

BILLY BEG AND HIS BULL

BILLY BEG AND HIS BULL ADAPTED FROM *IN CHIMNEY CORNERS*, BY SEUMAS McMANUS.

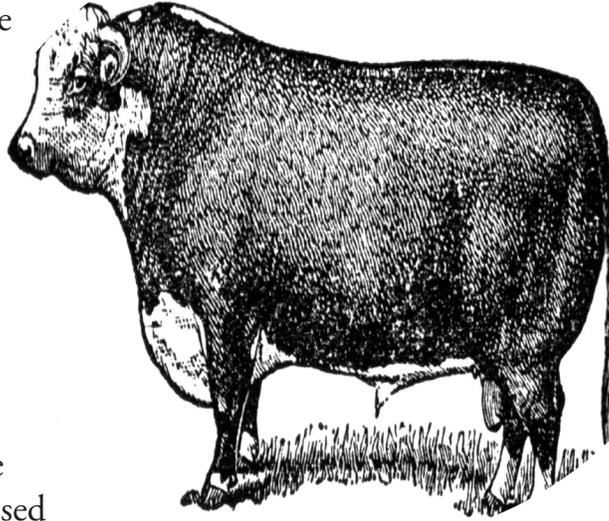
Once upon a time, there was a king and a queen, and they had one son, whose name was Billy. And Billy had a bull he was very fond of, and the bull was just as fond of him. And when the queen came to die, she put it as her last request to the king, that come what might, come what may, he'd not part Billy and the bull. And the king promised that, come what might, come what may, he would not. Then the good queen died, and was buried.

After a time, the king married again, and the new queen could not abide Billy; no more could she stand the bull, seeing him and Billy so thick. So she asked the king to have the bull killed. But the king said he had promised, come what might, come what may, he'd not part Billy Beg and his bull, so he could not.

Then the queen sent for the Hen-Wife, and asked what she should do. "What will you give me," said the Hen-Wife, "and I'll very soon part them?"

"Anything at all," said the queen.

"Then do you take to your bed, very sick with a complaint," said the Hen-Wife, "and I'll do the rest."



So the queen took to her bed, very sick with a complaint, and the king came to see what could be done for her. "I shall never be better of this," she said, "till I have the medicine the Hen-Wife ordered."

"What is that?" said the king.

"A mouthful of the blood of Billy Beg's bull."

"I can't give you that," said the king, and went away, sorrowful.

Then the queen got sicker and sicker, and each time the king asked what would cure her she said, "A mouthful of the blood of Billy Beg's bull." And at last it looked as if she were going to die. So the king finally set a day for the bull to be killed. At that the queen was so happy that she laid plans to get up and see the grand sight. All the people were to be at the killing, and it was to be a great affair.

When Billy Beg heard all this, he was very sorrowful, and the bull noticed his looks.

“What are you ditherin’ about?” said the bull to him. So Billy told him. “Don’t fret yourself about me,” said the bull, “it’s not I that’ll be killed!”

The day came, when Billy Beg’s bull was to be killed; all the people were there, and the queen, and Billy. And the bull was led out, to be seen. When he was led past Billy he bent his head. “Jump on my back, Billy, my boy,” says he, “till I see what kind of a horseman you are!” Billy jumped on his back, and with that the bull leaped nine miles high and nine miles broad and came down with Billy sticking between his horns. Then away he rushed, over the head of the queen, killing her dead, where you wouldn’t know day by night or night by day, over high hills, low hills, sheep walks and bullock traces, the Cove o’ Cork, and old Tom Fox with his bugle horn.

When at last he stopped he said, “Now, Billy, my boy, you and I must undergo great scenery; there’s a mighty great bull of the forest I must fight, here, and he’ll be hard to fight, but I’ll be able for him. But first we must have dinner. Put your hand in my left ear and pull out the napkin you’ll find there, and when you’ve spread it, it will be covered with eating and drinking fit for a king.”

So Billy put his hand in the bull’s left ear, and drew out the napkin, and spread it; and, sure enough, it was spread with all kinds of eating and drinking, fit for a king. And Billy Beg ate well.

But just as he finished he heard a great roar, and out of the forest came a mighty bull, snorting and running.

And the two bulls at it and fought. They knocked the hard ground into soft, the soft into hard, the rocks into spring wells, and the spring wells into rocks. It was a terrible fight. But in the end, Billy Beg’s bull was too much for the other bull, and he killed him, and drank his blood.

Then Billy jumped on the bull’s back, and the bull off and away, where you wouldn’t know day from night or night from day, over high hills, low hills, sheep walks and bullock traces, the Cove o’ Cork, and old Tom Fox with his bugle horn. And when he stopped he told Billy to put his hand in his left ear and pull out the napkin, because he’d to fight another great bull of the forest. So Billy pulled out the napkin and spread it, and it was covered with all kinds of eating and drinking, fit for a king.

