

ROUD 17

The Three Butchers

AKA: The Three Sportsmen, Three Jolly Butchers, Two Butchers, Three Huntsmen

Summary:

Honourable butcher Johnson, either with or without up to two companions, returning from a lucrative day of business, stops his horse at the sound of a damsel in distress. He finds a woman naked and tied up in the woods, apparently a victim of a robbery, so rescues her, only to be betrayed and killed himself.

Setting notes:

Often these songs are imbued with a moral lesson, and this one seems to be: don't be kind to naked women tied up in the woods, probably as an extension of the misogynistic patriarchal contention that women are not to be trusted, under any circumstances. Either way, the betrayal of the good Samaritan narrative is a fairly popular one in traditional song. The story comes from a 1678 broadside, originally titled "Three Worthy Butchers of the North". The number of butchers (or sportsmen, or hunters) sometimes varies, but you only really need one to object to Johnson rescuing the stricken woman, any more and you are just adding verses for the sake of it*. That said, I have stuck with the three men here, presuming one either remains silent, or scarpers before the action commences. These are mostly the words sung by Bob Scarce (though I have changed his sportsmen back to the original butchers), and it's from the remarkably in-your-face recording of Bob singing in the Ship Inn in 1953 that I took my initial inspiration, and in terms of melody it's quite similar to that found in Walter Pardon's more circumspect 1975 version, also recorded in Norfolk.

Suggested further listening:

"Three Huntsmen", Andy Irvine, *Abocurragh*

"Two Jolly Butchers", Walter Pardon, *A World Without Horses*

"The Three Huntsmen", The Foxglove Trio, *These Gathered Branches*

"Two Butchers", Martin Carthy, *Second Album*

"Three Jolly Sportsmen", Bob Scarce, *Singing at the Ship Inn*

"Three Huntsmen", Andy Irvine, *Abocurragh*

"Three Old Jolly Sportsmen", Patty Doran, *The Flax in Bloom*

* A favourite pastime of erstwhile ballad writers. Thankfully as time goes on, the oral tradition tends towards concision, partly due to the failing memories of the singers, and partly I'm sure due to the decreasing attention span of the audience.

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Traditional
Transcribed by Matt Quinn



It's of three jol - ly butch - ers as I've heard peo - ple say. They
took five hund - red gui - neas all on one mar - ket day.

As they were riding along the road / As fast as they could ride,
Saying, "Stop your horse," cried Johnson, / "For I hear a woman cry."

"But I shall not stop," said Lipston, / "I shall not stop," said he.
"I shall not stop," said Lipston, / "A robb'ed we shall be."

Now Johnson he got off his horse / To search the groves all round.
He found a woman stark naked / With her hair pinned to the ground.

Now Johnson being a valiant man, / A courage man so bold.
He took his coat from off his back / For to keep her from the cold.

Then Johnson he got on his horse / And the woman on behind,
She clasped her fingers to her ears / And she give three warning cries.

Now up stepped three young swaggering men / With swords all in their hands,
They bid him for to stop and stand, / And they bid him for to stand.

"I'll stop. I'll stand," cried Johnson, / "I'll stop. I'll stand," cried he.
"But I never was in all my life / Afraid of any three."

Now Johnson drew his glittering sword / And two of them he's slain.
Whilst he was killing the other one / The woman stabbed him behind.

"I must fall, I must fall," cried Johnson, / "I must fall upon the ground.
It's because of this wicked woman / She has caused my deathly wound."

Oh she shall be hung in chains of gold / For the murder she has done,
She has killed the finest butcher boy / That ever the sun shined on.