

The King's Dream

by Roland Foster

It was December 15. King Ferdolik had had a busy morning, reviewing all the plans for Christmas festivities at the castle and around the city. Now the King felt sleepy, as he often did after a nice lunch. He was middle-aged, you know, and getting a little bit portly, and the portlier he got, the more inclined he was to take a nap after lunch.

King Ferdolik was neither especially wise nor particularly fierce. He was blessed to have good relations with peaceable neighbors, so there were no wars or even border disputes to worry about. He had made no disastrously bad decisions during his reign, which is more than many kings can say. Whenever he needed wisdom he asked advice of his First Minister, Melrose, who was fairly wise although a bit stuffy, and of his Queen, Vivelda, who was very wise indeed. Because he usually did what they suggested, the King had become known as "Ferdolik the Wise."

As the King lay down on his king-size bed, he thought of the many blessings he and his people enjoyed. They were at peace, there was enough food for all, and by and large the people were happy, he thought. He wondered what he, himself, might do for his people in honor of Christmas.

When his valet, Harald, went into the royal bedroom at four o'clock to see if the King needed anything, he found Ferdolik still sleeping. "Sire," said Harald, "are you ready to wake up?" The King did not stir, but continued to sleep soundly, with a quiet snore each time he inhaled. "Your Majesty," said Harald a little louder, "it's four o'clock. Do you want to get up now?" Still the King did not awaken.

Harald did not know what to do, so he went to the First Minister, Melrose. "The King has never been hard to waken in the afternoons, my Lord Melrose. I'm not sure what I should do."

"You should do as you did, my boy. You were quite right to consult me, quite right, quite right indeed. Let us go and see if the King is ready to rise." The Minister, who was much more portly than the King, struggled to his feet, and they went to the King's bedroom.

"Sire," said Melrose, "are you ready to arise? It's four o'clock, and it will soon be time for supper." Melrose often thought in terms of mealtimes.

The King slept on. Hesitantly Melrose placed a hand on the King's shoulder and shook him gently. "Sire?" He shook harder. "Sire," he said loudly, "can you hear me?" Still the King did not stir. "My heavens," said Melrose, "I wonder what can be the matter. Harald, go and fetch the Royal Physician. What on earth can be the matter?"

The Royal Physician tried to rouse Ferdolik, but with no success. As he was checking the King's pulse and temperature to see if he was ill, Queen Vivelda entered the bedroom. "What is the matter?" she asked.

"We cannot awaken the King, Your Highness," replied Melrose. "We are trying to determine what is the matter. We fear that perhaps he is ill."

"He does not appear to have any symptoms," added the Physician. "His temperature and pulse are normal, and he is breathing naturally, if a bit noisily. I have no idea what's wrong."

"I'll wake him up," said the Queen. "Harald, fetch a bucket of water."

"Oh, no, Your Highness," said Melrose quickly, "please do not do that. If he does not awaken, we shall have to dry him off and move him into a different bed, and if he does awaken" He gave a small shudder. "Well, he will be very angry."

Queen Vivelda, who was wise, thought about that. "Yes, you're right," she agreed. "Just make sure he is comfortable and warmly covered, and leave him alone until he wakes up. I doubt that he will sleep past supper time."

But King Ferdolik did not wake up. He slept on and on. The next day they called in a specialist, Doctor Kajeenian, who said he had never seen anything like it. At his suggestion they undressed the King and put him into a tub of cool water. He still did not wake up, but he began to shiver and tried to curl up into a ball. They rescued him from the tub, dried him off, put pajamas on him and put him back into his warm bed, and he still slept on.

The doctors were baffled. "Let's wait. We'll give him a few spoonfuls of water now and then, turn him from side to side once in a while, and see what happens. If he doesn't wake up in a day or two, well ... then we will see what we will have to do."

The King slept soundly the rest of that day and through the night. Finally, at about four o'clock on the third day, he began to stir. Slowly he turned from his side onto his back, stretched mightily for several seconds, and heaved a great sigh. Harald, who was nearby, summoned the others. Soon Melrose, the Queen, the two physicians, Harald, and a page boy named Garth all gathered around the bed. As the King finally opened his eyes, he found six pairs of eyes staring at him from six worried faces.

