

Robert Southey (1774-1843)

14 *Roprecht the Robber*

The story here versified is told by Taylor the Water Poet, in his “Three Weeks, Three Days, and Three Hours’ Observations from London to Hamburgh in Germany; amongst Jews and Gentiles, with Descriptions of Towns and Towers, Castles and Citadels, artificial Gallowses and natural Hangmen; and dedicated for the present to the absent Odcombian Knight Errant, Sir Thomas Coryat.” It is in the volume of his collected works, p. 82. of the third paging.

Collein, which is the scene of this story, is more probably Kollen on the Elbe, in Bohemia, or a town of the same name in Prussia, than Cologne, to which great city the reader will perceive I had good reasons for transferring it.

Part I.

Roprecht the Robber is taken at last,
In Cologne they have him fast;
Trial is over, and sentence past;
And hopes of escape were vain he knew,
For the gallows now must have its due. 5

But though pardon cannot here be bought,
It may for the other world, he thought;
And so to his comfort, with one consent
The Friars assured their penitent.

Money, they teach him, when rightly given, 10
Is put out to account with Heaven;
For suffrages therefore his plunder went,
Sinfully gotten, but piously spent.

All Saints, whose shrines are in that city,
They tell him, will on him have pity, 15
Seeing he hath liberally paid,
In this time of need, for their good aid.

In the Three Kings they bid him confide,
Who there in Cologne lie side by side;
And from the Eleven Thousand Virgins eke, 20

Intercession for him will they bespeak.

And also a sharer he shall be
In the merits of their community;
All which they promise, he need not fear,
Through Purgatory will carry him clear. 25

Though the furnace of Babylon could not compare
With the terrible fire that rages there,
Yet they their part will so zealously do
He shall only but frizzle as he flies through.

And they will help him to die well, 30
And he shall be hang'd with book and bell;
And moreover with holy water they
Will sprinkle him, ere they turn away.

For buried Roprecht must not be, 35
He is to be left on the triple tree;
That they who pass along may spy
Where the famous Robber is hanging on high.

Seen is that gibbet far and wide
From the Rhine and from the Dusseldorff side;
And from all roads which cross the sand, 40
North, south, and west, in that level land.

It will be a comfortable sight
To see him there by day and by night;
For Roprecht the Robber many a year
Had kept the country round in fear. 45

So the Friars assisted, by special grace,
With book and bell to the fatal place;
And he was hang'd on the triple tree,
With as much honour as man could be.

In his suit of irons he was hung, 50
They sprinkled him then, and their psalm they sung;
And turning away when this duty was paid,
They said what a goodly end he had made.

The crowd broke up and went their way;
All were gone by the close of day; 55
And Roprecht the Robber was left there
Hanging alone in the moonlight air.

The last who look'd back for a parting sight,
Beheld him there in the clear moonlight;
But the first who look'd when the morning shone, 60
Saw in dismay that Roprecht was gone.

Part II.

The stir in Cologne is greater to-day
Than all the bustle of yesterday;
Hundreds and thousands went out to see;
The irons and chains, as well as he, 65
Were gone, but the rope was left on the tree.

A wonderful thing! for every one said
He had hung till he was dead, dead, dead;
And on the gallows was seen, from noon
Till ten o'clock, in the light of the moon. 70

Moreover the Hangman was ready to swear
He had done his part with all due care;
And that certainly better hang'd than he
No one ever was, or ever could be.

Neither kith nor kin, to bear him away 75
And funeral rites in secret pay,
Had he; and none that pains would take,
With risk of the law, for a stranger's sake.

So 'twas thought, because he had died so well
He was taken away by miracle. 80
But would he again alive to be found?
Or had he been laid in holy ground?

If in holy ground his relics were laid,

Some marvellous sign would show, they said;
If restored to life, a Friar he would be, 85
Or a holy Hermit certainly,
And die in the odour of sanctity.

That thus it would prove they could not doubt,
Of a man whose end had been so devout;
And to disputing then they fell 90
About who had wrought this miracle.

Had the Three Kings this mercy shown,
Who were the pride and honour of Cologne?
Or was it an act of proper grace,
From the Army of Virgins of British race, 95
Who were also the glory of that place?

Pardon, some said, they might presume,
Being a kingly act, from the Kings must come;
But others maintained that St. Ursula's heart
Would sooner be moved to the merciful part. 100

There was one who thought this aid divine
Came from the other bank of the Rhine;
For Roprecht there too had for favour applied,
Because his birth-place was on that side.

To Dusseldorff then the praise might belong, 105
And its Army of Martyrs, ten thousand strong;
But he for Dusseldorff man was known,
And no one would listen to him in Cologne,
Where the people would have the whole wonder their own.

The Friars, who help'd him to die so well, 110
Put in their claim to the miracle;
Greater things than this, as their Annals could tell,
The stock of their merits for sinful men
Had done before, and would do again.

'Twas a whole week's wonder in that great town, 115
And in all places, up the river and down:
But a greater wonder took place of it then,

For Roprecht was found on the gallows again!