And, sure enough, just as Billy finished eating, there was a frightful roar, and a mighty great bull, greater than the first, rushed out of the forest. And the two bulls at it and fought. It was a terrible fight! They knocked the hard ground into soft, the soft into hard, the rocks into spring wells, and the spring wells into rocks. But in the end, Billy Beg’s bull killed the other bull, and drank his blood.

Then he off and away, with Billy.

But when he came down, he told Billy Beg that he was to fight another bull, the brother

of the other two, and that this time the other bull would be too much for him, and would kill him and drink his blood.

“When I am dead, Billy, my boy,” he said, “put your hand in my left ear and draw out the napkin, and you’ll never want for eating or drinking; and put your hand in my right ear, and you’ll find a stick there, that will turn into a sword if you wave it three times round your head, and give you the strength of a thousand men beside your own. Keep that; then cut a strip of my hide, for a belt, for when you buckle it on, there’s nothing can kill you.”

Billy Beg was very sad to hear that his friend must die. And very soon he heard a more dreadful roar than ever he heard, and a tremendous bull rushed out of the forest. Then came the worst fight of all. In the end, the other bull was too much for Billy Beg’s bull, and he killed him and drank his blood.

Billy Beg sat down and cried for three days and three nights. After that he was hungry; so he put his hand in the bull’s left ear, and drew out the napkin, and ate all kinds of eating and drinking. Then he put his hand in the right ear and pulled out the stick which was to turn into a sword if waved round his head three times, and to give him the strength of a thousand men beside his own. And he cut a strip of the hide for a belt, and started off on his adventures.

Presently he came to a fine place; an old gentleman lived there. So Billy went up and

knocked, and the old gentleman came to the door.

“Are you wanting a boy?” says Billy.

“I am wanting a herd-boy,” says the gentleman, “to take my six cows, six horses, six donkeys, and six goats to pasture every morning, and bring them back at night. Maybe you’d do.”

“What are the wages?” says Billy.

“Oh, well,” says the gentleman, “it’s no use to talk of that now; there’s three giants live in the wood by the pasture, and every day they drink up all the milk and kill the boy that looks after the cattle; so we’ll wait to talk about wages till we see if you come back alive.”

“All right,” says Billy, and he entered service with the old gentleman.

The first day, he drove the six cows, six horses, six donkeys, and six goats to pasture, and sat down by them. About noon he heard a kind of roaring from the wood; and out rushed a giant with two heads, spitting fire out of his two mouths.

“Oh, my fine fellow,” says he to Billy, “you are too big for one swallow and not big enough for two; how would you like to die, then? By a cut with the sword, a blow with the fist, or a swing by the back?”

“That is as may be,” says Billy, “but I’ll fight you.” And he buckled on his hide belt, and swung his stick three times round his head, to give him the strength of a thousand men besides his own, and went for the giant. And at the first grapple Billy Beg lifted the

giant up and sunk him in the ground, to his armpits.

“Oh, mercy, mercy! Spare my life!” cried the giant.

“I think not,” said Billy; and he cut off his heads.

That night, when the cows and the goats were driven home, they gave so much milk that all the dishes in the house were filled, and the milk ran over and made a little brook in the yard.

“This is very odd,” said the old gentleman; “they never gave any milk before. Did you see nothing in the pasture?”

“Nothing worse than myself,” said Billy. And next morning he drove the six cows, six horses, six donkeys, and six goats to pasture again.

Just before noon he heard a terrific roar; and out of the wood came a giant with six heads.

“You killed my brother,” he roared, fire coming out of his six mouths, “and I’ll very soon have your blood! Will you die by a cut of the sword, or a swing by the back?”

“I’ll fight you,” said Billy. And buckling on his belt and swinging his stick three times round his head, he ran in and grappled the giant. At the first hold, he sunk the giant up to the shoulders in the ground.

“Mercy, mercy, kind gentleman!” cried the giant. “Spare my life!”

“I think not,” said Billy, and cut off his heads.

That night the cattle gave so much milk that it ran out of the house and made a stream, and turned a mill wheel which had not been turned for seven years!

“It’s certainly very queer,” said the old gentleman; “did you see nothing in the pasture, Billy?”

“Nothing worse than myself,” said Billy.

And the next morning the gentleman said, “Billy, do you know, I only heard one of the giants roaring in the night, and the night before only two. What can ail them, at all?”

“Oh, maybe they are sick or something,” says Billy; and with that he drove the six cows, six horses, six donkeys, and six goats to pasture.