"Sire," said Melrose, "how are you feeling? Are you quite all right?"

"Mmmm," said the King. "How do I feel?" He thought about it. "I feel ... just fine, I think. I've been away, you know."

"Yes, for more than two days," said Melrose, but the Queen said, "Away?"

"I had a ... dream ... at least I suppose it was a dream, though it all seemed real. I'll tell you about it shortly. I think that first I should get dressed, and eat something. Garth, tell the Steward I would like a bowl of soup in the dining room in twenty minutes. Oh, and maybe a small glass of red wine, That will be enough. Now, all of you except Harald, clear out of here so I can get dressed. I'll see you in the dining room."

After the King had refreshed himself with a bowl of delicious venison stew and a small glass of wine, he was ready to tell the story of his dream. This is what he said:

"At first I was an old Priest who cares for homeless people in the heart of a city. Please understand, I wasn't *transported* anywhere, or *transformed* into this Priest, or anything like that. There was no sense of *becoming*. It's just that, for a little while, I was this Priest. And I don't think it was this city, or even the present time.

"Anyway, I tried to help all the hurting people who came my way, and there were many of them. Homeless men and women, some with small children; runaway teenagers living on the streets — they all suffer so during the winter. Many die of discouragement and exposure. There was a soup kitchen, which I remembered organizing years before, where people could get one good, hot meal each day; also a clothing depot where they could find something warm and decent to wear. I had a few faithful volunteers helping in these places, and some who made donations to support them. I could have used many more of each.

"I also tried to meet their spiritual needs. I gave them comfort, and kind words, and as many hugs as they would accept. I talked with them, listened to their fears and frustrations, counseled them, prayed with them, and often cried with them. Above all, I loved them. Ah, the way I — the old Priest — loved those people! It was astonishing, and overwhelming.

"I think there was an interlude of some duration during which I simply slept without dreaming. Then I found that I was a Cobbler, living with my family in a room above my tiny shop, in the middle of another city. Again, there was no sense of transition or becoming. I was the Cobbler, and did not remember being otherwise.

"Each day I worked long hours at my bench. I tried to do my sewing during the daylight hours, and my cutting and gluing and nailing by candlelight. I had a wife and two children, a boy and a girl. The wife earned a little extra money doing sewing and ironing. The girl, who was twelve, did most of the housekeeping chores. The boy, ten years old, ran errands for his father, cleaned the shop, and was learning his father's trade.

"In the evenings, after our simple meal, I sometimes took out my little concertina and played the old folk songs that we all loved to sing. I did not play very well, and we did not sing like larks, but it did not matter. Later, when the children lay down on their pallets on the floor, the mother often sat with them and told them a story, or read to them from the Bible or *The Pilgrim's Progress*.

"We were poor, but happy. My heart was full of thanksgiving as I looked at their faces and felt their commitment to the life we shared. I was both proud and very humbled by the beauty and the joy of my little family, when I was the Cobbler.

"Again there must have been an interlude, and then again I was living the life of another man. This time I was a rich Merchant, dealing in wines and furs and all manner of fine goods. Yes, I was very wealthy, possibly the richest man in that kingdom — richer than the King himself, some were saying.

"I had three children, ages six, ten and thirteen. They had fine clothing, rooms full of toys, ponies to ride, and any other thing that a child could possibly want.

"I spent my days and nights making deals, making alliances, making more and more money. My wife was busy spending the money, and supervising the tasks of a dozen or more servants. The children were given into the care of a governess, a pleasant woman who took good care of them and made sure the tutors I employed were educating them properly.

"I knew that my children were probably unhappy, but I was too busy to deal with it. Instead I gave them presents, hoping that something would amuse them or entertain them enough to make them happy. I felt that being well fed and comfortable and indulged should be enough, should make them happy. I was saddened and angered by their failure to appreciate all I did for them.

