

PLEASANT HOURS

A PAPER FOR OUR YOUNG FOLK.

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Jack's Resolve.

If I were the king of a country as wide
As the sky on a bright summer day,"
Said Jack, with a nod, as he hunted about
In a wearied-to-death sort of way,
And my wealth and my power were
Limitless quite,
To do just the thing I might choose,
Do you know what I'd get with the gold
That I had?
How that wonderful power I'd use?
I would give the last cent that I had in
the world,
And I'd add my crown to the cost,
For a pencil," said he—then he paused
with a smile—
"For a pencil that 'couldn't' get lost!"

THE GREAT CHARTER.

BY HARRIET D. SLIDELL MACKENZIE.

Many pieces of old paper are worth their weight in gold. I will tell you of one that you could not buy for even so high a price as that. It is now in the British Museum, in London. It is old and worn. It is more than six hundred and sixty-six years old. It is not easy to realize how old that is. Kings have been born and died, nations have grown up and have wasted away, during that long time. There was no America—so far as the people who lived at that time knew—when this old paper was written upon. America was not discovered for nearly three hundred years after it. A king wrote his name on this old paper; and though he had written his name on many other pieces of paper, and they are lost, this one was very carefully kept from harm—though once it fell into the hands of a tailor, who was about to cut it up for patterns, and at another time it was almost destroyed by fire.

Visitors go to look at it with great interest. They find it a shrivelled piece of paper, with the king's name and the great seal of England on it; but they know that it stands for English liberty, and means that—as the poet Thomson wrote, in the song, "Rule Britannia"—

"BRITONS NEVER SHALL BE SLAVES."

"It is called the Magna Charta," which means simply the "Great Paper." There have been other great papers, and other papers that have been called "charters," but this one is known the world over as the "Great Paper."

As you look back into English history you will see that all the way along our ancestors have been striving with their might to be free. They were willing to have kings, but they wished to have them reasonable and not tyrannical. They had always to be on the watch; for every once in a while a king would arise who would try to take away some right or privilege which they had gained.

One of the modes of trial by "ordeal" was to put the prisoner into the water, and if he floated he was considered innocent, but if he drowned he was thought to have been guilty! Now I am sure that if I had to be tried in that way I should think it very hard, for it would make me out guilty the first time, and there would be no chance for another trial. I have no doubt that the "ordeal" removed many bad men from England, but I fear it removed some good ones too.

King John stands out among the sovereigns of England as one of the very worst. He was a bad son, and rebelled against his father, though his favourite child. He murdered his nephew, Arthur of Brittany, striking him down with his

own hands, and then pushing him head-long into the river Seine. And he was one of those who betrayed his brother Richard into a long imprisonment in Germany.

AS A KING HE WAS NO BETTER.

From the beginning to the end of his reign he was false and cruel; and no one, not even the highest and noblest, was safe from fines and taxes of the most tyrannical kind. Their only hope was in giving bribes to the sovereign, who, you know, should have been their protector and not their tormentor. There is no country in Europe in which the people are now treated in this way except Russia. One man actually was forced to pay for the privilege of eating his breakfast!

The great barons of England were many of them furious because they were treated in this way by the king, and joined in making a league by which they bound themselves to force the king to give them their rights. They waited until 1214. In that year, John called upon them to follow him to France, to fight against the French king. They had

When John heard what the barons had sworn to do, he fled to London, and shut himself up in a place that he thought safe. The barons had drawn up a charter, and they followed him to London to show it to him. It was the sixth of January, and he thought it would be safe to say that he would grant the charter at Easter, for he felt sure that he could raise an army in the meanwhile large enough to beat Langton and all the barons.

When Easter arrived, the barons met at Stamford. There were two thousand knights, followed by their esquires. I should like to have seen them as they rode about, their armour glistening in the spring sun, their banners flying, and their chargers neighing as they sniffed the air, which must have seemed to be filled with

THE STIMULUS OF FREEDOM.

They had the charter with them, and John, who was at Oxford, sent to see what it was like. When he found out its terms he was wild with fury, and sent word that he would never sign a paper that would make him a slave. He

that would avail on either side were power and force, and the king had already given way to them. The king almost immediately took his pen and wrote his name on the charter, and said that he did it on account of his pious regard for God, and his desire to benefit his people, though we know that he did not entertain any very pious motives at the time.

