

The Thief

He was born to thieves. He was raised a thief. He helped his parents steal their living before he could talk. His parents taught him their moral code, and he lived by that moral code.

He took his living from those with excess. He shared with those who had less than he had. He accumulated nothing beyond his immediate needs.

When he matured, he traveled. His craft was portable and supplied his needs wherever he went. He didn't seek communities of thieves nor cultivate friendships with thieves. Neither did he avoid them. In the wide world, he wanted to meet many different kinds of people.

He accepted hospitality in the home of a baker. He worked with the man daily until he could bake as well as the baker. He helped in the baker family's garden. He played with the baker's children. He helped teach the children. He taught them nothing of his profession because it was up to the baker and the baker's wife and the children what professions they would take up.

It was time for him to travel again, and he packed up to leave. He stole three loaves of bread and a dozen rolls. He took half the silver coins and the one gold coin from the tray under the counter, and he took his leave and set off down the road.

He wanted the baker to know a thief is always a thief. Though he knew the baker would not agree, he thought the baker and his family had more than they needed. They were plump with over-eating, and they fed fine-quality baked goods to the yard-fowl while the poorest children in the village suffered from hunger.

The thief gave away bread and rolls. He stopped in a tavern and exchanged the gold coin for a pocket full of silver. He gave away silver coins as he left the village. Out in the country again, walking down the lane, he ate the last roll.

In his journeying, he fell in with Christians. He thought they lived much as he did, a simple life, with their needs met day to day, with little accumulation of riches.

He helped in the gardens. He helped teach the children. He joined in their worship.

He came to love a young woman, and he thought he saw love in her eyes for him, but when he spoke of it to her, she said, "I love you as a fellow human, and yes, my heart leads me beyond that, but I will not follow my heart. I may someday

marry, but it will not be to you, for you are a thief, and the eighth commandment says thou shalt not steal."

He said, "Marrying me will not make you a thief. You haven't objected to being friends with me, thief though I am."

She thought for a moment and then said, "There is a difference between friend and wife. The devout must love all and try to show the true path through the examples of their own lives."

He said, "Your friendship with me has been a campaign for a convert to your religion?"

"No," she said, "It has been because I like you. I enjoy being with you. What you do for your living is between you and God. But if I am to think of marrying you, what you do for your living is my concern, because it becomes my living. When I have children, it becomes their living and their example."

He could think of nothing to say. He could say, "I will change," but he thought, "A thief is always a thief."

He said, "I will study on this. I will come back to tell you what I discover, before the year is out."

As was his custom, as he left the village, he stole that of which they had the greatest abundance. He stole her heart and her love, for she had such an abundance that her love radiated from her and exalted those around her. She had such an abundance of love that she was the only one who knew he had taken anything from her. She loved him, and she wished he was with her, but she dedicated herself to the direction she had chosen.

He lived by baking. He lived by teaching. He lived by labor in the fields and forests. He stole nothing in his time away from her. He came back before the year was out and rejoined the community.

Seasons passed. He made his contributions to the community and did not steal. The thief and the young woman married and had children. They taught the children their way, of baking, of tilling the soil, of belief and worship.

The village grew into a city, and commerce linked it to other cities. Many citizens pursued more and more materialistic goals. Few were able to maintain the intensity and purity of their earlier beliefs. Existence in man's constructed world of power and profit clouded their vision. They drifted from their religion.

The man who had been a thief saw something he thought had gone from this world. He saw excess to the point of bloat alongside starvation.

He began to steal again. Not for his own needs, nor for his family's, but to alleviate hunger where he could. He added part

of the earnings from his work to what he stole, until his family had nothing beyond their immediate needs.

His wife saw that he gave away more food than he could have purchased with what he earned.

She said, "You are stealing again."

"Yes, I am."

She said, "Your promise to me was without meaning."

He said, "It wasn't without meaning. It became an impossible promise to keep in the face of starvation around me. Does God want me to let these people starve?"

She said, "It is not your responsibility to fill their needs. It is yours to obey God's commandments, and their hunger, their lives, that is between them and God, if you can't help them without breaking one of His commandments."

"It would be that way for you," he said, "I didn't promise God I wouldn't steal. I promised you."

"If a promise to me will not hold you from it, then you must make your promise to God."

"If a promise to you would not keep me from it, a promise to God would not keep me from it. I don't believe God wants me to stop taking from those who have so much that food falls from the table and is trod into the floor, to give to those who have nothing, when those who have will not give by their own conscience."

