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The shepherd of clouds

Henry Beston

Once upon a time a young husband and wife named Giles and Phyllida lived in a cottage in the heart of a great plain. League upon league, the rich land fell away to the west, there to end at a wall of high mountains into whose fastnesses no one had ever ventured. Yet the mountains were very beautiful. In the cold of a clear winter's day, the snowy summits and rust-colored pinnacles shone bright and near at hand; in the spring, fogs hid them, and lay like gray mantles upon the lower slopes. Midway in the mountain wall, a wide chasm marked the entrance to a deep, gloomy valley, out of which a roaring mountain torrent hurried, to lose itself in the plain below. And because somewhere in the heart of this dark valley storms were brewed, whose dark clouds, laden with lightning and hail, poured from between the crags of the valley out over the land, this valley was known as the Valley of Thunder. According to an old legend, out of this valley a king should one day come to rule over the people of the plain.

Giles and Phyllida kept house by themselves. They had two cows, one red and white, the other black and white, a flock of hens, some hives of bees, a white horse, a dog, and a cat. All day long Phyllida worked happily at the household tasks, baking the sweet white bread and marking the fresh golden butter into square pats, while Giles went out to work in the waving grain; and Phyllida, watching from a window, would see the sun flash on the uplifted blade of her husband's scythe.



One day Phyllida said to Giles:--

"I have made a dress for the youngest child of our cousins, Jack and Jill, and this morning I shall saddle the white horse and ride over to their cottage. Perhaps I may stay with them for a few days. You will find a fresh baking of bread and a meat-pie in the larder. Good-bye, Giles; I'll soon be home again."

So Giles answered, "Good-bye," and away rode Phyllida on the white horse.

A few days passed, and Giles, wandering here and there through the quiet house, felt very lonely indeed. Finally he could stand it no longer, and said to

himself, "Phyllida must be on her way home now; I shall walk down the highway and meet her."

So he turned all the animals loose in the fields, and putting a few slices of bread and cheese in his pockets, set forth upon the road. Leagues ahead of him stood the mysterious mountains rising palely through the haze of the midsummer afternoon. A pale violet light fell on their distant precipices, and the snow in the rifts upon their sides appeared of the purest and loveliest white. Gusts of wind hurrying from the distant summits swept the great plain, and the fields of ripening wheat bent before them and rustled harshly.

Suddenly, down the throat of the Thunder Valley, Giles saw a river of lightning fall, and from far away came a low murmur of thunder. Then, faster and faster, a storm poured down the chasm like a flood, drowning out the light of the sun, stilling the songs of the little birds, and turning to the sky the pale underside of the leaves of the roadside trees. A darkness as of night itself covered the land. Rain began to fall in great spattering drops. Now, by the glare of the lightning, Giles would see the endless fields, drenched and waving in the rain; now the Thunder Valley itself, covered with a floor of onrushing cloud unfolding, turning, and sinking in continuous and multitudinous activity.

Night came on amid the storm, and a flash of lightning revealed to Giles that he had lost his way. Hoping to find a shelter or some friendly cottage, however, he plunged on; but the road became worse and worse, and he was again and again forced to wade brooks flooded by the tempest. At length his steps led him into a pine wood, and there in the thickest part he found a little shelter, and fell asleep.

When he woke, numb, cramped, and cold, he found to his horror that in the night and darkness he had blundered on into the Valley of Thunder, into which no living soul had ever before advanced. Worst of all, he could not find the way by which he had entered, for high crags rose on every side and held him prisoner. Presently, to his amazement, he beheld a narrow flight of steps cut in the solid rock of the mountainside. Up these steps climbed Giles, and as he mounted higher, the stairs began to twist and turn amid the crags and pinnacles. At the end of an hour's ascent, he found himself at a turn from which the Thunder Valley, the chasm through which it opened into the plain, and the wide plain itself, could all be seen.

