

## Old King Cole

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Old King Cole was a merry old soul,   And a merry old soul was he;   He called for his pipe and he called for his bowl   And he called for his fiddlers three.

Old King Cole was not always a king, nor was he born a member of any royal family. It was only chance--"hard luck" he used to call it--that made him a king at all.

He had always been a poor man, being the son of an apple peddler, who died and left him nothing but a donkey and a fiddle. But that was enough for Cole, who never bothered his head about the world's goods, but took things as they came and refused to worry about anything.

So, when the house he lived in, and the furniture, and even the applecart were sold to pay his father's debts, and he found himself left with the old fiddle that nobody wanted and the old donkey that no one would have--it being both vicious and unruly--he uttered no word of complaint. He simply straddled the donkey and took the fiddle under his arm and rode out into the world to seek his fortune.

When he came to a village he played a merry tune upon the fiddle and sang a merry song with it, and the people gave him food most willingly. There was no trouble about a place to sleep, for if he was denied a bed he lay down with the donkey in a barn, or even on the village green, and making a pillow of the donkey's neck he slept as soundly as anyone could in a bed of down.

And so he continued riding along and playing upon his fiddle for many years, until his head grew bald and his face was wrinkled and his bushy eyebrows became as white as snow. But his eyes never lost their merry twinkle, and he was just as fat and hearty as in his younger days, while, if you heard him singing his songs and scraping upon the old fiddle, you would know at once his heart was as young as ever.

He never guided the donkey, but let the beast go where it would, and so it happened that at last they came to Whatland, and entered one day the city where resided the King of that great country.

Now, even as Cole rode in upon his donkey the King of Whatland lay dying in his palace, surrounded by all the luxury of the court. And as he left no heir, and was the last of the royal line, the councilors and wise men of Whatland were in a great

quandary as to who should succeed him. But finally they bethought themselves of the laws of the land, and upon looking up the records they found in an old book a law that provided for just such a case as this.

"If the King dies," so read the law, "and there be no one to succeed to the throne, the prime minister shall be blinded and led from the palace into the main street of the city. And he shall stretch out his arms and walk about, and the first person he touches shall be crowned as King of the land."

The councilors were greatly pleased when they found this law, for it enabled them to solve the problem that confronted them. So when the King had breathed his last they blindfolded the prime minister and led him forth from the palace, and he began walking about with outstretched arms seeking someone to touch.

Of course the people knew nothing of this law, nor even that the old King was dead, and seeing the prime minister groping about blindfolded they kept out of his way, fearing they might be punished if he stumbled against them. But Cole was then riding along on the donkey, and did not even know it was the prime minister who was feeling about in such a funny way. So he began to laugh, and the minister, who had by this time grown tired of the game, heard the laugh and came toward the stranger and touched him, and immediately all the wise men and the councilors fell down before him and hailed him as King of Whatland!

Thus did the wandering fiddler become King Cole, and you may be sure he laughed more merrily than ever when they explained to him his good fortune.

They carried him within the palace and dressed him in purple and fine linen, and placed a crown of gold upon his bald head and a jeweled scepter in his wrinkled hand, and all this amused old King Cole very much. When he had been led to the great throne room and placed upon the throne of gold (where the silken cushions felt very soft and pleasant after his long ride upon the donkey's sharp back) the courtiers all knelt before him and asked what commands he wished to give, since everyone in the kingdom must now obey his slightest word.

"Oh well," said the new King, "I think the first thing I would like is my old pipe. You 'll find it in the pocket of the ragged coat I took off."

One of the officers of the court at once ran for the pipe, and when it was brought King Cole filled it with tobacco from his greasy pouch and lighted it, and you can imagine what a queer sight it was to see the fat King sitting upon the rich throne, dressed in silk, and satins and a golden crown, and smoking at the same time an old black pipe!

The councilors looked at each other in dismay, and the ladies of the court sneezed and coughed and seemed greatly shocked, and all this pleased old King Cole so much that he lay back in his throne and roared with laughter. Then the prime minister came forward very gravely, and bowing low he said,

"May it please your Majesty, it is not the custom of Kings to smoke a pipe while seated upon the throne."

"But it is my custom," answered Cole.

