

The sons of William the Conqueror

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There was once a great king of England who was called William the Conqueror, and he had three sons. One day King William seemed to be thinking of something that made him feel very sad; and the wise men who were about him asked him what was the matter.

"I am thinking," he said, "of what my sons may do after I am dead. For, unless they are wise and strong, they cannot keep the kingdom which I have won for them. Indeed, I am at a loss to know which one of the three ought to be the king when I am gone."

"O king!" said the wise men, "if we only knew what things your sons admire the most, we might then be able to tell what kind of men they will be. Perhaps, by asking each one of them a few questions, we can find out which one of them will be best fitted to rule in your place."

"The plan is well worth trying, at least," said the king. "Have the boys come before you, and then ask them what you please."

The wise men talked with one another for a little while, and then agreed that the young princes should be brought in, one at a time, and that the same questions should be put to each.

The first who came into the room was Robert. He was a tall, willful lad, and was nicknamed Short Stocking.

"Fair sir," said one of the men, "answer me this question: If, instead of being a boy, it had pleased God that you should be a bird, what kind of a bird would you rather be?"



"A hawk," answered Robert. "I would rather be a hawk, for no other bird reminds one so much of a bold and gallant knight."

The next who came was young William, his father's namesake and pet. His face was jolly and round, and because he had red hair he was nicknamed Rufus, or the Red.

"Fair sir," said the wise man, "answer me this question: If, instead of being a boy, it had pleased God that you should be a bird, what kind of a bird would you rather be?"

"An eagle," answered William. "I would rather be an eagle, because it is strong and brave. It is feared by all other birds, and is therefore the king of them all."

Lastly came the youngest brother, Henry, with quiet steps and a sober, thoughtful look. He had been taught to read and write, and for that reason he was nicknamed Beauclerc, or the Handsome Scholar.

"Fair sir," said the wise man, "answer me this question: If, instead of being a boy, it had pleased God that you should be a bird, what kind of a bird would you rather be?"

"A starling," said Henry. "I would rather be a starling, because it is good-mannered and kind and a joy to every one who sees it, and it never tries to rob or abuse its neighbor."

Then the wise men talked with one another for a little while, and when they had agreed among themselves, they spoke to the king.

"We find," said they, "that your eldest son, Robert, will be bold and gallant. He will do some great deeds, and make a name for himself; but in the end he will be overcome by his foes, and will die in prison."

"The second son, William, will be as brave and strong as the eagle but he will be feared and hated for his cruel deeds. He will lead a wicked life, and will die a shameful death."

"The youngest son, Henry, will be wise and prudent and peaceful. He will go to war only when he is forced to do so by his enemies. He will be loved at home, and respected abroad; and he will die in peace after having gained great possessions."

Years passed by, and the three boys had grown up to be men. King William lay upon his death-bed, and again he thought of what would become of his sons when he was gone. Then he remembered what the wise men had told him; and so he declared that Robert should have the lands which he held in France, that William should be the King of England, and that Henry should have no land at all, but only a chest of gold.

So it happened in the end very much as the wise men had foretold. Robert, the Short Stocking, was bold and reckless, like the hawk which he so much admired. He lost all the lands that his father had left him, and was at last shut up in prison, where he was kept until he died.

William Rufus was so overbearing and cruel that he was feared and hated by all his people. He led a wicked life, and was killed by one of his own men while hunting in the forest.

And Henry, the Handsome Scholar, had not only the chest of gold for his own, but he became by and by the King of England and the ruler of all the lands that his father had had in France.

A. Questions

1. How many sons did William the conqueror have?

2. What was William thinking about in the beginning of the story?

3. What question did the wise men put before the king's three sons?

4. Who of the three sons was called "short stockings"?

5. Who was the youngest of them?

6. What bird did William choose to be?

7. What bird did Henry choose to be?

8. What son did the wise men think would be most successful in life and what words did they use to describe him?

9. What became of Robert?

10. What became of Henry?

B. Gap-filling exercise

Put these words in the right place in the text:

feel - kingdom - three - loss - may - asked - wise - ought - seemed - king

There was once a great _____ of England who was called William the Conqueror, and he had _____ sons. One day King William _____ to be thinking of something that made him _____ very sad; and the wise men who were about him _____ him what was the matter. "I am thinking," he said, "of what my sons _____ do after I am dead. For, unless they are _____ and strong, they cannot keep the _____ which I have won for them. Indeed, I am at a _____ to know which one of the three _____ to be the king when I am gone."

