

BOOKS OF WISDOM

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ONCE A GREAT CITY sat in the middle of a fertile plain. The soil in the fields was rich, and there always seemed to be just the right amount of sunshine and rain. No one went hungry, because the harvest was ever bountiful. The people of the city had flourished as far back as anyone could remember.

It was summer, and the people were out tending their crops in the fields when a haggard old woman labored across the plain pulling a large wooden cart behind her. She drew near to the city, and the curious followed her in through the gate.

A crowd gathered around the old woman as she pulled her cart into the center of the city square. Twelve leather-bound books were stacked neatly in the cart. The people marveled at these magnificent books, which were of great age and decorated with beautiful designs.

One of the city elders stepped forward. "Welcome to our city," he said. "Perhaps you will be so kind as to tell us why you have come here. We can see that you are bearing something of importance in your cart."

"I have here in this cart twelve books," croaked the old woman. "They contain all of the knowledge and all of the wisdom of the world."

"And why have you brought them here to us?" he asked.

"I will sell them to you if you want them."

"And what price are you asking?"

"You may have all twelve of these books for one sack of gold," she replied.

"One sack of gold! Old woman, gold is clearly worth far more than you think it is. We are not interested in buying your old books for a sack of gold."

With that, the townsfolk pointed the way back toward the city gate.

“Very well,” said the old woman. But before she left, she lit a fire and threw six of the old books upon the flames. Once these books had been destroyed, she rolled her cart back through the gate of the city and out across the plain.

It was a pretty good year for the people of the city. Crops were not as abundant as usual, but they still produced a good harvest. There was just enough food to last through the winter and spring.

When the old woman returned again late the following springtime, the crops were already growing. Again she attracted a crowd as she rolled her cart of ancient books into the city square.

“Welcome,” said one of the village elders. “We were wondering if we would see you again. What are you offering us now?”

“I have in this cart six books. They contain one-half of all the knowledge and one-half of all the wisdom of the world,” replied the old woman. “I would be glad to sell them to you.”

“Yes, yes, I am sure you would. And what are you asking for these six books now?” the elder inquired.

“Two bags of gold.”

“Surely you must be joking!” said the elder. “You come into our city offering half of the twelve books at twice the price. Do you take us for fools?”

“Then you do not wish to buy the books?”

“No! We work hard for our wages and will not pay such an outrageous sum!”

“As you wish,” said the old woman.

She gathered some sticks, built them into a pile, and lit them. Then she placed three more of the books upon the fire. When the books were ablaze, the old woman turned her cart around and left the village.

It was a disastrous year for the people of the city. For the first time in memory, the rains did not come. Many of the crops were ruined by the drought. The meager harvest left many people weak with hunger after the bitter winter. An illness swept through the city. Some people did not live to see the birds returns from the south.

That spring, as the people were out planting their crops, they kept watching for the old woman. One day, after the seeds had begun to sprout, someone cried out, “Here she comes. Look, there to the east!”

The old woman rolled her cart back to the center of the city square.

“Welcome, old woman,” said one of the city elders. “We did not expect you until later in the season.”

“Indeed,” she cackled, “I am moving more quickly these days. There are only three books left to pull. These books contain one-fourth of all the knowledge and one-fourth of all the wisdom of the world.”

“What are you asking for your books now?” someone yelled.

“Four sacks of gold.”

“Old woman!” the elder cried out in alarm. “Every time you come to offer us your books, you have less of them and yet you ask for more gold. As you know, things are not well in our city, and we were hoping that your books would be of help to us. But we will not pay such an unreasonable price just because we are going through a hard time.”

“Very well,” she said with a faint smile on her face. “Then I will need some firewood.”

“No, wait!” a woman pleaded. “This is not helping anyone. You are burning up the books you want to sell us, and we are not getting any wiser. Give us some time to talk this over.”

So the elders held a meeting. After a few hours of discussing and arguing among themselves, they came back to reason with the old woman.

“This is what we have decided. We are going to read the remaining three books. If we find that the knowledge and wisdom they contain is of value, then we will offer you an appropriate sum.”

“Four sacks of gold now. No less!” exclaimed the old woman.

“And if we refuse?” the elders asked.

“Then the books will burn.”

“We will not give you one stick of firewood!” they shouted.

“I do not need your help,” she said.

With that, she knelt down, tore the pages from one of the remaining books, and crumpled them into a pile. After she lit these pages and they were burning brightly, she threw one of the last two books upon the flames and watched until both books had been consumed. Finally, she turned her cart around and left the village in haste.

Later, by the light of the moon when the city was asleep, some of the people sneaked into the town square. Carefully they combed through the ashes that remained of the two books of wisdom. They searched for a fragment of unburned paper in hopes of discovering a morsel of the knowledge and wisdom that the old woman had offered them. Alas, the books had been completely destroyed by the flames.

The following winter was even harder than the one before. As springtime grew near, the people of the city were anxious for the old woman to arrive. Plans were made to give her a warm welcome. Watchers were posted to keep an eye to the eastern horizon.

One day, in late spring, the horns sounded from the watchtowers near the village gate. “She comes!” shouted the watchers. “The old woman is approaching with her cart.”

The old woman was surprised at how glad the people of the city were to see her. She thanked them for their welcome as she rolled the cart with the single leather-bound book upon it into the city square.

“You are most welcome!” the townsfolk said. “We are happy to see you.”

“As you can see, I now have only one book left in this cart,” she said. “There was even enough room for some firewood. This book contains one-twelfth of all the knowledge and one-twelfth of all the wisdom of the world.

“Yes, we know,” said one of the village elders. “And we have budgeted a certain sum for the purchase of this book based on what you have asked in the past. Now, how much do you want for that book?”

“Sixteen sacks of gold!” demanded the old woman.

“But . . . but we gathered eight sacks of gold because you have doubled your price every time you returned. This is all of the gold that we have in the city treasury! We cannot possibly afford sixteen sacks of gold.”

“Sixteen sacks of gold,” she repeated, “or . . .” Then she knelt down and began to sing under her breath as she arranged the wood for a fire.

“Stop!” cried the people of the city. “We will find a way to meet your price.”

Everyone searched for their personal belongings for gold jewelry, gold goblets, and other family treasures and heirlooms. Everything that was made of gold in the entire city was brought to the treasury and placed in sacks. When this was done, the sum of all the wealth of the people of the city filled exactly sixteen sacks.

These sacks were rolled into the center of the square on two carts pulled by oxen and presented to the old woman. She thanked the people and gave them the one remaining leather-bound book.

“We hope this book is worth the price!” the townsfolk exclaimed.

“Oh yes, it is, and then some,” said the old woman. “You cannot even imagine what wonders were contained in the other eleven books.”

Then the old woman guided the ox carts that held the sixteen sacks of gold out through the city gates across the plain. With heavy hearts, the people watched her trail of dust until it disappeared over the western horizon.

The old woman never returned. The people struggled on and did their best to live with only one-twelfth of all the knowledge and one-twelfth of all the wisdom that once existed in the world.

To this day, all the people of the world are on a great journey. We are still trying to find the knowledge and wisdom that was lost when those eleven books were burned long ago.