"It is impolite, and unkingly!" ventured the minister.

"Now, see here, old fellow," replied his Majesty, "I did n't ask to be King of this country; it 's all your own doing. All my life I have smoked whenever I wished, and if I can't do as I please here, why, I won't be king--so there!"

"But you must be the King, your Majesty, whether you want to or not. The law says so."

"If that 's the case," returned the King, "I can do as I please in other things. So you just run and get me a bowl of punch, there 's a good fellow."

The aged minister did not like to be addressed thus, but the King's commands must be obeyed; so, although the court was greatly horrified, he brought the bowl of punch, and the King pushed his crown onto the back of his head and drank heartily, and smacked his lips afterwards.

"That 's fine!" he said; "but say--what do you people do to amuse yourselves?"

"Whatever your Majesty commands," answered one of the councilors.

"What! must I amuse you as well as myself? Methinks it is no easy task to be a King if so many things are required of me. But I suppose it is useless to fret, since the law obliges me to reign in this great country against my will. Therefore will I make the best of my misfortune, and propose we have a dance, and forget our cares. Send at once for some fiddlers, and clear the room for our merrymaking, and for once in our lives we shall have a jolly good time!"

So one of the officers of the court went out and soon returned with three fiddlers, and when at the King's command they struck up a tune, the monarch was delighted, for every fiddler had a very fine fiddle and knew well how to use it.

Now, Old King Cole was a merry old soul, so he soon set all the ladies and gentlemen of the court to dancing, and he himself took off his crown and his ermine robe and laid them upon the throne, while he danced with the prettiest lady present till he was all out of breath.

Then he dismissed them, and they were all very well pleased with the new King, for they saw that, in spite of his odd ways, he had a kind heart, and would try to make everyone about him as merry as he was himself.

The next morning the King was informed that several of his subjects craved audience with him, as there were matters of dispute between them that must be settled. King Cole at first refused to see them, declaring he knew nothing of the quarrels of his subjects and they must manage their own affairs; but when the prime minister told him it was one of his duties as king, and the law required it, he could not do otherwise than submit. So he put on his crown and his ermine robe and sat upon the throne, although he grumbled a good deal at the necessity; for never having had any business of his own to attend to he thought it doubly hard that in his old age he must attend to the business of others.

The first case of dispute was between two men who each claimed to own a fine cow, and after hearing the evidence, the King ordered the cow to be killed and roasted and given to the poor, since that was the easiest way to decide the matter. Then followed a quarrel between two subjects over ten pieces of gold, one claiming the other owed him that sum. The King, thinking them both rascals, ordered the gold to be paid, and then he took it and scattered it amongst the beggars outside the palace.

By this time King Cole decided he had transacted enough business for one day, so he sent word to those outside that if anyone had a quarrel that was not just he should be severely punished; and, indeed, when the subjects learned the manner in which the King settled disputes, they were afraid to come to him, as both sides were sure to be losers by the decision. And that saved King Cole a lot of trouble thereafter, for the people thought best to settle their own differences.

The King, now seeing he was free to do as he pleased, retired to his private chamber, where he called for the three fiddlers and made them play for him while he smoked his pipe and drank a bowl of punch.

Every evening he had a dance in the palace; and every day there were picnics and merrymakings of all kinds, and before long King Cole had the reputation of having the merriest court in all the world.

He loved to feast and to smoke and to drink his punch, and he was never so merry as when others were merry with him, so that the three fiddlers were almost always by his side, and at any hour of the day you could hear sweet strains of music echoing through the palace.

Old King Cole did not forget the donkey that had been his constant companion for so long. He had a golden saddle made for him, with a saddle-cloth brodered

in gold and silver, and the bridle was studded with diamonds and precious stones, all taken from the King's treasury.

And when he rode out, the old fat King always bestrode the donkey, while his courtiers rode on either side of him upon their prancing chargers.

Old King Cole reigned for many years, and was generally beloved by his subjects; for he always gave liberally to all who asked, and was always as merry and happy as the day was long.

When he died the new King was found to be of a very different temper, and ruled the country with great severity; but this only served to make the memory of Old King Cole more tenderly cherished by his people, and they often sighed when they recalled his merry pranks, and the good times they enjoyed under his rule.