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The High King of England

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The High King of England

by Paul Kocher

The High King of Engeland
Was striding round his cliffs.
He could smell the tempest rushing down
From Iceland's bergs and mists.
The balefires of the Boreal Eye
Waved in the sky like flags of fire,
And ocean's bottom naked lay
Bare as a field new-harvested.

"Angus, old Angus!" then shouted Engeland,
"Can ye still guard the blessed land
Though faded and bent ye be?
Speak up! I'll lend ye a helping hand
And the strength of my fine young back."

"My Laird, my Laird!" old Angus yelled,
"I have been at this post ten thousand years,
I'll be here ten thousand others.
But I grant ye 'tis a braw, braw night
When young ones should sleep tight and warm
Away from this winter dither."

So Engeland doffed his royal robes
And donned his garb of labor.
His breeks were of a goatish skin
That hung down to his knee cap,
And goatish was the vest he wore
To keep his mighty chest from ham.

Wherever spume flew highest
Or reefs lurked dark and fanged
He kicked them with his feet apart
So the boats could come in nigher;
And where the breakers climbed the cliffs
To sport among the farmlands
He heaved some stony barriers up,
Amid the scree beneath his feet
Where boulders clanked and clattered
He blindly groped and lifted them.
Blood made wine of that water.
And when he could he fed them back
To the place whence they had fallen,
Putting them where they still belonged
With hands both strong and gentle.

Dawn cracked, sun rose, hush fell,
For the storm had rushed away
Across the straits to Erin land.
Then did old Angus say,
"She's gone, my Laird. I'll take my rest
In my cave beneath the sea,
And you take yours in your castle tall
For other broils like this there'll be."

But Engeland thought a private thought:
I'll have a word with the Irish prince
Who needs many a word with me.
Then sweeter than a lark he called,
"O Bryan, dear, how do you fare
Among your green, green dales and dells?"

"Why well enough, if ye'd leave me be.
What with thinking this and thinking that
And hating what I loved before,
My brains are like to fry!"

But Engeland shook his heavy head:
"Son of my soul, 'tis not your thoughts,
Your surface thoughts, that break your peace.
Your loyalty's impure. And that's the worst;
For deep it waits, that silent pool
Where we quaff health or poison up,
Till life's a joy that eye endures
Or naught but a sullen game.
Now Ireland has too many kings.
One must prevail while the others die;
Choose well whom you will die with, if need be
For that's the art--to make a gladsome choice.
Have naught to do with traitors
On the shore or on the ships
But stand your ground and hold it
Where your true Lord sits.
On earth's no place of safety
For life is never safe,
And the arrow storm can sleet you down
From any compass point."

Farewell, then, waved High Engeland,
And wrapping well in his woolen robes,
Slept like a king whose duty's done
Till the next storm calls him out again.