"That's all I remember of my dream, but I remember all of it very clearly." The King was thoughtful for a moment, then added, "Now I need to understand what the dream means, and what I should do about it. I know there is a meaning, and I am called to action, but I am at a loss. I will have to seek the wisdom of the wise to tell me what it means and what to do."

The next morning, King Ferdolik called for his First Minister, Melrose. "Help me understand my dream, Melrose," said the King. Have you thought about what it might mean?"

"I have, Sire, and I have consulted your wisest advisors. None can say for sure what the dream means, or what you should do about it."

"They have no ideas?"

"One suggests, Sire, that the dream indicates that there are three classes of citizens in your kingdom: the destitute, the working poor, and the wealthy, each with their different needs. Others, including myself, did not find that helpful, because there are others who do not fit into those categories."

"No! No, that's not the meaning of the dream. I will know the true meaning when I hear it. Go away, and send me those two physicians!"

The physicians were no help either. "We think Your Majesty suffered some sort of seizure, and lay in a coma for three days. As for the dream, dreams mean nothing, Sire. They are just the workings or the self-amusement of the mind when it is asleep. You should not trouble yourself further about this dream. However, if it happens again ..."

"Nonsense!" declared the King. "How can you say this dream is meaningless? Have you ever had a dream like it? I mean, where you were someone else for a period of time, and living the waking life of that person? Three persons, actually. I tell you, this dream was extraordinary. It was given to me for a reason!"

The physicians could not respond to the King's challenge, so they left. The king sat in his study, disturbed and frustrated. "I must know what the dream means," he said to the Queen. "I must decide what I am to do about it. I can't just forget about it."

Queen Vivelda, who was wise, said gently, "Perhaps there is someone who can interpret the dream for you. Maybe if we search for such a person ..."

"Sire ..." It was the page boy, Garth.

"What is it, boy?"

"I ..."

"Come, lad, speak up. What do you want to say?"

"Sire, there is a woman who has interpreted dreams. I don't know her name. They know of her in the kitchen."

"Who knows of her? Is it the Master Chef?"

"No, Sire. I believe the woman is the grandmother of one of the scullery maids."

"I'll find out who she is," said the Queen. "Come, Garth, and help me."

King Ferdolik thought about his dream and worried over it for the next hour. Finally he threw up his hands. "Heaven help me!" he exclaimed. "What use is a dream if you can't understand it? Why have it at all if you can't figure out what to do about it?"

The Queen returned, followed by a little old lady, walking slowly with a cane, but with great dignity. As she came before the King, she bowed. "Your Majesty, I am Weldren," she said.

"You are welcome, Mistress Weldren," said the King. "You are especially welcome if you can help me understand my dream, and what I am to do about it. In fact, if you can help me ..."

The woman held up her hand. "You need not promise me a reward, Your Majesty. I need nothing more than I have. It is good that you want to understand your dream. If you do what it is telling you to do, that will be my reward."

"You believe you can help me, then?" said the King.

"Yes, I can help you. I have the gift of dreaming, and that of understanding dreams. They are different, you know. Now, please tell me the dream."

King Ferdolik had a chair brought close for Weldren, and offered refreshment. She accepted a cup of tea, and sat quietly, sipping the tea and listening with half-closed eyes, while the King again told the story of his three-day dream.

When he had finished, she sat in thoughtful silence for a long while. The King started to prompt her, but she held up her hand to stop him. At last she spoke.

"King Ferdolik, I can interpret this dream for you. Before I do, in order to avoid public disclosure without understanding, I suggest you send everyone out of the room."

"Everyone except me," said the Queen, who was wise.

"Of course, Your Highness," replied Weldren.

The Queen whisked everyone else out of the room and shut the door and locked it. Then she resumed her place behind her husband's chair, and rested her hand on his

shoulder. He placed his hand on hers briefly, and they smiled at each other.

"Your dream is one dream, with one message. It is a message of four great goods, and three great evils. What you must do is understand these things, and teach them to your people."

"I ..." the King began.

"No, Sire, do not talk. Just listen well. This dream is every bit as important as you have known that it is.

