

Gene Wolfe
Queen

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It was late afternoon when the travelers reached the village. The taller of the two led the way to the well, and they sat there to wait as travelers do who hope that someone will offer them a roof for the night. As it chanced the richest man in the village hurried by, then stopped, compelled by something he glimpsed in their faces. Something he could not have explained.

"I'll be back this way quite soon," he told them. "We have a room for guests, and can offer you a good supper."

The taller thanked him. "We were only hoping for directions. What is the name of your village?"

The richest man told him.

"We have come to the right place, then." He named the old woman.

"She's poor," the richest man said.

They said nothing; it was as though they had not heard.

"She hasn't a lot. Are you relatives? Maybe you could buy something and take it to her, then she could cook it for you. A lamb."

"Where does she live?" the taller asked.

"Over there." The richest man pointed. "At the edge of the village." He hesitated. "Come with me. I'll show you."

They followed him, walking side by side so silently that he looked behind him thinking they might have gone. Neither had a staff. That seemed strange; he tried to recall when he had last seen a traveler who had no staff to help him walk, no staff to defend his life, if defense of life were needed.

The old woman was still at her spinning, which surprised him. She let them in and invited them to sit. The travelers did, but he did not, saying, "There are things I have to do. I only brought them here because they didn't know the way, didn't know how to find your house. Are they relations of yours?"

She shook her head.

"Do you know them? It might not be safe."

She considered, her head to one side, remembering. "I think I know that one. Or perhaps not. It's been so long."

"You're not going to hurt her, I hope?" the richest man asked. "She has nothing."

Speaking for the first time, the smaller of the two said, "We have come to take her to the coronation."

"Well." The richest man cleared his throat. "She is a, er, um, descendant of the royal line. I had forgotten. However..."

"However?"

He coughed. "However, a great many people are, and she has little with which to make you welcome."

"A little oil," the old woman said. "Some flour."

"So why don't I, ah, provide a bit of food? I could have my servants bring something, and dine with you myself." Suddenly unsure, he looked at the old woman. "Would that be all right?"

"I would like it," the old woman assured him.

When his servants had spread a cloth for them and loaded her small table with dishes, he dismissed them and sat down. "I don't know that all this is good," he said. "Likely some of it won't be. But some of it's bound to be good."

"Do you want to go now?" the smaller traveler asked the old woman. "Or would you rather eat first? It's up to you."

She smiled. "Is it a long way?"

The taller said, "Very long indeed. The place is very far from here."

"Then I would like to eat first." She prayed over the food the richest man had provided, and as he listened to her it came to him that he had never heard such prayers before, and then that he had never heard prayer at all. He was like a man who had seen only bad coin all his life, he thought, and after a great many years receives a purse of real silver, fresh from the mint.

"That is true," the taller said when the old woman had finished her prayer, "but food is good, too." It seemed to the richest man that this had been said in answer to his thought, though he could not be sure.

"I was about to say that I never expected to go to a coronation," the old woman told the smaller, smiling, "but now that I think about it, I realize it isn't really true. I used to dream that I'd see my son's coronation—that my son would be a king, and someday I would see him crowned. It was silly of me."

"Her son was a teacher," the richest man explained.

They ate olives, bread, and mutton and drank wine.

"You won't be leaving in the morning, I hope?" The richest man had discovered that he did not want them to go; he would suggest they sleep in his house, as he had first proposed. They could rejoin the old woman in the morning.

"No," the taller said.

"That's good. You must be tired, since you've come a long way. You really ought to stay here for a fortnight or more recruiting your strength. This is an interesting part of the country, agriculturally and historically. I can show you around and introduce you to all the people you ought to meet. Believe me, it never hurts to be introduced, to have connections in various parts of the country. Too many people think that they can do everything through relatives, their families, and their wives' relations. It never works out."

No one spoke.

"I'll see to it that you're welcomed everywhere."

The old woman said, "If we're really going to go to a coronation..."

"I can find a donkey for you," the richest man told her, "and I will. You couldn't keep up with these two fellows for an hour. I'm sure you realize it, and they're going to have to realize it, too."

She was looking at the taller. "Weren't you the one who came to tell me about my son?"

He nodded.

"I knew I'd seen you somewhere. Yes, that was it. You don't look a day older."

The richest man coughed apologetically. "You're not relatives of hers, I take it."

"No," the taller said. "We're messengers."

"Well, you're welcome just the same. I hope you'll stay until the new moon, at least."

"We will leave when she has eaten as much as she wants," the smaller told him.

"Tonight?" It was insane. He thought the smaller might be joking.

"Oh, I've had all I want," the old woman said. "It doesn't take much to fill me up these days."

The taller said, "Then we should go."

"I want to thank you," the old woman told the richest man. "What you've done for me tonight was very kind. I'll always remember it."