Part III.

With that the whole city flocked out to see;
There Roprecht was on the triple tree, 120
Dead, past all doubt, as dead could be;
But fresh he was as if spells had charm'd him,
And neither wind nor weather had harm'd him.

While the multitude stood in a muse,
One said, I am sure he was hang'd in shoes! 125
In this the Hangman and all concurr'd;
But now, behold, he was booted and spurr'd!

Plainly therefore it was to be seen,
That somewhere on horseback he had been;
And at this the people marvelled more, 130
Than at any thing which had happened before.

For not in riding trim was he
When he disappeared from the triple tree;
And his suit of irons he still was in,
With the collar that clipp'd him under the chin. 135

With that this second thought befell,
That perhaps he had not died so well,
Nor had Saints perform'd the miracle;
But rather there was cause to fear,
That the foul Fiend had been busy here! 140

Roprecht the Robber had long been their curse,
And hanging had only made him worse;
For bad as he was when living, they said
They had rather meet him alive than dead.

What a horse must it be which he had ridden, 145
No earthly beast could be so bestridden;
And when by a hell-horse a dead rider was carried,
The whole land would be fearfully harried!

So some were for digging a pit in the place,
And burying him there with a stone on his face; 150
And that hard on his body the earth should be press'd,
And exorcists be sent for to lay him at rest.

But others, whose knowledge was greater, opined
That this corpse was too strong to be confined;
No weight of earth which they could lay 155
Would hold him down a single day,
If he chose to get up and ride away.

There was no keeping Vampires under ground;
And bad as a Vampire he might be found,
Pests against whom it was understood 160
Exorcism never had done any good.

But fire, they said, had been proved to be
The only infallible remedy;
So they were for burning the body outright,
Which would put a stop to his riding by night. 165

Others were for searching the mystery out,
And setting a guard the gallows about,
Who should keep a careful watch, and see
Whether Witch or Devil it might be
That helped him down from the triple tree. 170

For that there were Witches in the land,
Was what all by this might understand;
And they must not let the occasion slip
For detecting that cursed fellowship.

Some were for this, and some for that, 175
And some they could not tell for what:
And never was such commotion known
In that great city of Cologne.

Pieter Snoye was a boor of good renown,
Who dwelt about an hour and a half from the town: 180
And he, while the people were all in debate,
Went quietly in at the city gate.

For Father Kijf he sought about,
His confessor, till he found him out;
But the Father Confessor wondered to see 185
The old man, and what his errand might be.

The good Priest did not wonder less
When Pieter said he was come to confess;
“Why, Pieter, how can this be so?
I confessed thee some ten days ago! 190

Thy conscience, methinks, may be well at rest,
An honest man among the best;
I would that all my flock, like thee,
Kept clear accounts with Heaven and me!”

Always before, without confusion, 195
Being sure of easy absolution,
Pieter his little slips had summ’d;
But he hesitated now, and he haw’d, and humm’d.

And something so strange the Father saw
In Pieter’s looks, and his hum and his haw, 200
That he began to doubt it was something more
Than a trifle omitted in last week’s score.

At length it came out, that in the affair
Of Roprecht the Robber he had some share;
The Confessor then gave a start in fear — 205
“God grant there have been no witchcraft here!”

Pieter Snoye, who was looking down,
With something between a smile and a frown,
Felt that suspicion move his bile,
And look’d up with more of a frown than a smile. 210

“Fifty years I, Pieter Snoye,

Have lived in this country, man and boy,
And have always paid the Church her due,
And kept short scores with Heaven and you.

The Devil himself, though Devil he be, 215
Would not dare impute that sin to me;
He might charge me as well with heresy:
And if he did, here, in this place,
I'd call him liar, and spit in his face!"

The Father, he saw, cast a gracious eye 220
When he heard him thus the Devil defy;
The wrath, of which he had eased his mind,
Left a comfortable sort of warmth behind,

Like what a cheerful cup will impart,
In a social hour, to an honest man's heart: 225
And he added, "For all the witchcraft here,
I shall presently make that matter clear.

Though I am, as you very well know, Father Kijf,
A peaceable man, and keep clear of strife,
It's a queerish business that now I've been in; 230
But I can't say that it's much of a sin.

However, it needs must be confess'd,
And as it will set this people at rest,
To come with it at once was best:
Moreover, if I delayed, I thought 235
That some might perhaps into trouble be brought.

Under the seal I tell it you,
And you will judge what it best to do,
That no hurt to me and my son may ensue.
No earthly harm have we intended, 240
And what was ill done, has been well mended.

I and my son Piet Pieterszoon,
Were returning home by the light of the moon,
From this good city of Cologne,
On the night of the execution day; 245

And hard by the gibbet was our way.

About midnight it was we were passing by,
My son Piet Pieterszoon, and I,
When we heard a moaning as we came near,
Which made us quake at first for fear. 250

But the moaning was presently heard again,
And we knew it was nothing ghostly then;
'Lord help us, Father!' Piet Pieterszoon said,
'Roprecht, for certain, is not dead!'

