

The Ruse of the Shaman

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In a land long away and far ago, there lived a man who wished for a place of prominence among the people of his tribe. Alas, he had no skills. He was not a good hunter. He had difficulty making fire. Skinning the antelope brought home by the others was beyond his ability to use a knife. He could not carve a canoe or a bow. Most of the men and all of the women of the tribe ridiculed him for being so useless.

The man was so unimportant to his tribe, that he had not even been given a name by the Chief. As was the custom, he was called 'boy' by his mother until such time that the Chief would award him the name of a warrior or hunter. His place in tribal gatherings was at the very back of the others. At times, he had trouble hearing what the Chief had to say.

One day, the Chief gathered all of the men of the tribe together for a big announcement. The man could see that the Chief was unsettled and so he pushed forward as far as he could in order that he might hear.

The Chief calmed everyone with a wave of his hand and spoke.

"Travelers and tradesmen who have come to our village recently have told me of some unwelcome news. The tribe from the mountain forest is jealous of our fertile land and quiet river. It is told that they will soon form a raiding party. A hundred warriors are preparing their bows and spears."

The men in the tribe all began to yell and chant in defiance, letting the Chief know that they would stand by him to defend their lands.

Then, in one of those rare moments in a noisy crowd, everyone became silent just as the man muttered facetiously, "We should kill a goat and eat him under a full moon."

The Chief and all the men of the tribe heard him clearly and were stunned. The crowd parted as the Chief made his way to confront the man.

"What did you say?" he asked.

The man was terrified. He was not allowed to speak at these gatherings. They would surely kill him if he did not do something. Drawing on every ounce of bravado he could muster, he stood directly before the Chief and repeated his statement.

"We should kill a goat and eat him under a full moon."

Amused that the man would say such a thing, the Chief inquired, "And why would you suggest that?"

Knowing that he had little to lose, and would soon be relegated again to his position of insignificance, he drew himself together and made up his excuse. The man spoke his lie softly and sincerely.

“For years, I have lived among you as a ghost. I have been observing you, waiting for the Great Spirit to tell me when it was that you would need His help, through me. I am told that the Great Spirit will intervene and save us if we slaughter a goat and eat the meat beneath the shining of the full moon.”

As the Chief laughed, the man recalled the riddle of the Two Prison Guards. Knowing that his fate hung by a thread, the man added, “If we do not slaughter and consume the goat in exactly the manner prescribed by the Great Spirit, we shall all surely die.”

The Chief frowned and returned to his place at the head of the crowd. When he arrived, two of his closest advisors spoke to him in whispers. The Chief turned back to the men who had gathered and said in a loud, commanding voice.

“What shall it hurt if we eat a hearty meal before the enemy arrives? Our bellies will be full and we will have the strength to do battle.”

The suggestion was approved.

With a slight ring of disdain in his voice, the Chief looked at the man, still standing in the back of the crowd. “Anything else?” he asked.

The man recognized that his status had risen. If the enemy was repulsed, his suggestion would gain him credibility. If the enemy was victorious, he would probably be dead. He had nothing to lose and he might even advance further with the correct response. He bowed slightly and replied, “There are special instructions for preparation that must be followed.”

On the next day, a goat was slaughtered. The man said it must be killed very quickly so as to reduce the pain of death. He told the other men that giving pain to the goat would result in pain befalling the tribe. He then told the women, who would cook the beast, that certain fruits and vegetables must be placed in very specific spots in the pit with the goat. The blood of the goat was to be collected and used in the war paint when the time came.

Two days passed before a scout who had been sent out by the Chief returned with news that the war party was on the way. The Chief quickly gathered his warriors and, using the special war paint, they prepared for battle. As the enemy emerged from the forest that surrounded the plain where the man’s tribe lived, the man knew that he was in trouble. His muttered statement had put him in danger. If the Chief and his warriors lost the battle, he would certainly be banished, or perhaps put to death. He needed an

excuse to protect himself should the invaders prevail. He said to the Chief, "The goat was not prepared exactly as it should have been and there was one too many papaya fruits on the serving tray, but we might still have a chance. The Great Spirit is speaking to me, even now."

"What shall we do?"

The man turned to the women who had gathered near the center of the village. "Quickly! Each of you retrieve one ear of corn and one ripe tomato. Put the corn in your right hand and the tomato in the other! Go and offer these to the advancing warriors! Hurry!"

The Chief nodded and the women scurried to the small building where they kept their stores. As they did so, the man told the Chief to have his warriors put their weapons on the ground at their feet.

Although the men had to sacrifice their reputations, they did as they were told and watched as the women made their offering to the oncoming warriors. The attackers were surprised, but took the corn and tomato from each woman, laying down their own arms in order to hold the gifts.

The invaders, all but one, turned to return to the forest. That one approached the man and the Chief. "What will you ask in return for your harvest?"

When the negotiations were complete, the Chief called the man to his hut and gave him his name. "You shall be known as Shaman. You shall sit beside me and advise me of the wishes of the Great Spirit."

The man, now known as Shaman, thanked the Chief and added, "If we had dancing and music while we ate the goat, the forest tribe would have come to surrender their lands to us, instead of in hostility."

Shaman warmed with the knowledge that, in his newfound role, he could always take the credit when things went well and always blame the tribe for not following his instructions more closely when things went poorly. He had found his place of prominence; he was in complete control of the tribe.

This story was inspired by the Great Panic of 2020.