He wished that it had been a great deal more, and tried to say he was sorry that he had never befriended her during all the years she had lived in the village, and that it would be otherwise in the future.

She looked at the taller when he said these things, and the taller nodded assent.

"You're a messenger," she said. "You said so. Just a messenger."

The taller nodded again. "A servant."

"Sent to get me." A shadow, as of fear, crossed her face. "You're not the messenger of death?"

"No," the taller told her. "I'm not."

"What about him?" She indicated the smaller.

"We should go now." The taller stood as he spoke.

The richest man felt that all three had forgotten him. More diffidently than he had intended, he asked whether he might go with them.

"To the coronation?" The taller shook his head. "You may not. It's by invitation only."

"Just to the edge of the village."

The taller smiled and nodded. "Since we are there now, yes, you may."

"You'll tell others," the smaller said when they were outside. "That's good. Because you're rich, they'll have to listen to you. But some won't believe you, because you're dishonest. That should be perfect."

"I am not dishonest," the richest man said.

They walked on.

"I've done some dishonest things, perhaps. Those things were dishonest, but not I."

The sun had set behind the hills, but its light still filled the sky. A breeze sprang up, swaying the lofty palm

at the edge of his new pasture. The taller had been walking on the old woman's right; now the smaller took her left arm as if to assist her.

"Right here, I think," the smaller said. "There's a bit of a climb, but you won't find it tiring."

The taller spoke to the richest man. "This is where we part company. We wish you well."

The old woman stopped when he said that, and when she turned back to face the richest man, he saw that she was standing upon nothing, that she and they had climbed, as it appeared, a hummock of air. "Good-bye," she said. "Thank you again. Please tell everyone I'll miss them terribly, and that I'll come back just as soon as I can."

The richest man managed to nod, became aware that he was gaping, and closed his mouth.

"I suppose we ought to go on now," she said to the taller, and he nodded.

The richest man stood watching them follow a path he could not see up a hill he could not see—a hill that he could not see, he thought, because it had no summit. Only hills with summits were visible to his eyes. He had not known that before. When they had gone so high that the sun's light found them again, they halted; and he heard the taller say, "Do you want to take a last look? This would be a good place to do it."

"It's really quite little, isn't it?" The old woman's voice carried strangely. "It's precious, and yet it's not important."

"It used to be important," the smaller said; and it seemed to the richest man that it was the breeze that spoke.

The old woman laughed a girl's laugh. "Perhaps we'd better hurry. Do you know, I feel like running."

"We'll run if you like," the taller told her, "but we can't promise to run as fast as you can."

"We'll just walk briskly," the richest man heard the old woman say, "but it had better be very briskly. We wouldn't want to be late for the coronation."

"Oh, we won't be." (The richest man could not be sure which of her companions had replied.) "I can guarantee that. The coronation won't begin until you get there."

Night came as the richest man watched them climb higher; and at last one of his servants came too, and asked what he was looking at.

"Right there." The richest man pointed. "Look there, and look carefully. What do you see?"

The servant looked, rubbed his eyes, and looked again; and at last he said, "Three stars, master."

"Exactly," the richest man said. "Exactly."

Together they returned to the old woman's house. There was a great deal of food still on the table, and the richest man told his servant to fetch the cook and the scullion, to gather everything up, and to return it to his kitchen.

"Is this your house now, master?" his servant asked.

"Certainly not." The richest man paused, thinking. "But I'm going to take care of it for her while she's away."

The servant left, and the richest man found the figs, selected a fig, and ate it. Some people would want to tear this house down, and time and weather would do it for them, if they were allowed to. He would see that they did not: that nothing was stolen or destroyed. That necessary repairs were made. He would keep it for her. It would be his trust, and suddenly he was filled with a satisfaction near to love at being thus trusted.

Biography

Gene Wolfe lives in Harrington, Illinois, and is widely considered the most accomplished writer in the fantasy and science fiction genres; his four-volume *Book of the New Sun* is an acknowledged masterpiece. Although his novels are most often SF, his richly textured far-future worlds often feel like fantasy. His most recent book is *Return to the Whorl*, the third volume of *The Book of the Short Sun* (really a single huge novel), which as a whole may be his best work yet. He has published many fantasy, science fiction, and horror stories over the last thirty years and more, and has received the World Fantasy Award for Life Achievement. Collections of his short fiction (all still in print) include *The Island of Dr Death and Other Stories*, *Storeys from the Old Hotel*, *Endangered Species*, and *Strange Travelers*.

"Queen," from *Realms of Fantasy*, shows Wolfe in his more cryptic mode (contrasted with his more transparent story, "Viewpoint," reprinted in this book's companion volume, *Year's Best SF 7*). Michael Swanwick, writing in *Locus*, describes this story as "an account of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary in which a rich man who doesn't think he needs it is given another shot at heaven."