right now?"

The abbot answered,

"The King is thinking that I'm the abbot, but as you can see, I'm just the humble cook for the abbey."

The court burst into laughter and applause at the young man's audacity and wisdom. The King had no choice but to crack a smile - albeit a bit forced, because smiling was a new experience for him.

In order to wrap up the celebration in style, the King invited the abbot to spend a couple of weeks at a luxurious tourist resort, and that marked the start of a great friendship.

In the meantime, the cook, who didn't have any time off from work, but was happy as a lark, put his great and very original idea into practice; it was called "self-service", and is still operating to this day.

Script: Lluís Llinàs

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