

7. A Parable

High in the mountains by the eastern sea, the magicians have their own kingdom. It is small, compared to ours, not much larger than our largest city, but rich with the gifts of magic and nature. High

up it lies, on a still plateau where the rising sun brings warmth early every morning before it turns to us. The magicians who live there seek to draw us with their subtle powers, but are hindered by the frailties of our own intellect and flesh.

In our kingdom, all manner of weakness of the eyes is hereditary. Our kings, whom few have seen, were always the most far- and clear-sighted creatures on earth. In the sky they saw—so it is told—stars of fire to which they gave many wonderful names, likening them to warriors, beasts, and jewel-studded girdles. Our soldiers too were always far-sighted, and—then as now—strike fear in the heart of all that lives and moves beneath the sun. They detect enemies before they come within stone-throwing distance, and signal each other with mirrors glinting in the sun. We ordinary people of lesser stock, the craftsmen, fishers, and scholars, see as much as we need; though compared to them we live as if in mist and haze.

This story is told of long ago. The magicians sent a dream to three kings, three soldiers, and three scholars. The dream revealed the magical kingdom in all its glory, with such felt hope and grace as to be at once infinitely desirable. Each dreamer resolved to seek the kingdom. But our minds are clouded in proportion to our eyesight, so the kings, soldiers, and scholars did not learn equally much. The kings saw clearly the magicians' houses and castles, the high mountains, and a brilliant star which they recognized, at its zenith. The soldiers saw only a mountainside, and green meadows in the dawn; by the shadows they judged that the place must lie due east. They could not discern houses from rocks, nor see any star. But such was the longing this dream inspired, that they knew it held a prize beyond what any campaign could bring. Lastly, the scholars, as captivated as the others, received no inkling of whether the place was high or low, though they too saw how the rising sun cast the shadows. Each group began its journey east, quite unbeknownst to the others.

Many obstacles lay in the kings' path: rivers and ravines, hunger-maddened goblins and wolves, cliffs too steep to climb and lakes too wide to swim. Almost every day they were diverted, now left then right, out of their way. But each night the kings saw their guiding star and each dawn set out towards it. After three years and a day, the kings ascended the eastern mountains, and were welcomed into the magicians' city.

The soldiers, trained to find their way across difficult terrain,

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and to judge direction accurately from shadows cast by sun and moon, struck east. Coming upon the hills, they ascended. But the hills proved low, judging by their memories of old campaigns, and they knew they had not come to the place they sought. Eventually, climbing almost unscalable cliffs, they came to the top of a mountain. As far as they could see, there were no heights comparable to this. The high meadows were green and berries abounded, a lake held trout. In the earth they found silver and gold, the bees gave up their honey, the trees gave them wood for building. In their dream they had not seen the great magical castles, nor did they have the kings' grasp of how high the eastern mountains are. So there they stayed, still a year's journey from the east, in bounty undreamed of in their old soldiers' life—but still in poverty and want compared to the kings.

The journeying scholars did not have the kings' eyesight, nor the soldiers' fieldcraft. They did not know the place they sought was high in the mountains. The magicians' kingdom could after all have been as glorious and rich if it had been in a valley, and the east would still have been east if the land had run everywhere level to the sea. So they sought only the east and indeed, if they had journeyed due east they would have arrived. To guide them they had a lodestone compass, fashioned by our finest craftsmen. They attached a small light to the lodestone, which they sighted through narrow slits in a screen, so as to draw a line with true direction. Thus their determination of the compass points was exceedingly fine by night and day. Always after an obstacle they used a small sand-clock to gauge the time they had needed, departing from true; set up their compass again, and adjusted their path. Yet at every turn, some minute angle was lost, whether to south or north. The proportion of deflections favoured, ever so slightly overall, the south. After five years of travel they came upon the sea, where they found a land of milk and honey, warmth and welcome among a friendly people. There were green fields and the sweet taste of dates ripened in the sun. To the north, across an arid desert, there lay soaring mountains, they were told. But they had come to the easternmost shore, and there they stayed. A half year's journey to the north, lay the incomparable intellectual splendours of the magicians' land, where scholarship had already bloomed for ten thousand years.

Many generations have repeated this tale, which could only have

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come to us from a returning king, still shining with the magicians' knowledge. The soldiers remained, happy, in the lower mountains, and the scholars, also happy, by the eastern shore. Are we right to describe our fellow scholars of so long ago, as in error? They truly travelled

east, by the finest determination human hands and sight allowed them. Of course they realized that their instrumentation was not infinitely fine, and that such a journey could not have a single, pre-ordained end. But what they found, at the easternmost point by their reckoning, was paradise by their lights—they would not have been content with less. Yet we sigh; their light seems dim and poor to us who, though of the same benighted kin, have pictured to ourselves magicians, kings, and stars. Some say the tale is not a history of long ago, but a vision of our far future. In these republican days, some even say that our kings never had their fabled power of sight, and no one ever will. Whatever be true, we pity those scholars, our brothers, who only found happiness, but never that true home with its true riches.