

## Reading 6: King John and the Abbot of Canterbury

IN the reign of King John there lived an Abbot of Canterbury. A hundred of the Abbot's men dined each day with him, and they dined upon the finest roast geese that ever were tasted, which they had raised themselves. Well, King John, as you know, was a very bad king, and he couldn't brook the idea of anyone in his kingdom, however holy he might be, might live better than he. So he summoned the Abbot of Canterbury to his presence.

The Abbot came with a goodly retinue, with his fifty monks in their hoods. King went to meet him, and said to him, 'How now, father Abbot? I hear it of thee, thou keepest far greater state than I. This becomes not our royal dignity, and savours of treason in thee.'

'My lord,' quoth the Abbot, bending low, 'I beg to say that all I spend has been freely given to the Abbey out of the piety of the folk. I trust your Grace will not take it ill that I spend for the Abbey's sake what is the Abbey's.'

'Nay, proud man,' answered the King, 'all that is in this fair realm of England is our own, and thou has no right to put me to shame by holding such state. However, of my clemency I will spare thy life and thy property if you can answer me but three questions.'

'I will do so, my lord,' said the Abbot, 'so far as I can.'

'Well, then,' said the King, 'tell me where is the centre of all the world round; then let me know how soon can I ride around the whole world; and, lastly, tell me what I think.'

'Your Majesty must be joking,' stammered the Abbot.

'Thou wilt find it no joke,' said the King. 'Unless thou canst answer me these questions three before a week is out, thy head will leave thy body'; and he turned away.

Well, the Abbot rode off in fear and trembling, and first he went to Oxford to see if any learned doctor could tell him the answer to those questions three; but none could help him, and he took his way to Canterbury, sad and sorrowful, to take leave of his monks. But on his way he met his shepherd as he was going to the fold.

'Welcome home, Lord Abbot,' quoth the shepherd; 'what news from good King John?'

'Sad news, sad news, my shepherd,' said the Abbot, and told him all that had happened.

'Now, cheer up, Sir Abbot,' said the shepherd. 'A fool may perhaps answer what a wise man knows not. I will go to London in your stead; grant me only your apparel and your retinue of knights. At the least I can die in your place.'

'Nay, shepherd, not so,' said the Abbot; 'I must meet the danger in my own person. And to that, thou canst not pass for me.'

'But I can and I will, Sir Abbot. In a cowl, who will know me for what I am?'

So, at last the Abbot consented, and sent him to London in his most splendid array, and he approached King John with all his retinue as before, but dressed in his simple monk's dress and his cowl over his face.

'Now welcome, Sir Abbot,' said King John; 'thou art prepared for thy doom, I see.'

'I am ready to answer your Majesty,' said he.

'Well, then, question first -- where is the centre of the round earth?' said the King.

'Here,' said the shepherd Abbot, planting his crozier in the ground; 'an' your Majesty believe me not, go measure it and see.'

'By my crown,' said the King, 'a merry answer and a shrewd; so to question the second. How soon may I ride this round world about?'

'If your Majesty will graciously rise with the sun, and ride along with him until the next morning he rise, your Grace will surely have ridden it round.'

'By my throne,' laughed King John, 'I did not think it could be done so soon. But let that pass, and tell me question third and last, and that is -- What do I think?'

'That is easy, your Grace,' said he. 'Your Majesty thinks I am my lord the Abbot of Canterbury; but as you may see,' and here he raised his cowl, 'I am but his poor shepherd, that am come to ask your pardon for him and for me.'

Loud laughed the King. 'Well caught. Thou hast more wit than thy lord, and thou shalt be Abbot in his place.'

'Nay, that cannot be,' quoth the shepherd; 'I know not to write nor to read.'

'Well, then, four nobles a week thou shalt have for the ready wit. And tell the Abbot from me that he has my pardon.' And with that King John sent away the shepherd with a right royal present of gold.