

KING JOHN AND THE ABBOT.

I. THE THREE QUESTIONS.

There was once a king of England whose name was John. He was a bad king; for he was harsh and cruel to his people, and so long as he could have his own way, he did not care what became of other folks. He was the worst king that England ever had.

Now, there was in the town of Can'ter-bur-y a rich old abbot who lived in grand style in a great house called the Abbey. Every day a hundred noble men sat down with him to dine; and fifty brave knights, in fine velvet coats and gold chains, waited upon him at his table.

When King John heard of the way in which the abbot lived, he made up his mind to put a stop to it. So he sent for the old man to come and see him.

"How now, my good abbot?" he said. "I hear that you keep a far better house than I. How dare you do such a thing? Don't you know that no man in the land ought to live better than the king? And I tell you that no man shall."

"O king!" said the abbot, "I beg to say that I am spending nothing but what is my own. I hope that you will not think ill of me for making things pleasant for my friends and the brave knights who are with me."

"Think ill of you?" said the king. "How can I help but think ill of you? All that there is in this broad land is mine by right; and how do you dare to put me to shame by living in grander style than I? One would think that you were trying to be king in my place."

"Oh, do not say so!" said the abbot "For I"—

"Not another word!" cried the king. "Your fault is plain, and unless you can answer me three questions, your head shall be cut off, and all your riches shall be mine."

"I will try to answer them, O king!" said the abbot.

"Well, then," said King John, "as I sit here with my crown of gold on my head, you must tell me to within a day just how long I shall live. Sec-ond-ly, you must tell me how soon I shall ride round the whole world; and lastly, you shall tell me what I think."

"O king!" said the abbot, "these are deep, hard questions, and I cannot answer them just now. But if you will give me two weeks to think about them, I will do the best that I can."

"Two weeks you shall have," said the king; "but if then you fail to answer me, you shall lose your head, and all your lands shall be mine."

The abbot went away very sad and in great fear. He first rode to Oxford. Here was a great school, called a u-ni-ver'si-ty, and he wanted to see if any of the wise pro-fess-ors could help him. But they shook their heads, and said that there was nothing about King John in any of their books.

Then the abbot rode down to Cam-bridge, where there was another u-ni-ver-si-ty. But not one of the teachers in that great school could help him.

At last, sad and sor-row-ful, he rode toward home to bid his friends and his brave knights good-by. For now he had not a week to live.

II. THE THREE ANSWERS.

As the abbot was riding up the lane which led to his grand house, he met his shep-herd going to the fields.

"Welcome home, good master!" cried the shepherd. "What news do you bring us from great King John?"

"Sad news, sad news," said the abbot; and then he told him all that had happened.

"Cheer up, cheer up, good master," said the shepherd. "Have you never yet heard that a fool may teach a wise man wit? I think I can help you out of your trouble."

"You help me!" cried the abbot "How? how?"

"Well," answered the shepherd, "you know that everybody says that I look just like you, and that I have some-times been mis-tak-en for you. So, lend me your servants and your horse and your gown, and I will go up to London and see the king. If nothing else can be done, I can at least die in your place."

"My good shepherd," said the abbot, "you are very, very kind; and I have a mind to let you try your plan. But if the worst comes to the worst, you shall not die for me. I will die for myself."

So the shepherd got ready to go at once. He dressed himself with great care. Over his shepherd's coat he threw the abbot's long gown, and he bor-rowed the abbot's cap and golden staff. When all was ready, no one in the world would have thought that he was not the great man himself. Then he mounted his horse, and with a great train of servants set out for London.

Of course the king did not know him.

"Welcome, Sir Abbot!" he said. "It is a good thing that you have come back. But, prompt as you are, if you fail to answer my three questions, you shall lose your head."

"I am ready to answer them, O king!" said the shepherd.

"Indeed, indeed!" said the king, and he laughed to himself. "Well, then, answer my first question: How long shall I live? Come, you must tell me to the very day."

"You shall live," said the shepherd, "until the day that you die, and not one day longer. And you shall die when you take your last breath, and not one moment before."

The king laughed.

"You are witty, I see," he said. "But we will let that pass, and say that your answer is right. And now tell me how soon I may ride round the world."

"You must rise with the sun," said the shepherd, "and you must ride with the sun until it rises again the next morning. As soon as you do that, you will find that you have ridden round the world in twenty-four hours."

The king laughed again. "Indeed," he said, "I did not think that it could be done so soon. You are not only witty, but you are wise, and we will let this answer pass. And now comes my third and last question: What do I think?"

"That is an easy question," said the shepherd. "You think that I am the Abbot of Can-ter-bur-y. But, to tell you the truth, I am only his poor shepherd, and I have come to beg your pardon for him and for me." And with that, he threw off his long gown.

The king laughed loud and long.