So under the gallows our cart we drive, 255
And, sure enough, the man was alive;
Because of the irons that he was in,
He was hanging, not by the neck, but the chin.

The reason why things had got thus wrong,
Was, that the rope had been left too long; 260
The Hangman's fault — a clumsy rogue,
He is not fit to hang a dog.

Now Roprecht, as long as the people were there,
Never stirr'd hand or foot in the air;
But when at last he was left alone, 265
By that time so much of his strength was gone,
That he could do little more than groan.

Piet and I had been sitting it out,
Till a latish hour, at a christening bout;
And perhaps we were rash, as you may think, 270
And a little soft or so, for drink.

Father Kijf, we could not bear
To leave him hanging in misery there;
And 'twas an act of mercy, I cannot but say,
To get him down, and take him away. 275

And, as you know, all people said
What a goodly end that day he had made;
So we thought for certain, Father Kijf,

That if he were saved he would mend his life.

My son, Piet Pieterszoon, and I, 280
We took him down, seeing none was nigh;
And we took off his suit of irons with care,
When we got him home, and we hid him there.

The secret, as you may guess, was known
To Alit, my wife, but to her alone; 285
And never sick man, I dare aver,
Was better tended than he was by her.

Good advice, moreover, as good could be,
He had from Alit my wife, and me;
And no one could promise fairer than he: 290
So that we and Piet Pieterszoon our son,
Thought that we a very good deed had done.

You may well think we laughed in our sleeve,
At what the people then seem'd to believe;
Queer enough it was to hear them say, 295
That the Three Kings took Roprecht away.

Or that St. Ursula, who is in bliss,
With her Army of Virgins had done this:
The Three Kings and St. Ursula, too,
I warrant, had something better to do. 300

Piet Pieterszoon my son, and I,
We heard them talk as we stood by,
And Piet look'd at me with a comical eye.
We thought them fools, but, as you shall see,
Not over-wise ourselves were we. 305

For I must tell you, Father Kijf,
That when we told this to Alit my wife,
She at the notion perk'd up with delight,
And said she believed the people were right.

Had not Roprecht put in the Saints his hope, 310
And who but they should have loosen'd the rope,

When they saw that no one could intend
To make at the gallows a better end?

Yes, she said, it was perfectly clear
That there must have been a miracle here; 315
And we had the happiness to be in it,
Having been brought there just at the minute.

And therefore it would become us to make
An offering for this favour's sake
To the Three Kings and the Virgins too, 320
Since we could not tell to which it was due.

For greater honour there could be none
Than what in this business the Saints had done
To us and Piet Pieterszoon our son;
She talk'd me over, Father Kijf, 325
With that tongue of hers, did Alit my wife.

Lord, forgive us! as if the Saints would deign
To come and help such a rogue in grain;
When the only mercy the case could admit
Would have been to make his halter fit! 330

That would have made one hanging do,
In happy season for him too,
When he was in a proper cue;
And have saved some work, as you will see,
To my son Piet Pieterszoon, and me. 335

Well, father, we kept him at bed and board,
Till his neck was cured and his strength restored;
And we should have sent him off this day
With something to help him on his way.

But this wicked Roprecht, what did he? 340
Though he had been saved thus mercifully;
Hanging had done him so little good,
That he took to his old ways as soon as he could.

Last night, when we were all asleep,

Out of his bed did this gallows-bird creep, 345
Piet Pieterszoon's boots and spurs he put on,
And stole my best horse, and away he was gone!

Now Alit, my wife, did not sleep so hard,
But she heard the horse's feet in the yard;
And when she jogg'd me, and bade me awake, 350
My mind misgave me as soon as she spake.

To the window my good woman went,
And watch'd which way his course he bent;
And in such time as a pipe can be lit,
Our horses were ready with bridle and bit. 355

Away, as fast as we could hie,
We went, Piet Pieterszoon and I;
And still on the plain we had him in sight;
The moon did not shine for nothing that night.

Knowing the ground, and riding fast, 360
We came up with him at last,
And — would you believe it? Father Kijf,
The ungrateful wretch would have taken my life,
If he had not miss'd his stroke with a knife!

The struggle in no long time was done, 365
Because, you know, we were two to one;
But yet all our strength we were fain to try,
Piet Pieterszoon my son, and I.

When we had got him on the ground,
We fastened his hands, and his legs we bound; 370
And across the horse we laid him then,
And brought him back to the house again.

“We have robb'd the gallows, and that was ill done!”
Said I, to Piet Pieterszoon my son;
“And restitution we must make 375
To that same gallows, for justice' sake.”

In his suit of irons the rogue we array'd,

And once again in the cart he was laid!
Night not yet so far was spent,
But there was time enough for our intent; 380
And back to the triple tree we went.

His own rope was ready there;
To measure the length we took good care;
And the job which the bungling Hangman begun,
This time, I think, was properly done, 385
By me and Piet Pieterszoon my son.”

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