

Richard Harris Barham (1788-1845)

3 *A Lay of St. Nicholas*

“Statim sacerdoti apparuit diabolus in specie puellæ pulchritudinis miræ, et ecce Divus, fide catholicâ, et cruce, et aquâ benedicta armatus venit, et aspersit aquam in nomine Sanctæ et Individuæ Trinitatis, quam, quasi ardentem, diabolus, nequaquam sustinere valens, mugitibus fugit.”

“Lord Abbot! Lord Abbot! I’d fain confess;
I am a-weary, and worn with woe;
Many a grief doth my heart oppress,
And haunt me whithersoever I go!”

On bended knee spake the beautiful Maid: 5
“Now lithe and listen, Lord Abbot to me!” —
“Now naye, Fair Daughter,” the Lord Abbot said,
“Now naye, in sooth it may hardly be.

“There is Mess Michael, and holy Mess John,
Sage Penitauncers I ween be they! 10
And hard by doth dwell, in St. Catherine’s cell,
Ambrose, the anchorite old and gray!” —

“Oh, I will have none of Ambrose or John,
Though sage Penitauncers I trow they be;
Shrive me may none save the Abbot alone, 15
Now listen, Lord Abbot, I speak to thee.

“Nor think foul scorn, though mitre adorn
Thy brow, to listen to shrift of mine!
I am a Maiden royally born,
And I come of old Plantagenet’s line. 20

“Though hither I stray, in lowly array,
I am a damsel of high degree;
And the Compte of Eu, and the Lord of Ponthieu,
They serve my father on bended knee!

“Counts a many, and Dukes a few, 25
A suitoring came to my father’s Hall;

But the Duke of Lorraine, with his large domain,
He pleased my father beyond them all.

“Dukes a many, and Counts a few,
I would have wedded right cheerfullie; 30
But the Duke of Lorraine was uncommonly plain,
And I vow’d that he ne’er should my bridegroom be!

“So hither I fly, in lowly guise,
From their gilded domes and their princely halls;
Fain would I dwell in some holy cell, 35
Or within some Convent’s peaceful walls!”

Then out and spake that proud Lord Abbot,
“Now rest thee, Fair Daughter, withouten fear,
Nor Count nor Duke but shall meet the rebuke
Of Holy Church an he seek thee here: 40

“Holy Church denieth all search
Midst her sanctified ewes and her saintly rams;
And the wolves doth mock who would scathe her flock,
Or, especially, worry her little pet lambs.

“Then lay, Fair Daughter, thy fears aside, 45
For here this day shalt thou dine with me!” —
“Now naye, now naye,” the fair maiden cried;
“In sooth, Lord Abbot, that scarce may be!

“Friends would whisper, and foes would frown,
Sith thou art a Churchman of high degree, 50
And ill mote it match with thy fair renown
That a wandering damsel dine with thee!

“There is Simon the Deacon hath pulse in store,
With beans and lettuces fair to see;
His lenten fare now let me share, 55
I pray thee, Lord Abbot, in charitie!” —

“Though Simon the Deacon hath pulse in store,
To our patron Saint foul shame it were
Should wayworn guest, with toil oppress’d,
Meet in his Abbey such churlish fare. 60

“There is Peter the Prior, and Francis the Friar,
And Roger the Monk shall our convives be;
Small scandal I ween shall then be seen;
They are a goodly companie!”

The Abbot hath donn'd his mitre and ring, 65
His rich dalmatic, and maniple fine;
And the choristers sing, as the lay-brothers bring
To the board a magnificent turkey and chine.

The turkey and chine, they are done to a nicety;
Liver, and gizzard, and all are there; 70
Ne'er mote Lord Abbot pronounce *Benedicite*
Over more luscious or delicate fare.

But no pious stave, no *Pater* or *Ave*
Pronounced, as he gazed on that maiden's face;
She ask'd him for stuffing, she ask'd him for gravy, 75
She ask'd him for gizzard; — but not for Grace!

