

King Alfred and the cakes

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Many years ago there lived in England a wise and good king whose name was Alfred. No other man ever did so much for his country as he; and people now, all over the world, speak of him as Alfred the Great.

In those days a king did not have a very easy life. There was war almost all the time, and no one else could lead his army into battle so well as he. And so, between ruling and fighting, he had a busy time of it indeed.

A fierce, rude people, called the Danes, had come from over the sea, and were fighting the English. There were so many of them, and they were so bold and strong, that for a long time they won every battle. If they kept on, they would soon be the masters of the whole country.

At last, after a great battle, the English army was broken up and scattered. Every man had to save himself in the best way he could. King Alfred fled alone, in great haste, through the woods and swamps.

Late in the day the king came to the hut of a woodcutter. He was very tired and hungry, and he begged the woodcutter's wife to give him something to eat and a place to sleep in her hut.



The woman was baking some cakes upon the hearth, and she looked with pity upon the poor, ragged fellow who seemed so hungry. She had no thought that he was the king.

«Yes,» she said, «I will give you some supper if you will watch these cakes. I want to go out and milk the cow; and you must see that they do not burn while I am gone.»

King Alfred was very willing to watch the cakes, but he had far greater things to think about. How was he going to get his army together again? And how was he going to drive the fierce Danes out of the land? He forgot his hunger; he forgot the cakes; he forgot that he was in the woodcutter's hut. His mind was busy making plans for tomorrow.

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In a little while the woman came back. The cakes were smoking on the hearth. They were burned to a crisp. Ah, how angry she was!

«You lazy fellow!» she cried. «See what you have done! You want something to eat, but you do not want to work!»

I have been told that she even struck the king with a stick; but I can hardly believe that she was so ill-natured.

The king must have laughed to himself at the thought of being scolded in this way; and he was so hungry that he did not mind the woman's angry words half so much as the loss of the cakes.

I do not know whether he had anything to eat that night, or whether he had to go to bed without his supper. But it was not many days until he had gathered his men together again, and had beaten the Danes in a great battle.

A. Questions

1. Why was Alfred called Alfred the great?

2. Why was a king's life difficult in those days?

3. Do you think a king's life is more difficult or less difficult today? Why/why not?

4. Who were Alfred's enemies in this story?

5. Where did Alfred go after his army lost the battle?

6. What kind of warriors were the Danes?

7. What did Alfred ask of the woodcutter's wife?

8. What did the woman ask Alfred to do in return?

9. What was uppermost in Alfred's mind at that moment?

B. Gap-filling exercise

Use the following words to fill in the blank spaces in the text below:

name - fighting - lead - fierce - many - soon - easy - country - lived - speak

Many years ago there _____ in England a wise and good king whose _____ was Alfred. No other man ever did so much for his _____ as he; and people now, all over the world, _____ of him as Alfred the Great. In those days a king did not have a very _____ life. There was war almost all the time, and no one else could _____ his army into battle so well as he. And so, between ruling and fighting, he had a busy time of it indeed. A _____, rude people, called the Danes, had come from over the sea, and were _____ the English. There were so _____ of them, and they were so bold and strong, that for a long time they won every battle. If they kept on, they would _____ be the masters of the whole country.

C. Translation

Translate this passage into your own language

At last, after a great battle, the English army was broken up and scattered. Every man had to save himself in the best way he could. King Alfred fled alone, in great haste, through the woods and swamps. Late in the day the king came to the hut of a woodcutter. He was very tired and hungry, and he begged the woodcutter's wife to give him something to eat and a place to sleep in her hut.

Answers

A. Questions

- 1. Why was Alfred called Alfred the great?**
Because he did so much for his country.
- 2. Why was a king's life difficult in those days?**
Because there were constant wars.
- 3. Do you think a king's life is more difficult or less difficult today? Why/why not?**
Let the children use their knowledge about modern and ancient kingdoms to generate their very own ideas about being a royal person in the different ages. Keywords may be: war, responsibility, wealth, beliefs, the purpose of monarchy etc.
- 4. Who were Alfred's enemies in this story?**
The Danes.
- 5. Where did Alfred go after his army lost the battle?**
To a woodcutter's house.
- 6. What kind of warriors were the Danes?**
They were bold and strong.
- 7. What did Alfred ask of the woodcutter's wife?**
For something to eat and a place to sleep.
- 8. What did the woman ask Alfred to do in return?**
To see to it that the cakes did not burn.
- 9. What was uppermost in Alfred's mind at that moment?**
How he was going to get his army together again and how he was going to drive the fierce Danes out of the land.

B. Gap-filling exercise

Many years ago there *lived* in England a wise and good king whose *name* was Alfred. No other man ever did so much for his *country* as he; and people now, all over the world, *speak* of him as Alfred the Great. In those days a king did not have a very *easy* life. There was war almost all the time, and no one else could *lead* his army into battle so well as he. And so, between ruling and fighting, he had a busy time of it indeed. A *fierce*, rude people, called the

Danes, had come from over the sea, and were **fighting** the English. There were so **many** of them, and they were so bold and strong, that for a long time they won every battle. If they kept on, they would **soon** be the masters of the whole country.

C. Translation

The following translation is of course only one of many possible translations:

Til slutt, etter et stort slag, ble den engelske hærstyrken splittet og spredt omkring. Hver mann måtte berge seg selv som best han kunne. Kong Alfred flyktet i all hast alene gjennom skoger og sumper. Utpå dagen kom han til en tømmerhuggers koi. Han var meget sliten og sulten og han ba tømmerhuggerens kone om litt å spise og et sted å sove i koi.

Philosophical questions

1. *The woodcutter's wife asks Alfred to watch the cakes while she is out to milk the cow. He said yes to this, but then he forgets all about the cakes and they get burned. When the wife returns and discovers that her bakery is destroyed, she is very angry.*

The wife didn't know that her guest was a king. Do you think she would have been just as angry if she knew who he was? Why are we often more willing to accept blunders from certain people but not from others? What makes a king different from a woodcutter? What makes an important human being different from an unimportant human being? Or is it wrong to draw a line between important and unimportant people?

2. *Was it more important for the king that night to think about warfare than about food? Must not also a king have food? What is most important in life: food or thoughts? Milking cows or thinking about how to defeat an enemy of the state? repairing bicycles or studying remote galaxies in space?*
3. *Do you think this story would have survived all the centuries if this guest in the cottage of the woodcutter had not been a king? Would the story have been less funny if he had not been a king? Do you think it is a funny story? Why/why not?*