

UNJUST DESSERTS

a fable

There was once a man, living alongside a respectable river, who owned a rowboat. For many years the man quietly passed his days in ferrying people across the river in exchange for small measures of food and fuel, cloth and implements, and other things a man needs.

A war erupted, as wars do, between two factions of people, and the river, as rivers do, obstructed one army's advance to the front. The man was soon engaged by this army to ferry a battalion across the river one or two soldiers at a time along with their gear. The man realized that in one's life, as life goes, such disruptions can happen. Therefore he applied himself diligently, even enthusiastically, to this important effort.

When he was part way into ferrying the battalion across, another battalion showed up on the near shore. The commander of the second battalion said, "I have orders to commandeer this boat and rower to ferry my battalion across! I must be first to the front!"

Uncertain, the boatman included some of these soldiers on his trips, but hardly had he begun to do so when another battalion, (as battalions go), showed up on the same shore, then another and another, each commander having the same orders as the one before.

The man with the boat did his best to get a few soldiers from each battalion across, trying to favor no one, trying to assure that each commander, (secure in his tent on the ridge high above the near shore of the river), could see that his men were getting across.

Before long the wounded, as wounded do, began to appear on the opposite shore, back from battle. So instead of coming back empty from each trip the boatman was able nearly to double his effectiveness with little or no extra effort. He felt good about this. But then sometimes, shortly after he'd pulled away from the opposite shore with one or two wounded, another one desperate for transport would suddenly appear and hail

him. So the boatman would turn back. Pretty soon he was taking twice as long to return from each trip.

All of the battalion commanders were fed up with the service they were receiving. Grudgingly they agreed to provide the boatman with some help. The boatman's elation abruptly waned, however, when it became clear that the help would be in the form of a battered pail with which to bail and some scraps of food left over from the soldiers' chow. Meanwhile, with varying threats against the boatman the commanders vied with each other for control of the boat.

Finally the boatman risked some valuable time and climbed the riverbank. He went to one of the commanders and said, "Perhaps you should ask your headquarters to provide another boat, even two."

"We don't need another boat!" stormed the commander. "The problem's not with the boat, it's with the driver! You need to learn to set your priorities, and I'm your first priority!"

The boatman cautiously approached each of the other commanders. With the second, he also suggested that a bridge be built. Then all the soldiers could run swiftly across.

"A bridge costs too much and takes too long to build and is useful only for a short period, and besides, the enemy would probably destroy it before we could all get across!" the commander argued.

With the next, the boatman proposed all that he had before, and added that maybe the army should send scouts in opposite directions along the riverbank in search of another boat and rower.

"And take a chance that we won't find anything? Preposterous! That's a waste of good men who are needed immediately at the front!" said that commander.

After speaking to each commander he was met with the same kind of response. To the last one, in exasperation, he added, "Maybe your general should come observe what's happening here. If he concurs with you that another boat or a bridge isn't the answer, perhaps he'll think of something else that none of us has yet considered."

The last commander stared at him in disbelief, and then said, "This situation couldn't be more simple, and it

doesn't take a general to figure out what's wrong here!"

With that, the commanders all conferred privately. The next time the boatman landed with a load of wounded, (for whose wounds he'd begun to sense he was now being blamed – it took him so long to go get them), he was dragged from his boat and was executed on the riverbank.

Moments later the boatman found himself observing the scene as if hovering a short distance overhead. He saw his own body, as bodies go, drifting face down with the current. A few of his neighbors, whom he hadn't noticed before, were gathered a little distance apart, curious about the activity on the river. From the ranks of the army a lieutenant with grave self-importance approached the simple people, and the boatman watched as a tall boy was pulled from the group and had the oars thrust into his hands.

The boy looked quizzically at the nearest commander, and the boatman heard the commander's orders, muffled and indistinct, as if shouted through a down-filled pillow – as commanders orders are. With the boat precariously loaded, the boy who had taken the boatman's place shoved off, awkwardly stroking the unfamiliar water. On the opposite shore a dozen or more wounded cried out, each pleading to be the first ferried back.

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