Yet gayly the Lord Abbot smiled, and press'd,
And the blood-red wine in the wine-cup fill'd;
And he help'd his guest to a bit of the breast,
And he sent the drumsticks down to be grill'd. 80

There was no lack of old Sherris sack,
Of Hippocras fine, or of Malmsey bright;
And aye, as he drain'd off his cup with a smack,
He grew less pious and more polite.

She pledged him once, and she pledged him twice, 85
And she drank as Lady ought not to drink;
And he press'd her hand 'neath the table thrice,
And he wink'd as Abbot ought not to wink.

And Peter the Prior, and Francis the Friar,
Sat each with a napkin under his chin; 90
But Roger the Monk got excessively drunk,
So they put him to bed, and they tuck'd him in!

The lay-brothers gazed on each other, amazed;

And Simon the Deacon, with grief and surprise,
As he peep'd through the key-hole, could scarce fancy real 95
The scene he beheld, or believe his own eyes.

In his ear was ringing the Lord Abbot singing, —
He could not distinguish the words very plain,
But 'twas all about "Cole," and "jolly old Soul"
And "Fiddlers," and "Punch," and things quite as profane. 100

Even Porter Paul at the sound of such revelling,
With fervor himself began to bless;
For he thought he must somehow have let the Devil in, —
And perhaps was not very much out in his guess.

The Accusing Byers "flew up to Heaven's Chancery," 105
Blushing like scarlet with shame and concern;
The Archangel took down his tale, and in answer he
Wept — (See the works of the late Mr. Sterne).

Indeed, it is said, a less taking both were in
When, after a lapse of a great many years, 110
They book'd Uncle Toby five shillings for swearing,
And blotted the fine out again with their tears!

But St. Nicholas' agony who may paint?
His senses at first were well-nigh gone;
The beatified saint was ready to faint 115
When he saw in his Abbey such sad goings on!

For never, I ween, had such doings been seen
There before, from the time that most excellent Prince,
Earl Baldwin of Flanders, and other Commanders,
Had built and endowed it some centuries since. — 120

But hark! — 'tis a sound from the outermost gate!
A startling sound from a powerful blow. —
Who knocks so late? — it is half after eight
By the clock, — and the clock's five minutes too slow.

Never, perhaps, had such loud double raps, 125
Been heard in St. Nicholas' Abbey before;
All agreed "it was shocking to keep people knocking,"

But none seem'd inclined to "answer the door."

Now a louder bang through the cloisters rang,
And the gate on its hinges wide open flew; 130
And all were aware of a Palmer there,
With his cockle, hat, staff, and his sandal shoe.

Many a furrow, and many a frown
By toil and time on his brow were traced;
And his long loose gown was of ginger brown, 135
And his rosary dangled below his waist.

Now seldom, I ween, is such costume seen,
Except at a stage-play or masquerade;
But who doth not know it was rather the go
With Pilgrims and Saints in the second Crusade? 140

With noiseless stride did that Palmer glide
Across that oaken floor;
And he made them all jump, he gave such a thump
Against the Refectory door!

Wide open it flew, and plain to the view 145
The Lord Abbot they all mote see;
In his hand was a cup, and he lifted it up,
"Here's the Pope's good health with three!!"

Rang in their ears three deafening cheers,
"Huzza! huzza! huzza!" 150
And one of the party said, "Go it, my hearty!" —
When outspake that Pilgrim gray —

"A boon, Lord Abbot! a boon! a boon!
Worn is my foot, and empty my scrip;
And nothing to speak of since yesterday noon 155
Of food, Lord Abbot, hath pass'd my lip.

"And I am come from a far countree,
And have visited many a holy shrine;
And long have I trod the sacred sod
Where the Saints do rest in Palestine!" — 160

“And thou art come from a far countree,
And if thou in Paynim lands hast been,
Now rede me aright the most wonderful sight,
Thou Palmer gray, that thine eyes have seen.

“Arede me aright the most wonderful sight, 165
Gray Palmer, that ever thine eyes did see,
And a manchette of bread, and a good warm bed,
And a cup o’ the best shall thy guerdon be!”

“Oh! I have been east, and I have been west,
And I have seen many a wonderful sight; 170
But never to me did it happen to see
A wonder like that which I see this night!

