

**ENGLISH AND
SCOTTISH
BALLADS, VOL. VIII**

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English and Scottish Ballads, Vol. VIII by Francis James Child

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FRANCIS JAMES CHILD

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SCOTTISH
BALLADS, VOL. VIII**

ENGLISH AND SCOTTISH

B A L L A D S.

EDITED BY

FRANCIS JAMES CHILD.

VOLUME VIII.

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BOOK VIII.

VOL. VIII.

1

KING JOHN AND THE ABBOT OF CANTERBURY.

Stories resembling that contained in the following ballad are to be met with in the literature of most of the nations of Europe ; for example, in the *Gesta Romanorum*, (No. XIX. and [XXXV.] of Madden's *Old English Versions*,) in the amusing German tale *Der Phaffe Amis*, 98-180, in *Eulenspiegel*, (Marbach, p. 28,) and the English *Owlglass* (31st Adventure in the recent edition), in the Grimm's *Kinder-und-Haus-märchen*, No. 152, in Sacchetti's *Novels*, No. 4, the *Patrañuelo* of Juan Timoneda, Alcalá, 1576 (Ritson, *Anc. Songs*, ii. 183), the *Contes à rire*, i. 182, (*Gent. Mag.* 65, i. 35,) etc., etc. *King John and the Abbot*, says Grundtvig (ii. 650), is universally known in Denmark in the form of a prose tale ; and a copy is printed in *Gamle danske Minder* (1854) No. 111, *The King and the Miller*.

Wynken de Worde, printed in 1511, a little collection of riddles, translated from the French, like those propounded by King John to the Abbot, with the title *Demaundes Joyous*. By this link the present ballad is connected with a curious class of compositions, peculiar to the Middle Ages—the Disputations, or Wit-Combats, of which the dialogues of Salomon and Marcolf (existing in many languages) are the most familiar, and those of Salomon and Saturn (in Anglo-Saxon) the oldest preserved specimens. These dialogues, in their earlier shape grave contests for

superiority in knowledge and wisdom, underwent a change about the twelfth century, by which they became essentially comic. The serious element, represented by Salomon, was retained after this, merely to afford material, or contrast, for the coarse humor of Marcolf, whose part it is, under the character of a rude and clownish person, "facie deformis et turpissimus," to turn the sententious observations of the royal sage into ludicrous parodies.*

The hint, and possibly a model, for these disputations may have been found in Jewish tradition. We learn from Josephus, (*Antiquities*, Book VIII. ch. v.) that Hiram of Tyre and Solomon sent one another sophisticated puzzles and enigmas to be solved, on condition of forfeiting large sums of money in case of failure, and that Solomon's riddles were all guessed by Abdamon of Tyre, or by Abdimus, his son, for authorities differ. This account coincides with what we read in *Chronicles*, (Book II. ch. ii. 13, 14,) of the man sent by Hiram to Solomon, who, besides a universal knowledge of the arts, was skilful "to find out every device that might be put to him" by cunning men—that is, apparently, "hard questions," such as the Queen of Sheba came to prove Solomon with,

* Among those nations who originated and developed the character of Marcolf (the German and the French) his fame has declined, but in Italy, where the legend was first introduced towards the end of the sixteenth century, his shrewd sayings, like the kindred jests of the *Eulenspiegel* in Germany, have an undiminished popularity, and his story, both in the form of a chap-book and of a satirical epic, (the *Bertoldo*,) is circulated throughout the length and breadth of the country, whence it has also been transplanted into Greece.