The Magna Charta was, as some one said,

THE GREAT PUBLIC ACT OF THE NATION

after it had realized that it was a nation—the completion of a work for which they had been labouring for a hundred years. It has been the foundation of English liberty ever since.

It begins by saying that the king grants these rights to his subjects "for the health of his soul." The charter then proclaims the liberty of the church and the liberty of the people.

"No freeman," it says, "shall be seized, or imprisoned, or outlawed, or in any way brought to ruin. We will not go against any man, nor send against him, except by legal judgment of his peers.

"To no man will we sell, or deny, or delay right or justice.

"No scrutage or aid—taxes—shall be imposed in our realm save by the Common Council."

But the best thing in the Magna Charta was that it

PROTECTED THE POOR.

It was declared that no man, whose goods were forfeited, should lose his means of making a living. The freeman was to keep his "contentment," or tools, the merchant his merchandise, and the villain, or serf, his "wainage"—his oxen, plough, and waggon. Foreign merchants might travel in England, and sell and buy as they pleased. And the towns were to have and use "all their liberties and free customs."

So a council of twenty-four nobles was then chosen to watch this king whom no man could trust, and to make war upon him if he broke his compact.

After the charter was signed and sealed, it was published throughout England, and sworn to at every town. The barons rejoiced; and Robert Fitzwalter wrote

letters calling upon the knights of England to come with arms and horses to a great tournament, at which the prize was to be a large she-bear.

During the rest of his life—only little more than a year—he tried in vain, by the help of the Pope's curse and by foreign soldiers' swords, to escape from these "over-kings," who would not suffer him to go back to his old habits of forcing money from Jews by pulling out their teeth, carrying off and poisoning young girls, starving women and children, and crushing old priests under coopes of lead. It was in a last attempt against his people's freedom that he saw his baggage, with the royal treasure, his crown, and the provision for his army, all swept away by a sudden rising of the tide. A few days later he died in Newark, saying, "I commit my body to St. Wulstan and my soul to God," the God whose laws he had rebelled against for so many years.

His son, Henry III., was crowned soon afterwards, and immediately made to swear to maintain Magna Charta, which was from that time the foundation of English law.

Thus was accomplished the great work of the English barons of the twelfth century.



SIGNING THE MAGNA CHARTA.

started, but left him at a certain point in the journey, saying that the terms of their allegiance to him did not compel them to serve him more than forty days. John thought that he would conquer the French first, and then go home and subdue the rebellious barons, but he made a wrong reckoning. He was beaten by the French king, Philip II., at the battle of Bouvines, in 1214, and he was glad to escape with his life. It was one of the greatest battles of the time.

Archbishop Langton had already taken up the part of the liberties of the people by warning the king against his arbitrary course, but John had told him, "Mind your Church, and leave me to govern the State."

This had not restrained Langton, and he had pledged his support to the old Saxon laws, with certain changes that had been made by the Normans. The barons solemnly vowed to conquer or die.

After the battle of Bouvines, John returned to England. It was towards the end of October, and about the middle of the next month, Langton called the barons together again—this time at Bury St. Edmunds—and they knelt at the altar of their old Saxon saint, to swear "new" to force the king to deal justly with the people.

thought that the king should be able to do what he pleased, and that the people had no rights that he was bound to respect.

John's answer roused the whole country, and the wretched king found himself powerless before the anger of the nation that he had wronged. He was powerless, however, and he said once more that he would sign the hated paper, though he did not speak of it in this way. He said, instead, that he was ready and willing to grant the demands of his "loving subjects" whenever they should appoint the time and place. They appointed the fifteenth of June as the time, and the Meadow of Council, or Runnymede, as the place.

To this meadow, consecrated to freedom by ancient associations, which lies off the Thames, below Windsor, came John, with a small train of twenty-four bishops and nobles, in their armour and robes. Of this small number there were but two who really wished success to the king. The others were, heart and soul, on the side of the barons.

The king encamped on the left bank of the river, and men from each of the contracting parties met on a little island between the hosts. It was not a time for discussion, for the only arguments