“To see a Lord Abbot, in rochet and stole,
With Prior and Friar, — a strange mar-velle! —
O’er a jolly full bowl, sitting cheek by jowl, 175
And hob-nobbing away with a Devil from Hell!”

He felt in his gown of ginger brown,
And he pull’d out a flask from beneath;
It was rather tough work to get out the cork,
But he drew it at last with his teeth. 180

O’er a pint and a quarter of holy water,
He made a sacred sign;
And he dash’d the whole on the *soi-disant* daughter
Of old Plantagenet’s line!

Oh! then did she reek, and squeak, and shriek, 185
With a wild unearthly scream;
And fizzl’d, and hiss’d, and produced such a mist,
They were all half-choked by the steam.

Her dove-like eyes turn’d to coals of fire,
Her beautiful nose to a horrible snout, 190
Her hands to paws, with nasty great claws,
And her bosom went in, and her tail came out.

On her chin there appear’d a long Nanny-goat’s beard,
And her tusks and her teeth no man mote tell;

And her horns and her hoofs gave infallible proofs 195
’Twas a frightful fiend from the nethermost hell!

The Palmer threw down his ginger gown,
His hat and his cockle; and, plain to sight,
Stood St. Nicholas’ self, and his shaven crown
Had a glow-worm halo of heavenly light. 200

The fiend made a grasp, the Abbot to clasp;
But St. Nicholas lifted his holy toe,
And, just in the nick, let fly such a kick
On his elderly Namesake, he made him let go,

And out of the window he flew like a shot, 205
For the foot flew up with a terrible thwack,
And caught the foul demon about the spot
Where his tail joins on to the small of his back.

And he bounded away like a foot-ball at play,
Till into the bottomless pit he fell slap, 210
Knocking Mammon the meagre o’er pursy Belphegor,
And Lucifer into Beëlzebub’s lap.

Oh! happy the slip from his Succubine grip,
That saved the Lord Abbot — though, breathless with fright,
In escaping he tumbled, and fractured his hip, 215
And his left leg was shorter thenceforth than his right!

On the banks of the Rhine, as he’s stopping to dine,
From a certain Inn-window the traveller is shown
Most picturesque ruins, the scene of these doings,
Some miles up the river, south-east of Cologne. 220

And, while “*sour-kraut*” she sells you, the landlady tells you
That there, in those walls, now all roofless and bare,
One Simon, a Deacon, from a lean grew a sleek one,
On filling a *ci-devant* Abbot’s state chair.

How a *ci-devant* Abbot, all clothed in drab, but 225
Of texture the coarsest, hair shirt, and no shoes
(His mitre and ring, and all that sort of thing

Laid aside), in yon Cave lived a pious recluse;

How he rose with the sun, limping “dot and go one,”
 To yon rill of the mountain, in all sorts of weather, 230
 Where a Prior and a Friar, who lived somewhat higher
 Up the rock used to come and eat cresses together;

How a thirsty old codger, the neighbors called Roger,
 With them drank cold water in lieu of old wine!
 What its quality wanted he made up in quantity, 235
 Swigging as though he would empty the Rhine!

And how, as their bodily strength fail’d, the mental man
 Gain’d tenfold vigor and force in all four;
 And how, to the day of their death, the “Old Gentleman”
 Never attempted to kidnap them more. 240

And how, when at length, in the odor of sanctity,
 All of them died without grief or complaint;
 The Monks of St. Nicholas said ’twas ridiculous
 Not to suppose every one was a Saint.

And how, in the Abbey, no one was so shabby 245
 As not to say yearly four masses a head,
 On the eve of that supper, and kick on the crupper
 Which Satan received for the souls of the dead!

How folks long held in reverence their reliques and memories,
 How the *ci-devant* Abbot’s obtain’d greater still, 250
 When some cripples, on touching his fractured *os femoris*,
 Threw down their crutches and danced a quadrille!

And how Abbot Simon (who turn’d out a prime one)
 These words, which grew into a proverb full soon,
 O’er the late Abbot’s grotto, stuck up as a motto, 255
 “Who suppes with the Deville sholde have a long spoone!”

1840

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