

The Kings of Mistrria

Many centuries ago, in the Kingdom of Mistrria, every man's hand was turned against his fellow. And nowhere more so than among the rulers of the country. There was regicide and patricide, matricide and fratricide, left-side and right-side, inside and outside, and every other kind of side you would like to think of.

At last the people grew weary of perpetual turmoil and gave their loyalty to a strong king who restored order and ruled wisely and justly. During his long reign his subjects prospered, and this time was called a golden age. But at last the old king died, and his son succeeded to the throne. The new king resembled his father only in respect of his power, and this he inherited. The young ruler was as foolish as his father was wise, as tyrannical as his father was just. Terror spread across the land, and those who resisted the king's wish were put to the sword.

After some years there was a revolution, and the noblemen forced the king to sign an edict in which he undertook to consult them on all matters of state. For the remainder of his reign, and during that of his successor, the people were again content.

But rulers are rarely tolerant of restrictions on their freedom, and so at last another king decreed that, while the noblemen were entitled to be consulted, they were forbidden, as were all citizens, to question the authority and motives of the king. Not surprisingly the king thenceforth became richer, while the ordinary people suffered under ever more oppressive taxes.

Presently a wiser king came to the throne, and sensing revolution in the air, he decreed that the monarch was not, after all, infallible, and that he must consult and be guided not only by the noblemen but also by representatives of the people. Gradually prosperity returned to the people who learnt by their experience that they must guard their rights jealously.

But the new regime once again restricted the freedom of the monarch, and it was not long before a frustrated king called his closest counsellors together and addressed them thus: 'Our great and sacred nation is in ruins. Your fortunes are controlled by the whim of ignorant people, I cannot raise the taxes needed to repair my palaces and castles. Who can advise me on a strategy to reverse this decline?'

Thereupon the Lord Chancellor stood up and spoke: 'Your royal majesty, you are obliged by law to respect the wishes of the people. You must, therefore, control those wishes. It is an old rule of politics that you must make them afraid, and then tell them that you will protect them against all danger. In this way, with our loyal support, you will recover your freedom to rule as you wish.' The king was greatly impressed by his Lord Chancellor's advice, and soon put it to good use.

King Loudnoise, for such was his name, declared that the Kingdom of Bain Al-Nahrain, though thousands of leagues distant from the Kingdom of Mistrria, was about to attack it with fearsome weapons. He, King Loudnoise, would however protect his beloved people with all the resources at his (he meant of course their) disposal.

Many of his subjects were unconvinced, but their representatives largely complied and told the people that the king knew best. And so there was a war in which many thousands died, and King Loudnoise then declared that they had achieved a great victory.

But the people remained suspicious. Where were the fearsome weapons? Was not the postwar disorder worse than the supposed threat before it? Were the goldmines in Bain Al-Nahrain of no consequence in King Loudnoise's decision to go to war?

King Loudnoise continued to tell his people that fearsome weapons would be found in Bain Al-Nahrain – next month, next year, perhaps next century. He said the people could trust him, because he was a good and honorable king, and if they doubted him they were bad and dishonourable. Besides they would be betraying their own soldiers who had fought, and in some cases died, so heroically.

But King Loudnoise was troubled in his heart and sought the counsel of his favourite counsellor, Peter Tonsilson.

'The people say I attacked Bain Al-Nahrain because there is gold in that land, not because there were fearsome weapons there,' he complained.

'Well, that's true, isn't it?' replied Tonsilson.

'I suppose it is, but we can't have people saying this. It's treachery!'

'You're right,' said Tonsilson. 'So you need to tell the people what to think. Start with saying that the King of Bain Al-Nahrain was vile. No one will dispute that. But make sure you never compare him with lots of other vile leaders, particularly those in nearby countries with which you are allied and where there are undoubtedly fearsome weapons. Next, simply deny that gold has anything to do with your war. Lots of people will believe you if you say this often enough. Use any opportunity to create diversions – for example you could try brokering an agreement in Northern Shamrock where I spent so much time. And always remember to tell the people what a good country and what good people we are, and what a bad one and bad people they are

King Loudnoise did as his trusted councillor had advised, and verily the people became calm again, turned back to their own business and stopped asking treacherous questions. So pleased was the king with this strategy that he had a brilliant idea. Calling Peter Tonsilson to the palace, he pronounced: 'We find that it is simply how you tell a story that shapes the future. We must learn how to tell even better stories.'

Peter Tonsilson wanted to remind his Royal Highness that this had long been his proposal, but he knew how to flatter the royal person and replied instead: 'This is an inspired plan, your Imperial Majesty. May I be so bold as to suggest for your consideration a practical idea for implementing it. I am informed that the best storytellers in the world live in the seaside town of Brighthelmstone. But their forum is

about to close, so I recommend that you recruit them incomparable people to staff a new Ministry of Propaganda.’

King Loudnoise rubbed his hands in glee. ‘What would I do without you, dear Tonsi!’ he exclaimed. And so the Ministry of Propaganda was duly established staffed entirely by Brighthelmstone story-tellers. After that King Loudnoise forgot about his new toy. Then one day he heard that far-off Ash-Sham was full of riches and that a war against it could have a very profitable outcome. But when the people heard rumours of this plan they became again distrustful and rebellious. So the king commanded the Ministry of Propaganda to write a suitable story and to disseminate it to the masses.

Imagine King Loudnoise’s fury when a few days later he was handed a scroll by a courtier, and read on it a story which told of a foolish king who made unnecessary and cruel wars for avaricious reasons, and was eventually put to death by his own rebellious subjects. Remembering that it had been Peter Tonsilson who had proposed the Ministry of Propaganda, he cried out: ‘Who will rid me of this meddling councillor?’, shortly after which Tonsilson was put to the sword. Of course, though, the war had to be cancelled, and the people forced the king to pass a law saying he would respect international frontiers. King Loudnoise wanted to abolish the Ministry of Propaganda and kill the Brighthelmstonians, but this caused such uproar among the people that he was forced to retract his orders.

And so it was that the storytellers of Brighthelmstone found their place in the history books of Mistria.