"First the four great goods. Three of them are demonstrated by the Cobbler and his family. They are the Dignity of Useful Work, the Honor of Personal Responsibility, and the Joy of Loving Relationships.

"The Cobbler's life is dignified by the fact that he has useful work to do, and he does it faithfully and well. His shoes are important to the rich and the poor alike. Usually the rich get to wear them new, but they endure to be a blessing to the poor as well, and usually to more than one person.

"The Cobbler has his work, and by it he earns a living for his family. They have enough money to give something to the Church, and to make a pair of shoes now and then for a needy person who cannot pay for shoes. His wife has her work, too, keeping the household, stretching the money to feed and clothe them all. Each child has responsibilities as well, and each member of the family does what he or she must do for the family.

"And because they are productive, and working together, they are able to love each other in the giving, joy-filled way that they do. This is not a perfect family, but they are a beautiful example of what God intends a family to be.

"The fourth great good in your dream is the Holiness of Selfless Giving, demonstrated by the sacrificial, selfless love of the Priest for hurting people. Almost everyone in your kingdom gives something, whatever they can easily afford, to help the needy. This Priest pours himself out like water for the ones he serves. He loves them with the very love of God Himself. 'Greater love has no one than this: that he lay down his life for his friends.' To the priest, every person is a friend worth dying for.

"Which brings us to the first great evil of your dream — the Hopelessness of Poverty. If the poor had no Priest to help them, they would have nothing at all. Even with the Priest's help, as beautiful as it is, they are without hope. Will they ever be better off? Most of them never will.

"The worst thing about hopelessness is that it robs one of the ability to change. Do not think that this dream is calling you to restore hope to those who have lost it. Your course is to try to save the hope of the young, before life takes it from them.

"The remaining evils, so obviously demonstrated by the rich Merchant and his family, are the Deceitfulness of Riches and the Emptiness of a Selfish Life. Do I really need to tell you how badly the Merchant has missed the meaning of life in his pursuit of wealth? How he has robbed his wife and children of all real joy by giving them *things*?

"Just so. That was the meaning of your dream. Four great goods:

- The Dignity of Useful Work
- The Honor of Personal Responsibility
- The Joy of Loving Relationships
- The Holiness of Selfless Giving

and three great evils:

- The Hopelessness of Poverty
- The Deceitfulness of Riches
- The Emptiness of a Selfish Life.

You must remember these things, and help your people to understand and remember them as well."

"But," replied the King, "how can I teach the people these truths? What should I do?"

"I cannot instruct you, Your Majesty. My gift is to interpret the meaning of your dream, and to tell you what must be done about it. I cannot tell you how to go about it. However, I do have a suggestion, if you will receive it."

"Yes, of course."

"The Queen is very wise. Perhaps she can help you determine what actions you should take."

King Ferdolik looked at his Queen, who smiled. "That is an excellent suggestion," he said. "Dame Weldren, I thank you. I am in your debt. Surely I may give you something for your trouble ..."

"No, Your Majesty, your word of thanks is quite enough for now. My true reward will occur when your people begin to understand the message of your dream."

After sending Weldren on her way, Ferdolik turned to Queen Vivelda. "Now, my dear, let me hear your wise words concerning my dream, and how I should teach its message to the people."

It was not that simple, of course. The King and Queen enlisted the help of the First Minister, Melrose, and for three days the three of them tried to work out a plan of action. They came to realize that the only plan that would work — locking everyone up, and not releasing them until they could flawlessly recite the seven phrases — was not only impractical, it was pointless.

"These truths should make a difference in people's lives," said the King.

"Quite so, quite so," said Melrose. "The people not only have to learn them, they have to embrace their truth, or nothing has been accomplished."

"So where are we?" asked the King

"Nowhere. We have not even made a good start," replied the First Minister.

"Maybe we have been going about this the wrong way," observed Queen Vivelda. "Ferdolik, how did you get your dream?"

"What do you mean? I don't know how I 'got' it. God gave it to me, I suppose."

"Exactly. God gave you the dream. Perhaps He wants to give you His plan for communicating its truths to the people."

"But ... then why hasn't He told us what it is?"

