

The Star Chamber

By George Halitzka

Once upon a time at the furthest reaches of the earth, an aged king ruled a tiny dominion of some few thousand souls. He was known to his subjects as just, but also a potentate to be feared. Any evildoer, from the murderer to the petty thief, knew that when he stood before the king, he would receive just recompense for his deeds.

For a killer of men, the king prescribed death. For the thief, a full repayment was ordered. For the one who stole another's liberty — through an offense as grave as kidnapping or as seemingly mild as the payment of unjust wages — a corresponding term in prison was ordered.

No one should have been able to complain of inequity before such a king. But as the hearts of men have forever felt victimized by the truth, some still pretended injustice in their sentencing. For these, the king had a special room known as The Star Chamber.

Reachable only through a long passage lit by torch, The Star Chamber was a round, echoing cavern of rough-hewn stone. In the center was a huge golden cylinder set at an angle, pointed towards a ceiling aperture open to the sky. It was an enormous telescope of the highest quality, fitted with carefully-ground lenses and finely-polished mirrors. The Star Chamber was said to provide a clearer view of the night sky than any other place on the earth.

One evening, a man dressed in ragged, ill-fitting clothes with a scraggly beard and the odor of unwashed flesh stood before the king. The king wrinkled his nose. "What is this man's crime?" he asked the nearby jailer.

"Robbery, Your Highness," was the reply.

"Is this true?" A steady gaze, impossible to disobey or deceive.

The accused doffed a grime-blackened cap and stepped forward. "P-please, Your Majesty," said the man in a trembling voice, "I took only a single cheese. My children, they haven't eaten –"

"Did you take the cheese?" asked the king.

"Yes, Sire," said the man, head bowed.

"What was its value?"

The jailer: "Seven pieces of silver."

"Have you the repayment?" inquired the king.

"Sire, if I had money . . . I would not have stolen."

"Two weeks at hard labor, until the debt is paid," was the gruff reply. "And give this man a shower."

The king turned his face, but the poor man rushed forward and threw himself at the feet of the king, hands clutching the robes about his feet. "Please, Sire," the man cried, "Please, think of my children" – by now, the jailer was pulling him away – "My wife; they will have nothing –"

The king raised his hand to silence the outcry. "Bring him to The Star Chamber," he told the jailer.

At the base of the golden telescope was a large polished mirror that reflected the constellations for viewing by anyone in The Star Chamber. As the frightened man was half-dragged into the room, the king pointed to the looking-glass. "What do you see?"

The man looked at the king, frightened. "S-sire?"

"What do you see?"

"Stars?" said the man hesitantly.

"Do the stars ever fail to come out at night?"

"No, Your Highness."

"Do they move from their appointed places?"

"No, Your Highness."

"Do they change or vary in any way?"

“No, Your Highness.”

“So it is,” said the king. “And so shall it ever be. You have spoken justly.”

He stepped to a black book of records beside the telescope, where the king took quill in hand. In neat block letters, he forever branded the cheese-taker as a criminal, doomed to two weeks’ labor for his misdeed. The poor man stood quietly by – but he bore the look of a gentle cow on her last walk to the slaughterhouse.

Then the king rose from his writing and pointed with one finger to the door of his dungeon as the man was led away. For it was always beneath a stern gaze and The King’s Hand of Justice that lawbreakers were sent to their fate.

A week went by. Then late one night, after the king had gone to bed, a violent man – well-known to the king and his deputies as a rabble-rouser, ill-tempered and prone to fighting – was brought into the palace courtyard. The man was cursing; struggling against the four courtiers who held onto his arms; calling out oaths against the man he had beaten and even the king. Finally, awakened by the noise, the king stepped out onto his balcony and gazed sternly down upon the ruckus.

“Who disturbs the king’s rest?” he barked.

“Begging your pardon, Your Majesty,” said the jailer, “We’re only subduing a lawbreaker; we’ll have him away in a moment –”

“Lawbreaker!” shouted the violent man. “Am I a lawbreaker for defending what’s mine?”

“You are no stranger to my dungeons, man,” said the king coldly. “Away with him.” The king turned towards his bedroom.

“Then there is no justice in this kingdom!” spat the man, enraged.

“Oh, is it now *justice* that you want?” said the king, turning. “Then justice you shall have! Take him to The Star Chamber.”

The courtiers dragged still-struggling, still-cursing man deep inside the palace. The king met them at The Star Chamber with a disdainful frown.

“Will the king hear my story?” sneered the man. “Or does he prefer to send men to the dungeons without a trial?”

The jailer looked to the king. Never had he heard such insolence! But the king did not point with the Hand of Justice; he merely nodded coldly to the violent man, who began his story.

“My daughter is beautiful,” he began. “Any man who looks upon her is captivated by her charms. And in the summer, a rich young rascallion from the Manor House began to take an interest in her.”

“At first I thought nothing of it--I raised my daughter to look beneath outward airs and charms. But then this fool began coming to my house and demanding an audience with my daughter. When I refused him, my fields would mysteriously catch fire in the night, or my two best horses would grow lame. My daughter knew it was ruining us, so she begged my leave to see him--only in public places; only by day. ‘Do not concern yourself with me, Papa,’ she said with a laugh. ‘I will never love a man like him.’ I finally agreed when I realized that even in your kingdom of ‘justice,’ rich men obtain whatever they desire from the poor.

