

The Courier's Message

Once upon a time there were two countries - let us call them "Onelia" and "Twoland" - in conflict over a region of dry, barren ground that lay upon their border. Onelia sent a great army into this region and blockaded the road between Twoland's army and its capital city.

The General commanding the Twoland army called for his best couriers, and told them: "I need you to carry an urgent message through the Onelian lines to the King of Twoland. From the number of soldiers in the invading army, it appears that Onelia has committed all its reserves. I want to tell our King that it may be a good time to negotiate peace, if the Onelian's know that WE know they have left their capital defenseless. Your orders are to carry this message to the King the fastest way you can. Godspeed."

The first courier chose the fastest horse the army possessed; the second courier selected the fastest camel. The third courier chose ... a wheelbarrow. The other two laughed at him. "A wheelbarrow! You will have to walk all the way. How could that be the fastest way to carry a message?"

"It may turn out so," answered the third courier, "and it is the best way to carry a barrel of water."

Shaking his head in disbelief, the first courier mounted his horse and rode off. He soon came near where the Onelian soldiers blocked the main road, and turned to the north to find a way around the army. But every trail was blocked, and he was forced to go farther and farther north into the high country. The path was so steep and rocky, he had to dismount and lead his horse on foot, and it took him many days to find a pass through the mountains.

The second courier mounted his camel and set off toward the south, into the desert, to find a way around the blockading army on that side. But Onelian soldiers chased him away from every path leading toward his goal, and he was forced farther and farther south into the trackless desert. After many days, his camel grew lame, and he had to dismount and walk.

The third courier loaded the barrel onto his wheelbarrow, filled it with water, and trudged straight down the main road toward the Onelian army. When he came to the enemy's outer picket lines, he was stopped by a company of footsoldiers. They searched him thoroughly, but did not find the message to the King hidden under the water barrel, which was too heavy to lift. "What business do you have here?" the Onelian soldiers demanded.

The courier replied, "The General has sent me with this water to replenish your supplies." So the soldiers filled their canteens, taking about half the water in the barrel, and sent him on his way.

Soon the courier came to a second roadblock, manned by a company of Onelian lancers. When they challenged him, he said, "The General has sent me with this water to replenish your supplies." The lancers took the rest of the water in the barrel, and sent him on his way.

The courier then came to a third and last checkpoint. When challenged, he answered, "The General sent me with water to replenish your supplies, but the other soldiers took it all. I am going to get more, and will give you yours first on my way back." The Onelian soldiers searched him, and finding only an empty barrel, they sent him on his way.

After passing through the whole Onelian army, the courier found a place to hide the wheelbarrow and ran the rest of the way to the Twoland capital to deliver his message.

The King of Twoland thoughtfully read the message and thanked the courier, saying: "You should rest here in the palace for a few days."

"No, thank you," said the courier. "I promised some soldiers I met on the way that I would bring them water, and I had best go do it now."

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Twenty years later I thought about the risk the third courier took: Any of the Onelian soldiers could have tested him by asking him his General's name. He was clever enough to complete his task in less than a day, so I am confident he could have given them an acceptable answer.

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