"Perhaps we should ask Him." The Queen smiled her sweet, wise smile.

"Oh. I see." The King turned to the First Minister. "Melrose, will you ..."

"Oh, no, Sire. I think you are the one who must ask."

"Oh." The King took several deep breaths. "Oh, my." He took another deep breath. "Very well, then. But come, both of you, and pray with me."

"Gracious God in Heaven, who taught me important truths through a dream, now give us the knowledge and strength we need to convey those truths to our people, so that they may embrace them, and use them to their profit and to your glory. As in all things, your will be done. Amen."

"Amen," echoed Melrose and the Queen together.

"And now," said the King, "enough of this. Since we have turned this matter over to God, let us turn our hands to other things, such as the Christmas celebration."

During the next several days King Ferdolik was resolved not to think of the dream and its truths again until God answered his prayer, and, for the most part, he succeeded. When his thoughts strayed that way, he immediately reined them in and sent them in another direction. So it was a bit of a surprise to him when three days after Christmas, shortly after breakfast, a page entered the throne room with a message.

"Sire, a boy has just arrived at the castle gate and is asking for an audience with the King. He says it has to do with your dream."

"With my dream? Then by all means, bring him in."

The boy who was brought to the King was perhaps fourteen years old, small and thin, but not looking particularly undernourished. He wore sandals, and his feet and bare legs showed that the roads he had walked were dusty.

He bowed to the King, but did not speak.

"What is your name, lad, and where do you come from?"

"Sir, my name is Urgard, and I serve the hermit Protellus, whose home is a distance north of here."

"And you walked here? For how many days?"

"Yes, Sir, for five days. I have been helped on my way by generous people who fed me and provided lodging, or a bed in a haystack, overnight."

"And what message do you have for me?"

"Sir, Protellus bids me tell you that he is aware of your dream and its truths, and of your need to know what actions you must take in response to it. He asks you to come to him, you and the Queen, so that he may tell you what to do, so that God's intention for your dream may be realized. He also warns you that if you do not come, or if you do not faithfully do as God directs, then you will have injured your people and robbed them of a blessing."

"Why does this hermit not come to me?"

"Sir, he is old, and frail, and hardly able now to leave his bed. If you would hear him, you must come to him. And soon."

The King did not even bother to reply. Instead, he clapped his hands, and said to a page, "Bring the Queen and the First Minister to me immediately." To another page he said, "Take this young man to the kitchen and see his needs are met." To Urgard he said, "Take some refreshment, and be ready to leave within the hour, to guide us to the home of your hermit."

The Queen and the First Minister had come in. "Vivelda," said the King, "we must go to see a hermit who can tell us God's plan for my dream. We leave on horseback within the hour. Get ready — bring what we'll need for several days, in saddle bags. Melrose," he added, "I'm leaving you in charge. You know what that means. Handle what you can as I would, and leave the rest for my return." He sent another page to the stables to have three horses made ready.

By riding hard, they arrived at the hermit's home before dusk of the second day. His dwelling was part hut, part cave, tucked into the side of a steep hill. At the doorway the boy called, "Protellus, we are here," and they entered and approached the hermit.

The old man was on his bed, neither lying down nor sitting, but propped up on an array of unidentifiable pillows or bolsters. His legs were covered by an old, worn, deerskin robe, and his chest and arms were bare.

After a moment, the hermit spoke. "King Ferdolik." The King nodded. "Queen Vivelda." She also nodded. "And Urgard, my faithful helper. You have done well, my son. Now come, bring stools for our guests."

After they were seated, Protellus asked the King, "Why are you here?"

"You summoned us," he replied.

"Yes, I did, but why did you come?"

The King thought. "Because you said you can tell us what actions to take with regard to my dream."

"But why do anything? Why not just forget it, and go on with your life? You certainly have enough to do."

The King started to say something, then stopped. Then he said, "I see what you mean. Very well. The answer is, God has given me a task — something He wants done. I want to do it, not just because I am obliged to obey Him, but because I want to. When I find out what it is."