Giles lingered there a while, trying to see his own cottage, or perhaps Phyllida on her white horse; but he could see neither one nor the other. So he began to climb again. All day long he climbed and climbed and climbed. Twilight fell. The circle of the sun dropped below the level horizon of the distant fields. One still golden star hung on the fringe of the sun-glow. The stairs began to widen, and presently Giles found himself at the summit of the mountain. Before his eyes lay a little level field surrounded by strange crags and pinnacles, looming tall and

black against the fast-appearing stars, and as Giles rubbed his eyes in wonder, lights shone here and there in the sides of the towering rocks, even as lights shine in the windows of a village when you see it from afar.

Giles rubbed his eyes again. Lights? What could they mean? Presently a great door, cut in the side of a towering mass of stone, opened with a burst of light, and toward Giles there hurried the two strangest creatures whom he had ever seen. These were two elves, alike as two peas and each about three feet tall. Instead of having ears much like other elves, however, the first one had ears like great curved cornucopias, which projected almost a foot on each side of his enormous round head, while the other, whose ears were quite natural, had but one huge eye in the centre of his forehead.

Without saying a single word, these strange elves seized Giles by the hands, and after hurrying him across the open space, urged him through the open doors into the house in the crags.

Still keeping silence, the elves led Giles through hundreds of splendid rooms and great halls, all lighted by hanging lamps as countless in number as the leaves upon the trees. Suddenly, a great archway rose before them, through which appeared a hall larger and brighter than all the others seen before. At one end of it, under a canopy of rosy-gray, stood a golden throne, and on the throne sat a being dressed in radiant blue--in blue such as the sky wears after a rain, when the dark clouds with bright edges break asunder and reveal the glory overhead. At the same moment, the countless mountain elves gathered in the hall began to sing:--

"All Hail, All Hail to the Shepherd of Clouds, Who, high in his mountain-top,
rules o'er the' weather; He sends the rich rain over mountain and plain, And
sprinkles the dew-drops afar o'er the heather."

The elves led Giles before the Shepherd.

"How comest thou, mortal, to invade my mountain?" said the Shepherd.

"I went forth to seek Phyllida," said Giles, "and lost my way in the storm."

"What sayest thou, Eye-o?" said the Shepherd to the elf with the single great eye in his forehead.

"The mortal speaks the truth," answered Eye-o in the queerest, squealiest voice. "I saw him set out yesterday from his cottage on the plain. He had not gone far when the storm which Your Mightiness prepared in the morning and sent forth in the afternoon overtook him. He lost his way, and chance led him to your dwelling, O Shepherd of Clouds."

"What sayest thou, Ear-o?" said the Shepherd to the elf with the great ears.

"I heard him say good-bye to his wife Wednesday last," replied the elf in a voice exactly like that of his brother. "Phyllida said to him, 'You will find a fresh baking of bread and a meat-pie in the larder.'"

The Shepherd of Clouds fixed his deep, solemn gaze upon Giles and said:--

"Mortal, I have hearkened to your story and to the words of my faithful Eye-o, who sees all things that happen in the whole wide world; I have paid heed to the words of Ear-o, who hears all things that are to be heard under the sun. Chance has led you to discover the secret of the weather. Nevermore must you revisit the lower world. Here shall you stay till Death overtakes you. Obey me, and I will give you happiness and honor; seek to escape, and my lightnings will find you wheresoever you may hide."

"Oh, no! no! no!" cried poor Giles, throwing himself down before the throne. "Great Shepherd of Clouds, do not keep me here. Let me return to my cottage on the plain, to Phyllida who waits for me, and knows not whither I am gone or whether I am living or dead. Oh, let me go, let me go!"

But the Shepherd only shook his head austerely, and rising from his throne, disappeared behind the rose-gray curtains. Again the mountain elves sang, and as they sang, the great hall slowly grew darker than the darkest night, and cold gusts of wind arose wailing in the darkness. Presently Giles felt his body grow weak, strong hands seized him and bore him up, and an instant later a deep sleep blotted out the world.

When he awoke, he found himself in a little room. Dawn was at hand, and the sweet, cold mountain air was blowing through the eastern window. Suddenly, the door swung open, and Eye-o and Ear-o entered.

