

Two Shaky Towers  
by Joe Blow  
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## Two Shaky Towers

Once upon a time there was a peaceful village built on a wide expanse of flat land between a huge lake and an equally huge forest. On one side of it all you could see was the lake, stretching away to the horizon, and on the other side trees stood tall and green all the way to a row of hills against the sky.

The people of the village drank water and ate fish from the lake and ate the fruits of the forest, and they were relatively contented with their lives.

One day one of the villagers spat out a seed, from a piece of fruit he was eating, into a small puddle next to the lake. Nobody paid any attention to it until they noticed a couple of weeks later that a small tree was growing up in that spot.

Once they realised what had happened, they decided to plant some more fruit trees so that they would be able to pick and eat fruit without having to leave the village to find it.

The only problem is that when they dug a hole to plant their first tree they happened to dig right into the underground lair of a spider which was fully two feet across and dripped venom from his pointed fangs. He burst up from the earth and the people ran screaming.

The next day they held a town meeting.

"We can no longer continue to live here on the ground," one of them said. "A spider might come out of the ground and kill us in our beds."

So they agreed to build a small tower that they could live in most of the time.

"Let's build a tower next to the lake," said those who liked to eat fish.

"No, no, let's build a tower next to the forest," said those who preferred to eat fruit.

Since they couldn't come to a decision, they ended up building two towers, one next to the forest and one next to the lake.

And so it came to pass that the fish-eaters lived in their tower overlooking the lake and the fruit-eaters lived in their tower overlooking the forest.

At night, as they sat around drinking and eating under the stars on the platform that formed the top of their particular tower, the fish-eaters and the fruit-eaters would tell stories and the most popular story was the story about the giant spider which had burst forth from the ground. And, as will happen with such stories, with each telling the spider became bigger and more ferocious.

As time passed and the vision of the horrible spider grew in their minds, the people tended to spend less and less time out of their towers. Eventually, the fruit-eaters built up a huge store of dried fruit in their tower, and the fish-eaters an equally large stockpile of dried and salted fish. They also put many barrels of water into their towers. Thus they were able to live many, many years without leaving their respective towers.

Understandably they were somewhat limited in the pastimes they could pursue. The fruit-eaters had taken a telescope up into their tower with them, and with it they took turns in looking around at the trees of the forest. It was a very powerful telescope and they were able to see all of the insects crawling up the trunks of the trees, and all of the birds building their nests among their branches. Over time they became experts on the trees and the animals of the forest, and wrote a number of books about them.

Since the fish-eaters were now eating salted fish, they became very thirsty. They realised that, if they drank as much of their water as they would like to, it would run out very quickly. So they rationed it.

For this reason they looked out particularly longingly at the lake, for they never had as much water as they really wanted.

Then one day, they saw something moving far out in the water of the lake. It looked too big to be a fish.

"What could that be?" they asked themselves.

As they watched the thing getting nearer and nearer, they realised that it was in fact a man. He had been swimming like a fish swims through the water of the lake. This amazed them, as they had only ever paddled in the shallows of the lake, and cast their nets into it to capture fish. The idea that a man could swim was unknown to them.

"This is a miracle!" they cried. "A man who can swim like a fish!"

When the man reached the shore of the lake he waved to them.

"How can you do such a thing?" they cried out from the top of their tower. "How can you move through the water of the lake like a fish?"

"Come down here and I will show you," he replied.

"Oh, no," they said. "We never go down there."

"Why is that?" he asked.

They didn't want to tell him that they were afraid of the spider, lest he think them cowards.

"We would prefer it if you came up here and told us about yourself," they replied.

"O.K.," he replied, and climbed up the side of the tower.

Having forgotten how much strength they once had when they had lived on a balanced diet of fresh fruit and fresh fish and had drunk as much water as they liked, they had forgotten how easily they had climbed the tower themselves while building it. And so when they saw the stranger climb up quickly and confidently, placing his feet in the nooks and crannies between the stones, they were amazed.