"But the commandment hasn't conditions and exceptions qualifying it. It is simply, 'Though shalt not steal.'"

He said, "I swore no allegiance to your God beyond what I find in my own choices. Your support and the support for our children comes from my earnings as a baker and from what we grow from the land. If God would that I would not steal, he would give me the conviction that my actions are wrong."

She could not convince him.

He didn't try to convince her. He had no desire to change her beliefs. He would do what he would do.

He was caught, tried, convicted, and imprisoned. Always before, he had been free to do as he would. In despair for his freedom, he remembered saying if God's will was that he should not steal, God would give him conviction that his deeds were wrong. If these stone walls and iron bars were the consequences of his actions, then he was convinced. He could not exist here. He was overwhelmed by despair.

He promised God. He said, "I will not steal again."

He felt strong and calm. He knew in this prison, loneliest of all places, he was not alone. God would take care of him. The man who had been a thief would find some good in this experience. None of his life would be wasted. God promised

him that when he promised God he would not steal again. God promised not as a reward, nor in trade. God always had taken care of him, and now the thief recognized that, because his understanding of God deepened as quickly as his commitment.

The sheriff and the guards knocked prisoners around in fits of temper.

People went to prison for their inability to pay their debts. Murderers shared cells with the mentally incompetent. Prisoners starved and died of untreated injuries and illnesses.

Surely this corruption, this inhumane institution could not be God's instrument to bring about moral change in his life. "Nonetheless, this institution, the law, and the prison, built in corruption by men, is here, and I have run afoul of it. If God is to be my life and I am to do his work, then I must do it here."

He thought God would not have given him such sensitivity to other people's lack without giving him some way, either to help, or to dull his sensitivity.

When the sheriff or the guards abused him, he returned calm compassion, unspoken forgiveness. He looked past their corruption as citizens of this material world to the reality that they were God's children, created in His perfect image and likeness. He made no attempt to change them. He made no moral judgement. He left that to God.

He puzzled the officials of the prison. They had not seen reactions like his before. They began to respect him and to feel a small measure of affection toward him. Within the prison, he had some freedom of movement. He made himself useful, not to curry favor, but because, by helping them with their tasks, he was able to begin to help some of the prisoners.

He took over the job of cooking for the prison. Under his supervision, more of the food was wisely used. All the prisoners were fed. He cleaned cells. He helped the sick and injured. He involved other prisoners in helping make the prison a better place to live. He taught prisoners simple things they needed to know so they could live better lives.

Though he didn't know it, the sheriff and the guards and the prisoners changed because of the example showed them by the man who had been a thief. They gained some sense of compassion and of moderation. They had not known what respect and affection for their fellow humans was, but they saw that respect every day in the man who had been a thief, and they liked that respect and affection and took some of it into themselves. They liked having the prison become a better place to live, and they understood more and more that cooperation among all of them helped make the prison a better place to live.

He was released, and the door shut behind him. He walked

out into a world of broad sky, bright sunshine, and clean, active air. He wondered how much the world had changed. He wondered how much his children had grown.

He had become a more deeply religious man. In the depths of his despair, he had seen God more clearly than he had before. In prison, helping other prisoners and trying in a small way to make the human condition better, he thought he had come to understand more about all of existence than he had before.

His wife and his children were overcome with joy at his return. His children were taller and stronger.

His wife had not changed at all. He thought she looked the same as she had the day they married. They held each other close for a long time, and the children danced around them, joined them in a mass of many people all hugging each other together, and then the children danced around them again.

The man who had been a thief could see the human condition was a product of man's work, and not something given by God. He remembered his promise. He knew God, with enough believers working in harmony, could end starvation and suffering for all, without any stealing.

He said, "God, I know that. But that's in the future. To a man or a woman or a child who does not yet know God and who has no food, to say, 'Seek ye first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you,' means nothing. It takes time to learn and to change, and for people who will die of starvation in a few days, there is no time.

"When harmony comes to the earth, there will be no need for theft. Meanwhile, if you will damn me for theft, then I am damned. I can only do what I'm going to do."

He didn't try to conceal what he was doing from his wife. He said, "I love you, and you know I do. I would make you happy and keep only harmony between us and in this family. Nonetheless, I must act against hunger as I am able."

She said, "There is harmony between us and in this family. I accept you as you are. It isn't up to me to try to make God's judgements for Him nor to try to shape your life for you. I am your wife, and I love you as best I can."

He said, "As best you can is very good indeed."