"The sun is rising, Giles," said Ear-o, "and your appointed task awaits you. The Shepherd wishes the clouds released at once. Hurry, hurry, hurry, Giles, and open their prison-door."

So Giles went forth with the elves. Over the summit of the mountain they ran, along a path which wandered here and there--now dodging between huge boulders, now skirting terrible precipices. Presently Giles saw a monstrous wall of rock rising before him, in which were fixed two brazen doors taller and more stately than he had ever seen in the world below. Beside these doors, a flight of steps began, which led to the top of the wall.

Curious to see what lay behind the wall and the closed doors, Giles hurried to the top. He found himself standing at the brink of a great bowl, many miles wide and many miles long, hollowed out of the very rock of the mountaintop. Within this bowl, like a giant flock of sheep, lay hundreds of clouds on whose misty tops the rising sun poured gold, pale lavender, and rose. At first, Giles thought them

motionless, but as he gazed intently within the bowl, he saw that the clouds moved and swayed much like anchored ships in a tide.

This bowl was the weather-bowl. In it the Shepherd of Clouds prepared the weather for the neighboring countries. One day he would keep the fair-weather clouds at home and let the rain-clouds sail over the land; on another day, he would keep all the clouds in and let the sun shine; on other days he would mix together such frosts, mists, and snow-flurries as the season required.

Suddenly, ringing infinitely sweet over the mountain-top, rose the clear music of a silver horn.

"It is the Shepherd!" cried Eye-o and Ear-o.

"The hour is at hand to send the clouds over the earth. Quick, Giles, unbar the doors!"

So Giles unbound the giant doors, which of their own volition opened wide. A sound as of thunder heard from far away over the sea beat upon Giles's ear as the portals turned upon their hinges. In answer to this sound, the clouds rose and lifted their golden heads, and hastening to the brazen doors, one by one escaped through them to the sunlit spaces of the morning sky. There, they formed themselves into a fleet, and sailed majestically away.



Thus Giles became the servant of the Shepherd of Clouds. It was his task to unbar the door when the Shepherd had prepared the weather; it was his to lock the clouds in, once they had returned from the heavens in answer to the Shepherd's summoning horn. In time he came to know the rain-clouds from their fair-weather brothers; he learned how frosts were sent forth; how fogs were made; and he was even allowed to prepare a small storm. He saw the icy caverns in which the hail-stones lie piled in monstrous bags, the lightning-bolts in their crystal jars, and even the prisoned storm-winds. You may be sure that, when he could so arrange it, Phyllida's garden had quite the finest variety of weather. For Eye-o and Ear-o would tell him about her.

"Tell me, what is Phyllida doing?" Giles would say again and again.

And Eye-o would answer, "She is out in the garden gathering plums"; or, "she is in the kitchen making gingerbread."

And then Giles would say to Ear-o, "Tell me, what is Phyllida saying?"

And Ear-o would answer, "'Oh, would that my lad were home!'"

Two years passed, and Giles, who had found no opportunity of escape, began to lose hope of doing so. Never again, he feared, would he see Phyllida. One day, with Eye-o and Ear-o by his side, he sat on a great boulder and gazed gloomily down on the plain. Spring was just ripening into early summer, the plain was at its very greenest and loveliest, and here and there a little blue wood-smoke hung over the tiny villages. Giles thought of Phyllida far, far away, and a terrible loneliness poured into his heart. Eye-o and Ear-o sitting beside him, their long, strange arms clasped about their knees, looked on with sympathy. Presently Ear-o's right ear turned itself about, and after a moment's silence, the elf said:--

"I hear voices telling of war. I hear the Robber King of the Black Lakes summoning his terrible army. He is preparing a secret attack on the people of the plain."

"I see him! I see him!" cried Eye-o. "He is talking to the Grand Chamberlain Scelerato."

"Listen," said Ear-o; "he is saying, 'We will sweep the land at dawn, steal the grain, and destroy every village to its foundation.'"

"I see the robbers gathering," said Eye-o. "They are hiding in the dark pine forests, lest they be seen by the people of the plain. The sunlight pierces here and there through the thick branches and shines on the breastplates of the armed men."