"This is a miracle!" they cried. "Look how he flies up the side of the tower!"

When the man had reached the top of the tower he sat down with the fish-eaters and told them many marvellous things about the lake, where he had been long in the habit of swimming.

They sat enraptured and their homesickness for the lake and their thirst for its water made them hang on every word the man said. And when he started to tell them all about how to swim, they started writing down notes.

Now many of the fish-eaters were sick from their poor diet and from lack of water. The man could see this, and so he climbed back down the side of the tower, found one of their old nets and caught some fish. He also filled some bottles with water from the lake. And then he carried the fish and the water back up to the people in the tower.

When the sick people in the tower drank the water and ate the fish, they began to feel healthy again. Some who had been in the habit of laying around listlessly all day, jumped up and began to sing for joy when they got some fresh fish into their bellies and had slaked their thirst with some fresh water.

"Look how he has healed the sick!" cried the fish-eaters. "Another miracle!"

"I do nothing but bring you what the lake provides," explained the man. "It is not me who has done any of these things. Rather it is the bountiful lake from which I have come and to which I must return."

"Please do not leave us," the fish-eaters begged.

"Why not come with me," he replied.

"We can't do that," they responded, quaking secretly with fear of the giant spider.

The man could see that they were afraid.

"Once you paddled in the lake and caught fish from it," he said.

They were amazed that he would know such a thing, when they had not told him.

"There will come a day when you will eat and drink from the lake again," he told them. "And

now that I have told you how to swim you will be able to live in the lake like I do."

"When will this time come?" they asked.

"Only after things have become very bad for you indeed," he said, as he realised that their fear was great and would keep them in their tower for a long time yet.

"I warn you," he said, "those of you who stay up in your tower eating salt fish too long may die of thirst."

The fish-eaters did not realise how desperate they had become for an end to their thirst, until they saw that the man was about to leave them and return to the lake for good.

They fought with him to stop him from going. They were jealous of the fact that he would be able to drink the water and eat the fish of the lake and they would have to go back to their dried fish diet and their thirst.

"If we can't have water and fresh fish, then neither will you!" they cried, their despair in their own plight bringing out the worst in them.

They pushed the man off of the edge of the tower and he fell to his death.

The fish-eaters looked down at the dead man and a terrible guilt gripped their souls. They didn't sleep at all that night.

But the next day when they awoke and looked down for the body of the dead man, it was gone. It had rained in the night and the body had been washed back into the lake.

For many hours they sat wondering about why this thing had happened. But then one of them picked up the notes that they had made from the things the man said. These had been forgotten.

Now they all gathered around as he read the man's words out aloud.

"He was dead," they told themselves. "But now he lives again. Now we can all learn how to swim."

They called the dead man the Son of the Lake and like the stories of the spider, the stories of the Son of the Lake grew more wonderful with each telling.

And so the fish-eaters spent their days sitting around reading the notes they had made and learning the art of swimming. Of course it was only the theory, and not the practice, because they still did not dare to climb down from their tower and face the giant spider.

Meanwhile in the other tower, the fruit-eaters who had become experts on trees, and insects and birds, were having a debate about whether or not the lake existed.

"Nothing exists but what we can see," declared one of the fruit-eaters authoritatively. "I see no lake. Therefore there is no lake."

"But I remember the lake. It still exists in my memory," said another.

"What is memory?" said the first man. "I cannot see memory."

"Let's ask those in the other tower," said the second man.

"Why would you want to do that?" asked the first man. "They haven't even got a telescope. They see nothing."

"But I remember them saying that they were going to build their tower overlooking the lake," he replied.

"Stuff and nonsense!" the first man expostulated. "I can see their tower, but I can see no lake."

"IS THERE A LAKE?" cried the second man, making a loud-hailer of his hands, as he looked out towards the other tower.