"Excellent. One more question: Why Haven't you come up with a plan and implemented it?"

Ferdolik hesitated. "Well, we tried."

"But?"

"But we couldn't think of anything that would work."

"Why not?"

The King didn't answer, so the Queen spoke up. "I think I see what you're getting at. We were trying to do it ourselves. Without God's help."

"Yes, exactly. You were learning what the Scriptures say: 'Unless the Lord builds the house, the people who are building it are laboring in vain.' They're wasting their time."

After several moments of silence, the King cleared his throat. "So ..." he said.

"Take refreshment and stay the night — there's a place prepared for you in the village. In the morning God will tell us His plan."

Next morning they found Protellus waiting for them on a stool outside his door — still with the deerskin robe; still bare-chested. "Come, sit," he said. "You must remember all I have to tell you."

After they were seated, the hermit said, "We start with two basic facts. First, no matter what you do, not everyone will receive it or profit by it. By trying to reach everyone, you reach no one. People are individuals, with free will. Which leads to the second fact: by and large, people do what they want to do, if they can. So to impart the truths of your dream to people, to those who will receive them, you need to make them receptive. Do you understand?"

Ferdolik and Vivelda looked at each other, and nodded. "Yes," said the King, "we understand what you're saying, as far as it goes."

"Very good. Now, another question. Other than the gift of Himself, what is the greatest gift God has given to human beings?"

The King, thought, then shook his head. "I don't ..."

The Queen interrupted him. "Prayer," she said.

"Exactly! God invites us — actually, He *commands* us — to converse with Him. We talk to Him, and He talks to us, using prayer."

"But ... I've prayed, a lot, about the dream, about a plan ..."

'Good. And He brought you here, didn't He?"

"Oh." The King looked sheepishly at his wife, who smiled.

"So," the hermit continued, "God's plan is, you shall invite the people to pray."

The King didn't say anything, because he knew there was more.

The hermit smiled. "There's a bit of trickery involved," he said. "You'll decree times and seasons of prayer, and you will invite the people to pray about certain things. And those who do pray will learn, and internalize, and begin to live by, the truths revealed in your dream.

"You'll start by decreeing a Prayer Project, inviting all of your people to join you in a month of prayer for specific things. You'll say, for example, 'The theme for this month of prayer is, "The Dignity of Useful Work." For the first week you'll pray that all useful work, and those who perform it, will be recognized and appreciated by all the people. The second week you'll pray specifically for people who do useful work, that God will bless their efforts and make them fruitful, and they will receive just compensation for their labor. Then for a week you'll pray for those who benefit from that useful work, that the products or services they receive may bless them as God intends. For the rest of the month the people shall pray for themselves, that they may truly understand and appreciate and honor the dignity of useful work. Do you get the idea?"

Nobody said anything for at least a minute. Then the King said, "I can see that such a plan will get a few people involved. Some who are already people of prayer will join such a project. But how many ..."

"This is God's plan. He's willing to start small. If you are faithful, there will be more who join in. And some who do not join you in prayer will still receive the truths God wants them to know. And, finally, God will certainly hear your prayers and grant what they are asking — after all, this is His idea."

"But ... I see the first month of the plan. What about the months after that?"

The Queen laid her hand on his arm. "I think, dear husband, if we ask Him, God will give us all the guidance we need."

He looked at his wife, and saw her wisdom and her love, both God's gifts to him. "Thank you, my love. You are right, as you so often are." Turning to Protellus, he said, "Have you said all you have to say to us?"

"All but just this: Trust God, and go where He leads."

"Yes, I hear you. I ... no, we ... will follow where God leads. Now, what may I do for you?"

"You owe me nothing. I work for the Heavenly Father. But if you are willing, you may allow Urgard to keep the horse you provided for his journey."

"Thank you, faithful servant of God." He turned to the boy, who was standing at the door. "Urgard, the horse you rode is now yours. Take good care of him. May you and he be a blessing to each other."

Urgard bowed his thanks.

Ferdolik took the Queen's hand. "Come, Vivelda, my darling, my best help. We have work to do. We have a Prayer Project to launch."

The End