At this terrible news, Giles was stricken to the heart with anxiety and fear. What was to become of Phyllida and the people of the plain? If he could only hurry down the mountain and warn them! If he could only escape! And he looked round eagerly, as he had looked a thousand times before, for any avenue of escape; but his gaze met only the great precipices of the mountain and the guarded stairs.

What could he do? His heart became like ice, and he feared to gaze upon the plain lest he see the smoke of burning villages. All night long he never closed his eyes. At dawn he rose and hurried to the top of the gate which overlooked the cloud-bowl. For two whole weeks, not a cloud had been allowed to roam the sky, and it seemed to Giles that the mists were angry, and that a darkness brooded upon them. Turning toward the plain, Giles saw, at the edge of the land, a little glow of fire. The robbers had invaded the plain!

Presently Eye-o came clambering up the steps.

"I see a village in flames," said the elf. "The inhabitants are fleeing down the roads. The news is spreading, and the people of the plain are hurrying to seek refuge in the mountains."

"Oh, where is Phyllida?" cried Giles.

"She is on the highway with Jack and Jill and their children, hastening toward the Valley of Thunder," answered the elf.

Suddenly Giles stood up, and throwing his arms high over his head, uttered a loud shout. "I can save them," he cried. "Let us send a storm against the robbers. Hurry, let us prepare the worst tempest that ever was seen."

And away he ran to the hail-stone caverns, and carrying bag after bag to the brim, emptied them all into the weather-bowl; he then tossed in a dozen skinsful of the fiercest storm-winds, and ended by casting in all the jars of thunderbolts that were to be found in the cavern. You should have heard the crash of the crystal vases on the rocky floor of the weather-bowl, and the hiss with which the lightning escaped and hid in the rolling edges of the clouds. The great bowl roared and trembled, the clouds massed together and grew dark; lightning played over the black crests of the thunder-heads. From the top of the gate, Giles took one satisfied look into the prisoned tempest, and then hurried down to unbar the door.

Through the gates, like wild herds, poured the clouds, and rising in the air, were caught by the spreading storm-winds and whirled madly over the sky. The thunder roared as no mortal had ever before heard it or ever will hear it again, and the tempest sailed away to break in all its anger over the heads of the robber army. So terrible was the noise that the enchanted mountain trembled to its very foundations.

Hearing the roar, the Shepherd of Clouds himself was roused and ran down to the cloudbowl; but so dark was the mountain-top that he lost his way, and narrowly missed falling down a precipice. The mountain elves, terrified by the confusion, ran hither and thither like ants whose nests had been opened. Crash went the thunder! Rumble, rumble, rumble, room, rrrr-rang bang! bang!

Once he had seen the storm break over the robber army, Giles, taking advantage of the darkness, noise, and confusion, determined to make one more effort to escape. Down the endless stairs he hurried, splashing through the falling rain, down, and down, and down. Once at the bottom, he was lucky enough to find the path out of the chasm, and hurried along it to the mouth of the Valley of Thunder.

He was free! The terrible storm had spent itself, and the sun was beginning to shine on the thousand rain-drops caught in the matted grass. A rainbow formed just as Giles approached the plain, and the little birds came out to shake the rain from their feathers.

Now, in the secure shelter of an overhanging cliff, were to be found those people of the plain who had fled to the valley for refuge; and when these poor worried folk saw Giles coming down the valley, they recalled the prophecy that a king

should come to them out of the valley, and hailed Giles as their king. Best of all, Phyllida herself ran out, and threw her arms about her husband. As for the robbers, the storm had overwhelmed them and swept them all into the river. There, I am glad to say, they turned into little fishes.

When the Shepherd of Clouds found that Giles had escaped after making all this disturbance, he was very angry, and rushed to his lightning closet to hurl some thunderbolts at him. When he got to the closet, however, he found that Giles had used every single bolt, and that the cupboard was empty. Consequently, he had to wait till the end of summer before he could get some new lightning, and by that time, he was so busy arranging the autumn frosts that he quite forgot about Giles.

So Giles and Phyllida became King and Queen of the people of the plain and lived happily ever after.

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