

King Canute on the Seashore

by James Baldwin

A hundred years or more after the time of Alfred the Great there was a king of England named Canute. King Canute was a Dane, but the Danes were not so fierce and cruel then as they had been when they were at war with King Alfred.

The great men and officers who were around King Canute were always praising him. "You are the greatest man that ever lived," one would say. Then another would say, "O king! there can never be another man so mighty as you." And another would say, "Great Canute, there is nothing in the world that dares to disobey you."

The king was a man of sense, and he grew very tired of hearing such foolish speeches. One day he was by the seashore, and his officers were with him. They were praising him, as they were in the habit of doing. He thought that now he would teach them a lesson, and so he told them to set his chair on the beach close by the edge of the water.

"Am I the greatest man in the world?" he asked.

"O king!" they cried, "there is no one so mighty as you."

"Do all things obey me?" he asked.

"There is nothing that dares to disobey you, O king!" they said. "The world bows before you, and gives you honor."

"Will the sea obey me?" he asked, and he looked down at the little waves which were lapping the sand at his feet. "Sea," cried Canute, "I command you to come no farther! Waves, stop your rolling, and do not dare to touch my feet!"

But the tide came in, just as it always did. The water rose higher and higher. It came up around the king's chair, and wet not only his feet, but also his robe. His officers stood about him, alarmed, and wondering whether he was not mad.

Then Canute took off his crown and said, "I shall never wear this again." Speaking to his men, he said, "Learn a lesson from what you have seen. There is only one King who is all-powerful, and it is he who rules the sea, and holds the ocean in the hollow of his hand. It is he whom you should praise and serve above all others."

The Lowest Place
by Christina Rossetti

Give me the lowest place: not that I dare
Ask for that lowest place, but Thou hast died
That I might live and share
Thy glory by Thy side.

Give me the lowest place: or if for me
That lowest place too high, make one more low
Where I may sit and see
My God and love Thee so.

A Lesson in Humility¹

by James Baldwin

One day the caliph Harun al-Rashid² made a great feast. The feast was held in the grandest room of the palace. The walls and ceiling glittered with gold and precious gems. The table was decorated with rare and beautiful plants and flowers. All the noblest men of Persia and Arabia were there. Many wise men and poets and musicians had also been invited.

In the middle of the feast, the caliph called on the poet Abul Atayah and said, "O prince of verse makers, show us your skill. Describe this glad and glorious feast in verse."

The poet rose and began, "Live, O caliph and enjoy yourself in the shelter of thy lofty palace."

"That is a good beginning," said Rashid. "Let us hear the rest."

The poet went on: "May each morning bring you some new joy. May each evening see that all your wishes have been performed."

"Good! good!" said the caliph, "Go on."

The poet bowed his head and obeyed. "But when the hour of death comes, O my caliph, then alas! you will learn that all your delights were but a shadow."

The caliph's eyes were filled with tears. Emotion choked him. He covered his face and wept.

Then one of the officers, who was sitting near the poet, cried out, "Stop! The caliph wished you to amuse him with pleasant thoughts, and you have filled his mind with melancholy."

"Let the poet alone," said Rashid. "He has seen me in my blindness, and is trying to open my eyes."

¹ From *Fifty Famous People*

² Harun al-Rashid ("Aaron the Just") was the greatest of all the caliphs of Baghdad. In a wonderful book, called *Arabian Nights*, there are many interesting stories about him.