“But this rich young fool began to press himself upon her--taking her in his arms; trying to press his lips upon her; even resorting to threats against our family to obtain her hand in marriage. Finally, one day he told her, ‘If your “Papa” were not here, you would be mine.’

“The next day he appeared in my doorway and stood in the entrance; arms crossed, legs apart. He said with a sneer, ‘I will not depart without leave to marry your daughter.’ I told him through clenched teeth that I was not a man to be taken lightly, and he should leave my property immediately. He *laughed*--at me, in my own house! I asked him again to depart. He still refused. ‘Make me leave, Old Man,’ he said. I gave him a shove--it did not good. I pushed harder--he sneered at me, insulting my strength. Finally, I delivered a kick that sent him sprawling into the yard.

“‘Let that teach you to toy with my family!’ I shouted. He merely laughed; a wicked, insolent laugh--and said, ‘Your temper has been your undoing, old man.’ And

at that moment, four 'men'--if I dignify them with that name--stepped from the shadows, laid hands on me, and brought me here. These henchmen have sworn under oath that I attacked without provocation, and now, with no protector, my daughter shall be his--unless you see through his ruse to carry out real justice."

The king looked hard at the man; his words carried the mark of veracity. And yet he had, in truth, assaulted someone without just cause. The king was torn--the law dictated a stiff prison term, and yet justice . . . what did justice demand?

Then the king's eye caught the reflection of a star in the glass at the base of his telescope. He stared for a moment at the reflected sky as he pondered. Then his jaw hardened and he turned to the violent man.

"Do the stars ever fail to come out at night?" he asked.

"No," said the violent man, eyeing the king with suspicion.

"Do they move from their appointed places?"

"You know the answer--why do you ask me these things?"

"Do they change or vary in any way?"

"What have the stars to do with my daughter?" burst the man, face reddened.

"The answer," said the king, "is 'no.' And so shall it ever be. You have spoken justly."

He stepped to his black book of records beside the telescope and took quill in hand. But before The King's Hand of Justice could write a single word, the violent man gave an enraged shout, wrenched himself free from the four men with a sudden burst of strength, and charged towards the king. The courtiers and the jailer pursued him, but they were too late. Before they reached the violent man, he had raised a huge fist and brought it down upon the mirror at the base of the golden telescope, shattering it to pieces.

The king was frozen. He could not move. His unchangeable heavens had been broken into shards. Starlights were shifted and reflected helter-skelter about the room. The constant beacons were no longer visible except in tiny pieces; disjointed constellations. Suddenly, the king gave a loud cry, and with the intensity of a father

seeing his only child come to harm, he rushed to the broken mirror. He plunged his hand into the tangle as though to recover his one precious possession; his one constant guide. But even as the courtiers rushed forward and drew His Majesty's arms from the glass, his hands were already a mangle of blood and shredded flesh. They tried to staunch the crimson river, but as they did, blood flowed onto the black book of records, obliterating each man's name who had been branded a lawbreaker in the king's own hand.

The violent man ran down the corridor and escaped. No justice was done in the palace that night, but in the countryside, a girl of eighteen was removed, under threat of force, from a wagon that was even then bearing her away to the Manor House.

For a week, the king stayed in his chambers, not emerging for food or refreshment; not conducting court in the demolished The Star Chamber. The jailer, without the black book of records, could not know which men were to be held and which released, so he opened wide the door to the dungeon and let all the men go free. When word reached the people that The King's Hand of Justice was no longer a threat, disorder began to plague the kingdom.

Finally, after seven days, the jailer came into the king's bedroom and begged him to hold court again; to bandage his mangled limbs and return to his role as Lawgiver for the people. Hearing the raucous sounds of the streets, the king reluctantly agreed.

But it was a different man who stepped into The Star Chamber that night. The king's face, always composed, was lined with worry; his bearing, always regal, was hunched and weak. When the first lawbreaker was ushered into the king's presence, the prisoner marvelled at the change that only two weeks' time had wrought--for it was the same poor man who had just paid his debt in the dungeons for stealing a cheese.

"What is this man's offense?" asked the king, hesitantly.

"Stealing bread, Your Majesty," said the jailer.

The poor man's eyes looked at the floor. "I did as he says, Sire."

The king could not find words. "Why?" he said finally.

“When I was released, my family was so hungry . . . my children had eaten nothing for three days. Sire, if you could see their eyes . . . I know I was wrong, but begging your pardon, I do not regret it now. To see the bread reach their mouths . . . I am prepared for my hard labor.”

The king looked about him. He saw the broken mirror and the useless telescope. He saw the black book of records, covered with his own blood. He looked down at his hands, swathed in bandages and still oozing red. There would be no star-questions, no recording of sentences, no pointed finger of The King’s Hand of Justice today.

Instead, he reached out one bandaged hand towards the poor man. With an earnest gaze, he said, “Come, man. Bring your family. Come and eat at my table.”

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