At about ten o’clock there was a roar like a dozen bulls, and the brother of the two giants came out of the wood, with twelve heads on him, and fire spouting from every one of them.

“I’ll have you, my fine boy,” cries he; “how will you die, then?”

“We’ll see,” says Billy; “come on!”

And swinging his stick round his head, he made for the giant, and drove him up to his twelve necks in the ground. All twelve of the heads began begging for mercy, but Billy soon cut them short. Then he drove the beasts home.

And that night the milk overflowed the mill-stream and made a lake, nine miles long, nine miles broad, and nine miles deep; and

there are salmon and whitefish there to this day.

“You are a fine boy,” said the gentleman, “and I’ll give you wages.”

So Billy was heard.

The next day, his master told him to look after the house while he went up to the king’s town, to see a great sight. “What will it be?” said Billy.

“The king’s daughter is to be eaten by a fiery dragon,” said his master, “unless the champion fighter they’ve been feeding for six weeks on purpose kills the dragon.”

“Oh,” said Billy.

After he was left alone, there were people passing on horses and afoot, in coaches and chaises, in carriages and in wheelbarrows, all going to see the great sight. And all asked Billy why he was not on his way. But Billy said he didn’t care about going.

When the last passer-by was out of sight, Billy ran and dressed himself in his master’s best suit of clothes, took the brown mare from the stable, and was off to the king’s town.

When he came there, he saw a big round place with great high seats built up around it, and all the people sitting there. Down in the midst was the champion, walking up and down proudly, with two men behind him to carry his heavy sword. And up in the centre of the seats was the princess, with her maidens; she was looking very pretty, but nervous.

The fight was about to begin when Billy got there, and the herald was crying out how

the champion would fight the dragon for the princess’s sake, when suddenly there was heard a fearsome great roaring, and the people shouted, “Here he is now, the dragon!”

The dragon had more heads than the biggest of the giants, and fire and smoke came from every one of them. And when the champion saw the creature, he never waited even to take his sword,—he turned and ran; and he never stopped till he came to a deep well, where he jumped in and hid himself, up to the neck.

When the princess saw that her champion was gone, she began wringing her hands, and crying, “Oh, please, kind gentlemen, fight the dragon, some of you, and keep me from being eaten! Will no one fight the dragon for me?” But no one stepped up, at all. And the dragon made to eat the princess.

Just then, out stepped Billy from the crowd, with his fine suit of clothes and his hide belt on him. “I’ll fight the beast,” he says, and swinging his stick three times round his head, to give him the strength of a thousand men besides his own, he walked up to the dragon, with easy gait. The princess and all the people were looking, you may be sure, and the dragon raged at Billy with all his mouths, and they at it and fought. It was a terrible fight, but in the end Billy Beg had the dragon down, and he cut off his heads with the sword.

There was great shouting, then, and crying that the strange champion must come to the king to be made prince, and to the princess,

to be seen. But in the midst of the hullabaloo Billy Beg slips on the brown mare and is off and away before anyone has seen his face. But, quick as he was, he was not so quick but that the princess caught hold of him as he jumped on his horse, and he got away with one shoe left in her hand. And home he rode, to his master's house, and had his old clothes on and the mare in the stable before his master came back.

When his master came back, he had a great tale for Billy, how the princess's champion had run from the dragon, and a strange knight had come out of the clouds and killed the dragon, and before anyone could stop him had disappeared in the sky. "Wasn't it wonderful?" said the old gentleman to Billy.

"I should say so," said Billy to him.

Soon there was proclamation made that the man who killed the dragon was to be found, and to be made son of the king and husband of the princess; for that, everyone should come up to the king's town and try on the shoe which the princess had pulled from off the foot of the strange champion, that he whom it fitted should be known to be the man. On the day set, there was passing of coaches and chaises, of carriages and wheelbarrows, people on horseback and afoot, and Billy's master was the first to go.

While Billy was watching, at last came along a raggedy man.

"Will you change clothes with me, and I'll give you boot?" said Billy to him.

"Shame to you to mock a poor raggedy man!" said the raggedy man to Billy.

"It's no mock," said Billy, and he changed clothes with the raggedy man, and gave him boot.

When Billy came to the king's town, in his dreadful old clothes, no one knew him for the champion at all, and none would let him come forward to try the shoe. But after all had tried, Billy spoke up that he wanted to try. They laughed at him, and pushed him back, with his rags. But the princess would have it that he should try. "I like his face," said she; "let him try, now."

So up stepped Billy, and put on the shoe, and it fitted him like his own skin.

Then Billy confessed that it was he that killed the dragon. And that he was a king's son. And they put a velvet suit on him, and hung a gold chain round his neck, and everyone said a finer-looking boy they'd never seen.

So Billy married the princess, and was the prince of that place.