"OF COURSE THERE IS A LAKE?" replied a man in the other tower. "ARE YOU BLIND!"

"WE CAN'T SEE IT!" he responded. "AND WE HAVE A TELESCOPE."

And so an argument grew up between the fruit-eaters in their tower and the fish-eaters in their tower over whether or not there was a lake.

"We know everything there is to know about the world," said the foremost expert among the fruit-eaters. "If there were a lake, we would have seen some sign of it in our studies of the trees and the insects and the flowers."

But what the expert couldn't see, and therefore didn't know, was that the only reason there were trees was because their roots - which the expert knew nothing of as they were beneath the ground and could not be seen with a telescope - drank water from the lake.

Eventually the fruit-eaters ran out of their stores of water.

When this happened they began to deny that there had ever been such a thing as water.

"Why do our tongues stick to the roofs of our mouths?" someone asked the expert.

"Because the cells on the roof of our mouths exert a force of attraction upon the cells of our tongues," the expert explained patiently.

"Isn't it because we are thirsty?" asked a small boy. "Because we have no more water."

"Don't talk to me of water!" cried the expert. "I'm a scientist, not a mystic!"

He would have said more, but his tongue was sticking the roof of his mouth.

Slowly water deprivation began to drive the fruit-eaters and the fish-eaters crazy. Their minds were filled with dreams of giant spiders, now ten feet across, swarming over the land and climbing up the towers to eat them.

"We must build our tower higher!" cried the fish-eaters.

"We must build our tower higher!" cried the fruit-eaters.

But all they had with which to build their towers higher were the stones which made up those towers. So they began pulling stones off of the edges and piling them up in the middle. The towers got taller, but they also got more and more precarious and unstable. Slowly they began dismantling the outer edges of layer upon layer of their towers and piling those stones up into teetering spires from which they clung for their lives, looking down ever-fearfully for the spiders they expected to appear at any moment.

The chant of the fruit-eaters, which once had been "There is no lake!", became one of "There are no spiders! There are no spiders! There are no spiders!" But they still kept building their shaky tower higher.

"The Son of the Lake foretold a time when we would swim in the lake," the fish-eaters told each other. "He must have meant that the lake will rise up to the top of our tower and he will swim back to us and lead us away to safety."

And so they prayed that the Son of the Lake would come and rescue them soon, before the giant spiders ate them.

"YOU MUST LEARN HOW TO SWIM!" they yelled out to the fruit-eaters who were teetering on their own precarious tower. "FOR THE LAKE IS GOING TO RISE AND THE SON OF THE LAKE IS GOING TO RETURN. AND THOSE WHO CANNOT SWIM WILL SURELY DROWN, OR BE EATEN BY THE GIANT SPIDERS."

"THERE IS NO LAKE! THERE ARE NO GIANT SPIDERS! AND THE TERM "SWIMMING" IS MEANINGLESS, BECAUSE, AS WE HAVE ALREADY TOLD YOU A MILLION TIMES - THERE IS NO LAKE!" the fruit-eaters yelled back.

"ARE YOU NOT SCARED THAT YOU WILL BE EATEN BY THE GIANT SPIDERS?" cried the fish-eaters

"WE KEEP TELLING YOU - THERE ARE NO GIANT SPIDERS!" cried the fruit-eaters, looking around nervously for giant spiders.

At this point a young boy came walking through the forest. He had been looking around at all the trees and insects and birds. And he'd been playing under the trees, digging around and checking out their roots. He noticed that it was damp beneath the ground, so he knew there must be a lake nearby.

When he wandered out from among the trees he saw the most amazing sight.

There were two tall towers, rocking and teetering precariously, and clinging to them were many men and women screaming out something about giant spiders.

Now the boy had never seen a giant spider, so he was very curious.

"What is all this about giant spiders?" he asked.

"Spiders, spiders...who mentioned spiders?" said the men and women hanging from the two precariously rocking towers. They could see that the small boy was not afraid, and they didn't want to let on that they were. It would make them look bad. They just tried to pretend that everything was normal.

