

## **The Endless Tale**

**James Baldwin**

In the Far East there was a great king who had no work to do. Every day, and all day long, he sat on soft cushions and listened to stories. And no matter what the story was about, he never grew tired of hearing it, even though it was very long.

"There is only one fault that I find with your story," he often said: "it is too short."

All the story-tellers in the world were invited to his palace; and some of them told tales that were very long indeed. But the king was always sad when a story was ended.

At last he sent word into every city and town and country place, offering a prize to any one who should tell him an endless tale. He said,--

"To the man that will tell me a story which shall last forever, I will give my fairest daughter for his wife; and I will make him my heir, and he shall be king after me."

But this was not all. He added a very hard condition. "If any man shall try to tell such a story and then fail, he shall have his head cut off."

The king's daughter was very pretty, and there were many young men in that country who were willing to do anything to win her. But none of them wanted to lose their heads, and so only a few tried for the prize.

One young man invented a story that lasted three months; but at the end of that time, he could think of nothing more. His fate was a warning to others, and it was a long time before another story-teller was so rash as to try the king's patience.

But one day a stranger from the South came into the palace.

"Great king," he said, "is it true that you offer a prize to the man who can tell a story that has no end?"

"It is true," said the king.

"And shall this man have your fairest daughter for his wife, and shall he be your heir?"

"Yes, if he succeeds," said the king. "But if he fails, he shall lose his head."

"Very well, then," said the stranger. "I have a pleasant story about locusts which I would like to relate."

"Tell it," said the king. "I will listen to you."

The story-teller began his tale.

"Once upon a time a certain king seized upon all the corn in his country, and stored it away in a strong granary. But a swarm of locusts came over the land and saw where the grain had been put. After searching for many days they found on the east side of the granary a crevice that was just large enough for one locust to pass through at a time. So one locust went in and carried away a grain of corn; then another locust went in and carried away a grain of corn; then another locust went in and carried away a grain of corn."

Day after day, week after week, the man kept on saying, "Then another locust went in and carried away a grain of corn."

A month passed; a year passed. At the end of two years, the king said,--

"How much longer will the locusts be going in and carrying away corn?"

"O king!" said the story-teller, "they have as yet cleared only one cubit; and there are many thousand cubits in the granary."

"Man, man!" cried the king, "you will drive me mad. I can listen to it no longer. Take my daughter; be my heir; rule my kingdom. But do not let me hear another word about those horrible locusts!"

And so the strange story-teller married the king's daughter. And he lived happily in the land for many years. But his father-in-law, the king, did not care to listen to any more stories.