



The Parable of the Miller and His Apprentices

An ambitious and greedy miller had two fears and two apprentices. The first fear was that the great water wheel would jam — debris from the river caught the paddles without warning, and a stopped wheel meant no flour ground and no living made. The second fear was flood. The powerful river that powered the wheel would periodically overflow its course and any flooding of the mill ruined the stored flour before it could get to market.

The miller set one apprentice at the wheel to clear debris, and one at the sluice gate upstream to manage the flow and avoid flooding. Both posts mattered. Both were staffed from first light to last.

The wheel apprentice was diligent. When debris caught the paddles he worked alone — straining, wedging, heaving — because he understood that calling his fellow away from the sluice carried its own risk. He asked for help only when he had no choice. By then the wheel had stopped and the miller's patience with it.

The miller called him lazy and wondered how he might be encouraged to work harder.

The sluice apprentice was by nature conscientious. But overflow was rare, and rare things are hard to watch for across a long day in the sun. His attention wandered, sometimes he fell asleep. When the water rose he sometimes caught it late. Flour was ruined.

The miller called him an idiot and wondered where he might find a better second apprentice.

Walking home from town one summer evening, the miller passed a market garden where a labourer was cutting a small channel from an irrigation ditch to a dry bed of vegetables. The water followed without supervision. The labourer moved on to the next bed.

The miller stood and watched longer than he meant to.

The following morning the miller dug a small trench upstream from the mill running to edge to the vegetable garden. The first trickle of any overflow now ran there — harmless, visible, impossible to miss. The sluice apprentice could see it from the mill premises. He had time to notice and jog to the sluice before any flour was at risk.

He now spent most of most days bagging flour — work the miller had always done himself.

And because he was no longer fixed at the sluice, he was a shout away from the wheel.

The wheel apprentice shouted for help freely now. The risk of asking for help had disappeared. He called at the first sign of trouble — not the last — and two pairs of hands cleared the paddles in moments. The wheel rarely slowed down in the days that followed and never stopped.

The mill created and sold more flour than ever. The miller began to understand the diligence and capability his apprentices had always had — now that what they were being asked to do wasn't in conflict with their earnest but human nature.