"Why are you hanging there from those towers?" asked the boy. "It looks rather dangerous."

"Oh, it is dangerous," one replied. "We do it because we are brave men." The others nodded.

But the boy could see that the men were afraid of something.

"I am only a boy," he told them. "I know little of the world. Tell me what the world is like, that it makes people want to show their bravery by hanging from tall towers."

The fruit-eaters told the boy all that they had learned from using their telescope. Some of it made sense and some of it did not. The boy laughed out loud when they explained the reason why one's tongue sticks to the roof of one's mouth.

"Do not laugh at us you impudent boy!" they scolded him indignantly. "For we are wise men."

"You have told me many useful things," said the boy. "But that last bit is a load of sparrow droppings."

"Why do you say that?" they asked.

"Because my tongue doesn't stick the roof of my mouth unless I haven't drunken enough water," replied the boy.

"Oh, a mystic are you!" cried the expert from among the fruit-eaters. "Go and peddle your nonsense somewhere else." And yet he couldn't help but wonder at the ease with which the boy spoke. He himself had to exert a great effort to make his tongue work because of the strength of the attractive force that held it to the roof of his mouth.

So the boy decided to go and talk to the men hanging from the other tower.

"How long will you hang there?" he asked.

"Until the Son of the Lake returns and rescues us," they replied.

"Rescues you from what?" asked the boy. "The giant spiders you were talking about? I don't see any giant spiders."

"You must learn to swim!" they cried. "Or when the lake rises you will drown."

"How is the lake going to rise?" asked the boy. "Where is the extra water going to come from?"

"We do not know. No-one can answer these questions. All a person can do is to have faith and learn to swim," they told him.

"Oh, I already know how to swim," the boy assured them.

"How can you know how to swim?" they asked. "We are the keepers of the notes of the Son of the Lake. If you have not read the notes, then you cannot know how to swim."

"Swimming is easy," replied the boy.

"Blasphemy!" cried the fish-eaters. "The boy claims that he is the equal of the Son of the Lake!"

"I don't know this Son of the Lake person you are talking about," said the boy. "Please tell me more about him."

So the fish-eaters told the boy all about the Son of the Lake.

"He sounds like a very nice man," replied the boy.

"A MAN! He was not a man!" they cried. "He was the Son of the Lake! He was a superman who flew through the air to visit us on our tall tower. He brought some of us back from the dead. How can you refer to him as just a man! Could a man climb all the way up this tower to talk to us?"

"No," replied the boy. "I suppose he couldn't. It is a very tall tower and not very steady. It will fall down fairly soon."

"That shows how little you know," they replied. "For this tower will stand until it is washed away by the lake rising to bring the Son of the Lake back to us."

This was all a mystery to the boy, so he went and sat under a tree and thought about all that he had seen and all that they had told him.

"They are obviously afraid of something down here," the boy surmised. "Otherwise why would they have built those towers and climbed up them. It must be something very scary, but I can't see anything like that. I must admit, though, they are acting kind of crazy. If they have been up there without water or food that could explain it. But what scared them up there in the first place?"

The fruit-eaters had examined the forest very closely and so he doubted that what they were afraid of was in the forest. And the fish-eaters obviously loved the lake, so it can't have been from

there. So the boy decided to dig around in the sand and see if he could find something there.

He hadn't dug for long when out sprang a spider two feet across.

The boy grabbed it from behind and pulled out its fangs with his fingers.

"You no longer have to fear!" cried the boy to the men and women hanging from the two towers. "I've found the spider and pulled its fangs out. It can't hurt you now!"

"What do you mean, a spider?" asked the expert of the fruit-eaters. "There are no spiders. We are up here because it gives us a better view of the world that we are studying." And he tried to use his telescope with one hand and hang onto the tower with the other.