"A merry fellow you are," said he, "and you shall be the Abbot of Canterbury in your master's place."

"O king! that cannot be," said the shepherd; "for I can neither read nor write."

"Very well, then," said the king, "I will give you something else to pay you for this merry joke. I will give you four pieces of silver every week as long as you live. And when you get home, you may tell the old abbot that you have brought him a free pardon from King John."

A STORY OF ROBIN HOOD.

In the rude days of King Rich-ard and King John there were many great woods in England. The most famous of these was Sher-wood forest, where the king often went to hunt deer. In this forest there lived a band of daring men called out-laws.

They had done something that was against the laws of the land, and had been forced to hide themselves in the woods to save their lives. There they spent their time in roaming about among the trees, in hunting the king's deer, and in robbing rich trav-el-ers that came that way.

There were nearly a hundred of these outlaws, and their leader was a bold fellow called Robin Hood. They were dressed in suits of green, and armed with bows and arrows; and sometimes they carried long wooden lances and broad-swords, which they knew how to handle well. When-ever they had taken anything, it was brought and laid at the feet of Robin Hood, whom they called their king. He then di-vid-ed it fairly among them, giving to each man his just share.

Robin never allowed his men to harm any-body but the rich men who lived in great houses and did no work. He was always kind to the poor, and he often sent help to them; and for that reason the common people looked upon him as their friend.

Long after he was dead, men liked to talk about his deeds. Some praised him, and some blamed him. He was, indeed, a rude, lawless fellow; but at that time, people did not think of right and wrong as they do now.

A great many songs were made up about Robin Hood, and these songs were sung in the cot-ta-ges and huts all over the land for hundreds of years after-ward.

Here is a little story that is told in one of those songs:—

Robin Hood was standing one day under a green tree by the road-side. While he was lis-ten-ing to the birds among the leaves, he saw a young man passing by. This young man was dressed in a fine suit of bright red cloth; and, as he tripped gayly along the road, he seemed to be as happy as the day.

"I will not trou-ble him," said Robin Hood, "for I think he is on his way to his wedding."

The next day Robin stood in the same place. He had not been there long when he saw the same young man coming down the road. But he did not seem to be so happy this time. He had left his scarlet coat at home, and at every step he sighed and groaned.

"Ah the sad day! the sad day!" he kept saying to himself.

Then Robin Hood stepped out from under the tree, and said,—

"I say, young man! Have you any money to spare for my merry men and me?"

"I have nothing at all," said the young man, "but five shil-lings and a ring."

"A gold ring?" asked Robin.

"Yes?" said the young man, "it is a gold ring. Here it is."

"Ah, I see!" said Robin: "it is a wedding ring."

"I have kept it these seven years," said the young man; "I have kept it to give to my bride on our wedding day. We were going to be married yes-ter-day. But her father has prom-ised her to a rich old man whom she never saw. And now my heart is broken."

"What is your name?" asked Robin.

"My name is Allin-a-Dale," said the young man.

"What will you give me, in gold or fee," said Robin, "if I will help you win your bride again in spite of the rich old man to whom she has been promised?"

"I have no money," said Allin, "but I will promise to be your servant."

"How many miles is it to the place where the maiden lives?" asked Robin.

"It is not far," said Allin. "But she is to be married this very day, and the church is five miles away."

Then Robin made haste to dress himself as a harper; and in the after-noon he stood in the door of the church.

"Who are you?" said the bishop, "and what are you doing here?"

"I am a bold harper," said Robin, "the best in the north country."

"I am glad you have come," said the bishop kindly. "There is no music that I like so well as that of the harp. Come in, and play for us."

"I will go in," said Robin Hood; "but I will not give you any music until I see the bride and bridegroom."

Just then an old man came in. He was dressed in rich clothing, but was bent with age, and was feeble and gray. By his side walked a fair young girl. Her cheeks were very pale, and her eyes were full of tears.

"This is no match," said Robin. "Let the bride choose for herself."

Then he put his horn to his lips, and blew three times. The very next minute, four and twenty men, all dressed in green, and carrying long bows in their hands, came running across the fields. And as they marched into the church, all in a row, the fore-most among them was Allin-a-Dale.

"Now whom do you choose?" said Robin to the maiden.

"I choose Allin-a-Dale," she said, blushing.

"And Allin-a-Dale you shall have," said Robin; "and he that takes you from Allin-a-Dale shall find that he has Robin Hood to deal with."

And so the fair maiden and Allin-a-Dale were married then and there, and the rich old man went home in a great rage.

"And thus having ended this merry wedding,
The bride looked like a queen:
And so they re-turned to the merry green wood,
Amongst the leaves so green."

Source:

Baldwin, James. "King John and the Abbot." *50 Famous Stories Retold*. New York: American Book Company, 1896. 22-28. Electronic.

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