



Ririro

READ ANYWHERE, ANYTIME

Three Wise Men of Gotham

L. Frank Baum

Three Wise Men of Gotham
Went to sea in a bowl.
If the bowl had been stronger
My tale had been longer.

There lived in the great city of Gotham, over against the north gate, a man who possessed a very wise aspect, but very little else. He was tall and lean, and had a fine large head, bald and smooth upon the top, with a circle of white hair behind the ears. His beard was pure white, and reached to his waist; his eyes were small, dark, and so piercing that they seemed to read your every thought. His eyebrows were very heavy, and as white as his beard. He dressed in a long black mantle with a girdle corded about the middle, and he walked slowly and majestically, and talked no more than he was obliged to.

When this man passed down the street with his stately tread the people all removed their hats and bowed to him with great reverence, saying within themselves,

"He is very wise, this great man; he is a second Socrates."

And soon this was the only name he was called by, and every one in Gotham knew him as "Socrates."

To be sure this man was not really wise. Had they realized the truth, not one he met but knew more than Socrates; but his venerable appearance certainly betokened great wisdom, and no one appeared to remember that things are seldom what they seem.

Socrates would strut about with bowed head and arms clasped behind him, and think:

"My! how wise these people take me to be. Every one admires my beautiful beard. When I look into their faces they drop their eyes. I am, in truth, a wonderful man, and if I say nothing they will believe I am full of wisdom. Ah, here comes the schoolmaster; I shall frown heavily and refuse to notice him, for then he also will be deceived and think I am pondering upon matters of great import."

Really, the one wise thing about this Socrates was his ability to keep quiet. For,

saying no word, it was impossible he should betray his ignorance.

Singularly enough, over by the south gate of Gotham there dwelt another wise man, of much the same appearance as Socrates. His white beard was a trifle longer and he had lost his left eye, which was covered by a black patch; but in all other ways his person betokened as much wisdom as that of the other.

He did not walk about, being lazy and preferring his ease; but he lived in a little cottage with one room, where the people came to consult him in regard to all their troubles.

They had named him Sophocles, and when anything went wrong they would say, "Let us go and consult Sophocles, for he is very wise and will tell us what to do."

Thus one man, who had sued his neighbor in the courts, became worried over the outcome of the matter and came to consult the wise man.

"Tell me, O Sophocles!" he said, as he dropped a piece of money upon a plate, "shall I win my lawsuit or not?"

Sophocles appeared to ponder for a moment, and then he looked at his questioner with his one eye and replied,

"If it is not decided against you, you will certainly win your suit."

And the man was content, and went away feeling that his money had been well invested.

At another time the mother of a pair of baby twins came to him in great trouble.

"O most wise Sophocles!" she said, "I am in despair! For my little twin girls are just alike, and I have lost the ribbon that I placed on one that I might be able to tell them apart. Therefore I cannot determine which is Amelia and which is Ophelia, and as the priest has christened them by their proper names it would be a sin to call them wrongly."

"Cannot the priest tell?" asked the wise man.

"No one can tell," answered the woman; "neither the priest nor their father nor myself, for they are just alike. And they are yet too young to remember their own names. Therefore your great wisdom is our only resource."

"Bring them to me," commanded Sophocles.

And when they were brought he looked at them attentively and said,

"This is Ophelia and this Amelia. Now tie a red ribbon about Ophelia's wrist and put a blue ribbon on Amelia, and so long as they wear them you will not be troubled to tell them apart."

Everyone marvelled greatly that Sophocles should know the children better than their own mother, but he said to himself,

"Since no one can prove that I am wrong I am sure to be right;" and thus he maintained his reputation for wisdom.

In a little side street near the center of Gotham lived an old woman named Deborah Smith. Her home was a wretched little hut, for she was poor, and supported herself and her husband by begging in the streets. Her husband was a lazy, short, fat old man, who lay upon a ragged blanket in the hut all day and refused to work.

"One beggar in the family is enough," he used to grumble, when his wife upbraided him, "and I am really too tired to work. So let me alone, my Deborah, as I am about to take another nap."

Nothing she could say would arouse him to action, and she finally allowed him to do as he pleased.

But one day she met Socrates walking in the street, and after watching him for a time made up her mind he was nothing more than a fool. Other people certainly thought him wise, but she was a shrewd old woman, and could see well enough that he merely looked wise. The next day she went to the south of the city to beg, and there she heard of Sophocles. When the people repeated his wise sayings she thought,

"Here is another fool, for any one could tell as much as this man does."

Still, she went to see Sophocles, and, dropping a penny upon his plate, she asked,

"Tell me, O wise man, how shall I drive my husband to work?"

"By starving him," answered Sophocles; "if you refuse to feed him he must find a way to feed himself."

"That is true," she thought, as she went away; "but any fool could have told me that. This wise man is a fraud; even my husband is as wise as he."

Then she stopped short and slapped her hand against her forehead.

"Why," she cried, "I will make a Wise Man of Perry, my husband, and then he can earn money without working!"

So she went to her husband and said,

"Get up, Perry Smith, and wash yourself; for I am going to make a Wise Man of you."

"I won't," he replied.

"You will," she declared, "for it is the easiest way to earn money I have ever discovered."

Then she took a stick and beat him so fiercely that at last he got up, and agreed to do as she said.

She washed his long beard until it was as white as snow, and she shaved his head to make him look bald and venerable. Then she brought him a flowing black robe with a girdle at the middle; and when he was dressed, lo! he looked fully as wise as either Socrates or Sophocles.