"What do you mean, a spider?" asked one of the fish-eaters. "We are up here so that we will be the first to see the return of the Son of the Lake."

"I know why you are up there," said the boy. "And you can come down now."

A few of the fruit-eaters and a few of the fish-eaters climbed down from their towers. It was hard, because the towers were rocking and the stones were loose, but eventually they joined the boy on the ground.

"What do we do now?" they asked themselves. "How do we get the others to come down." And then they turned to the boy and said, "You were right. It was the spider that scared us. But we didn't want to admit it."

"That's O.K.," replied the boy. "But those towers are going to collapse any minute. We need to do something fast."

And so they all went into the forest and cut branches from the trees. Then they stripped off big pieces of bark and bound them to the branches to make giant nets. And then they returned to the two towers.

"Jump! Jump!" they cried. "We will catch you!"

And as the people who were still clinging to the two towers saw that the towers were about to fall they began jumping into the nets.

The work went on until late in the afternoon, but finally all of the fruit-eaters and the fish-eaters had been caught.

It took a while for everybody to get used to being back on solid ground again. But with plenty of water to drink and plenty of fresh fruit and fish, everybody quickly regained their strength.

Now there are no fish-eaters and fruit-eaters. Everybody is simply a ground-dweller. And everybody swims in the sea and everybody walks in the forest and studies the trees and the birds and the insects. Some even swim underwater and study the fish. And everybody now knows that there wouldn't be trees without a lake.

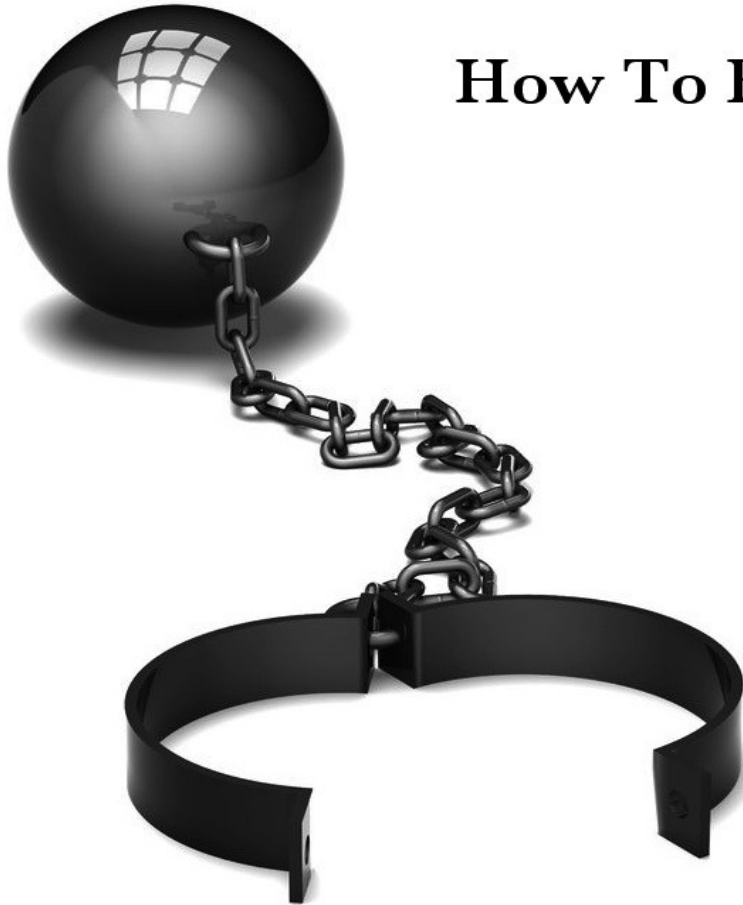
And an orchard has been planted on the land under which the spider once dwelled.

### **The End**

For more by Joe Blow (and his alter ego Aussiescribbler) :

<http://www.smashwords.com/profile/view/Aussiescribbler>

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by Joe Blow

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