C. Writing

Imagine that you are asked to come up with five questions to decide between two men who is going to be king of your country. Write them down.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

D. Verbs

Put the verbs in the brackets in the right form in the gaps. The passage is written in the past tense:

«The sons of William the Conqueror»

Years (to pass) _____ by, and the three boys had (to grow) _____ up to be men. King William (to lie) _____ upon his death-bed, and again he (to think) _____ of what would become of his sons when he was (to go) _____. Then he (to remember) _____ what the wise men had (to tell) _____ him; and so he (to declare) _____ that Robert should (to have) _____ the lands which he held in France, that William should (to be) _____ the King of England, and that Henry should have no land at all, but only a chest of gold. So it (to happen) _____ in the end very much as the wise men (to have) _____ foretold. Robert, the Short Stocking, was bold and reckless, like the hawk which he so much (to admire) _____. He lost all the lands that his father had (to leave) _____ him, and was at last shut up in prison, where he was (to keep) _____ until he died.

Answers

A. Questions

1. **How many sons did William the conqueror have?**
Three.
2. **What was William thinking about in the beginning of the story?**
He was thinking of his sons, if they were wise and strong enough to keep his kingdom.
3. **What question did the wise men put before the king's three sons?**
If, instead of being a boy, it had pleased God that you should be a bird, what kind of a bird would you rather be?
4. **Who of the three sons was called "short stockings"?**
Robert.
5. **Who was the youngest of them?**
Henry.
6. **What bird did William choose to be?**
An eagle.
7. **What bird did Henry choose to be?**
A starling.
8. **What son did the wise men think would be most successful in life and what words did they use to describe him?**
Henry as he would be wise, prudent and peaceful.
9. **What became of Robert?**
He lost all his lands in Normandy and died in prison.
10. **What became of Henry?**
He became king of England and the ruler of all the lands his father had ruled over in France.

B. Gap-filling exercise

There was once a great **king** of England who was called William the Conqueror, and he had **three** sons. One day King William **seemed** to be thinking of something that made him **feel** very sad; and the wise men who were about him **asked** him what was the matter. "I am thinking," he said, "of

what my sons *may* do after I am dead. For, unless they are *wise* and strong, they cannot keep the *kingdom* which I have won for them. Indeed, I am at a *loss* to know which one of the three *ought* to be the king when I am gone.”

C. Writing

Answers will vary.

D. Verbs

Years *passed* by, and the three boys had *grown* up to be men. King William *lay* upon his death-bed, and again he *thought* of what would become of his sons when he was *gone*. Then he *remembered* what the wise men had *told* him; and so he *declared* that Robert should *have* the lands which he held in France, that William should *be* the King of England, and that Henry should have no land at all, but only a chest of gold. So it *happened* in the end very much as the wise men *had* foretold. Robert, the Short Stocking, was bold and reckless, like the hawk which he so much *admired*. He lost all the lands that his father had *left* him, and was at last shut up in prison, where he was *kept* until he died.

Philosophical questions

1. *The king was sad when he started to think about what would happen after he was dead. Have you ever thought about what will happen after you are dead? What did you think about: your family, your friends, your belongings, animals, people in other countries?*

If it is true that everything ends when we die, why do we still keep thinking about what will happen after our own death? Why do we care about things that we will never experience ourselves?

When you have a family and you get older, like King William, it is perhaps natural to think of the future right after your own death, the future of your own children. But is it just as natural to think of the future 500 or 5000 years away? Why, why not?

2. *Robert wanted to be a hawk, William an eagle, Henry a starling. But what is more important than their choices, are their reasons for making their choices. Can you think of better reasons for wanting to be a hawk and an eagle than the reasons Robert and William gave?*

3. *What kind of bird would you have liked to be? Is there another animal you would rather be? What animal? Can I tell something about you from your answer? What?*

Can we tell anything about the three wise men from the question they chose? That they liked birds? That they thought that children like birds? That they are very good at asking questions? Something else?

4. *If you want to know who is your real friend and who is not, what kind of question could you ask to find out? If you can't think of a question right away, you may start by discussing the following alternatives:*

- *What kind of music do you like?*
- *If someone you know very well hit you in the face, what would you do?*
- *What is your opinion of me?*
- *How would you feel if I died?*
- *What is your reaction when people you know suddenly change attitudes and behaviour?*

What is the best question in your opinion? What is the worst? Why? Can you think of a better one?