"You must have a new name," she said, "for no one will ever believe that Perry Smith is a Wise Man. So I shall hereafter call you Pericles, the Wisest Man of Gotham!"

She then led him into the streets, and to all they met she declared,

"This is Pericles, the wisest man in the world."

"What does he know?" they asked.

"Everything, and much else," she replied.

Then came a carter, and putting a piece of money in the hand of Pericles, he enquired,

"Pray tell me of your wisdom what is wrong with my mare?"

"How should I know?" asked Pericles.

"I thought you knew everything," returned the carter, in surprise.

"I do," declared Pericles; "but you have not told me what her symptoms are."

"She refuses to eat anything," said the carter.

"Then she is not hungry," returned Pericles; "for neither man nor beast will refuse to eat when hungry."

And the people who heard him whispered together and said,

"Surely this is a wise man, for he has told the carter what is wrong with his mare."

After a few days the fame of Pericles' sayings came to the ears of both Socrates and Sophocles, and they resolved to see him, for each feared he would prove more wise than they were, knowing themselves to be arrant humbugs. So one morning the three wise men met together outside the hut of Pericles, and they sat themselves down upon stools, facing each other, while a great crowd of people gathered around to hear the words of wisdom that dropped from their lips.

But for a time all three were silent, and regarded one another anxiously, for each feared he might betray himself.

Finally Sophocles winked his one eye at the others and said, in a grave voice,

"The earth is flat; for, were it round, as some fools say, all the people would slide off the surface."

Then the people, who had listened eagerly, clapped their hands together and murmured,

"Sophocles is wisest of all. What he says is truth."

This provoked Socrates greatly, for he felt his reputation was in danger; so he said with a frown,

"The world is shallow, like a dish; were it flat the water would all run over the edges, and we should have no oceans."

Then the people applauded more loudly than before, and cried,

"Socrates is right! he is wisest of all."

Pericles, at this, shifted uneasily upon his stool, for he knew he must dispute the matter boldly or his fame would depart from him. Therefore he said, with grave deliberation,

"You are wrong, my friends. The world is hollow, like the shell of a cocoanut, and we are all inside the shell. The sky above us is the roof, and if you go out upon the ocean you will come to a place, no matter in which direction you go, where the sky and the water meet. I know this is true, for I have been to sea."

The people cheered loudly at this, and said,

"Long live Pericles, the wisest of the wise men!"

"I shall hold I am right," protested Sophocles, "until Pericles and Socrates prove that I am wrong."

"That is fair enough," said the people.

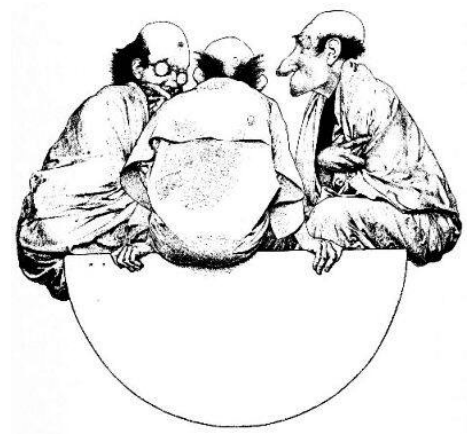
"And I also shall hold myself to be right until they prove me wrong," declared Socrates, firmly.

"I know I am right," said Pericles, "for you cannot prove me wrong."

"We can take a boat and sail over the sea," remarked Socrates, "and when we come to the edge we will know the truth. Will you go?"

"Yes," answered Sophocles; and Pericles, because he did not dare refuse, said "Yes" also.

Then they went to the shore of the sea, and the people followed them. There was no boat to be found anywhere, for the fishers were all away upon the water; but there was a big wooden bowl lying upon the shore, which the fishermen used to carry their fish to market in.



"This will do," said Pericles, who, because he weighed the most, was the greatest fool of the three.

So the wise men all sat within the bowl, with their feet together, and the people pushed them out into the water.

The tide caught the bowl and floated it out to sea, and before long the wise men were beyond sight of land.

They were all greatly frightened, for the bowl was old and cracked, and the water leaked slowly through until their feet were covered. They clung to the edge with their hands and looked at one another with white faces. Said Pericles,

"I was a fool to come to sea in this bowl."

"Ah," remarked Socrates, "if you are a fool, as you confess, then you cannot be a wise man."

"No," answered Pericles, "but I'll soon be a dead man."

"I also was a fool," said Sophocles, who was weeping from his one eye and trembling all over, "for if I had stayed upon land I would not have been drowned."

"Since you both acknowledge it," sighed Socrates, "I will confess that I also am a fool, and have always been one; but I looked so wise the people insisted I must know everything!"

"Yes, yes," Sophocles groaned, "the people have murdered us!"

"My only regret," said Pericles, "is that my wife is not with me. If only she were here"—

He did not finish what he was saying, for just then the bowl broke in two. And the people are still waiting for the three wise men to come back to them.

Stories help us explore cultures, learn moral lessons, connect with nature — or simply have fun. That's why ririro.com offers 3,000+ free stories — fairy tales, fables, bedtime stories, myths and more — for every age, in 13 languages, with free printable PDFs and often audio. Reading should be a right, not a privilege. Share

ririro.com and spread the joy of reading.
Instagram: @ririro_reading · Pinterest: pinterest.com/ririrocom