



# *The Bee, the Harp, the Mouse and the Bum-Clock*

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Irish

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*Intermediate*

*16 min read*

Once there was a widow, and she had one son, called Jack. Jack and his mother owned just three cows. They lived well and happy for a long time; but at last hard times came down on them, and the crops failed, and poverty looked in at the door, and things got so sore against the poor widow that for want of money and for want of necessities she had to make up her mind to sell one of the cows. “Jack,” she said one night, “go over in the morning to the fair to sell the branny cow.”

Well and good: in the morning my brave Jack was up early, and took a stick in his fist and turned out the cow, and off to the fair he went with her; and when Jack came into the fair, he saw a great crowd gathered in a ring in the street. He went into the crowd to see what they were looking at, and there in the middle of them he saw a man with a wee, wee Harp, a Mouse, and a Bum-clock (Cockroach), and a Bee to play the harp. And when the man put them down on the ground and whistled, the Bee began to play the Harp, and the Mouse and the Bum-clock stood up on their hind legs and got hold of each other and began to waltz. And as soon as the Harp began to play and the Mouse and the Bum-clock to dance, there wasn't a man or woman, or a thing in the fair, that didn't begin to dance also; and the pots and pans, and the wheels and reels jumped and jigged, all over the town, and Jack himself and the branny cow were as bad as the next.

There was never a town in such a state before or since, and after a while the man picked up the Bee, the Harp, and the Mouse, and the Bum-clock and put them into his pocket, and the men and women, Jack and the cow, the pots and pans, wheels and reels, that had hopped and jigged, now stopped, and everyone began to laugh as if to break its heart. Then the man turned to Jack. "Jack," says he, "how would you like to be master of all these animals?"

"Why," says Jack, "I should like it fine."

"Well, then," says the man, "how will you and me make a bargain about them?"

"I have no money," says Jack.

"But you have a fine cow," says the man. "I will give you the Bee and the Harp for it."

"O, but," Jack says, says he, "my poor mother at home is very sad and sorrowful entirely, and I have this cow to sell and lift her heart again."

"And better than this she cannot get," says the man. "For when she sees the Bee play the Harp, she will laugh if she never laughed in her life before."

"Well," says Jack, says he, "that will be grand."

He made the bargain. The man took the cow; and Jack started home with the Bee and the Harp in his pocket, and when he came home, his mother welcomed him back.

"And, Jack," says she, "I see you have sold the cow."

"I have done that," says Jack.

"Did you do well?" says the mother.

"I did well, and very well," says Jack.

"How much did you get for her?" says the mother.

"O," says he, "it was not for money at all I sold her, but for something far better."

“O, Jack! Jack!” says she, “what have you done?”

“Just wait until you see, mother,” says he, “and you will soon say I have done well.”

Out of his pocket he takes the Bee and the Harp and sets them in the middle of the floor, and whistles to them, and as soon as he did this the Bee began to play the Harp, and the mother she looked at them and let a big, great laugh out of her, and she and Jack began to dance, the pots and pans, the wheels and reels began to jig and dance over the floor, and the house itself hopped about also.

When Jack picked up the Bee and the Harp again the dancing all stopped, and the mother laughed for a long time. But when she came to herself, she got very angry entirely with Jack, and she told him he was a silly, foolish fellow, that there was neither food nor money in the house, and now he had lost one of her good cows also. “We must do something to live,” says she. “Over to the fair you must go to-morrow morning, and take the black cow with you and sell her.”

And off in the morning at an early hour brave Jack started, and never halted until he was in the fair. When he came into the fair, he saw a big crowd gathered in a ring in the street. Said Jack to himself, “I wonder what are they looking at.”

Into the crowd he pushed, and saw the wee man this day again with a Mouse and a Bum-clock, and he put them down in the street and whistled. The Mouse and the Bum-clock stood up on their hind legs and got hold of each other and began to dance there and jig, and as they did there was not a man or woman in the street who didn't begin to jig also, and Jack and the black cow, and the wheels and the reels, and the pots and pans, all of them were jiggling and dancing all over the town, and the houses themselves were jumping and hopping about, and such a place Jack or any one else never saw before.

When the man lifted the Mouse and the Bum-clock into his pocket, they all stopped dancing and settled down, and everybody laughed right hearty. The man turned to Jack. “Jack,” said he, “I am glad to see you; how would you like to have these animals?”

“I should like well to have them,” says Jack, says he, “only I cannot.”

“Why cannot you?” says the man.

“O,” says Jack, says he, “I have no money, and my poor mother is very down-hearted. She sent me to the fair to

sell this cow and bring some money to lift her heart.”

“O,” says the man, says he, “if you want to lift your mother’s heart I will sell you the Mouse, and when you set the Bee to play the Harp and the Mouse to dance to it, your mother will laugh if she never laughed in her life before.”

“But I have no money,” says Jack, says he, “to buy your Mouse.”

“I don’t mind,” says the man, says he, “I will take your cow for it.”

Poor Jack was so taken with the Mouse and had his mind so set on it, that he thought it was a grand bargain entirely, and he gave the man his cow, and took the Mouse and started [Pg 30] off for home, and when he got home his mother welcomed him.

“Jack,” says she, “I see you have sold the cow.”

“I did that,” says Jack.

“Did you sell her well?” says she.

“Very well indeed,” says Jack, says he.

“How much did you get for her?”

“I didn’t get money,” says he, “but I got value.”

“O, Jack! Jack!” says she, “what do you mean?”

“I will soon show you that, mother,” says he, taking the Mouse out of his pocket and the Harp and the Bee and setting all on the floor; and when he began to whistle the Bee began to play, and the Mouse go up on its hind legs and began to dance and jig, and the mother gave such a hearty laugh as she never laughed in her life before. To dancing and jigging herself and Jack fell, and the pots and pans and the wheels and reels began to dance and jig over the floor, and the house jiggled also. And when they were tired of this, Jack lifted the Harp and the Mouse and the Bee and put them in his pocket, and his mother she laughed for a long time.

But when she got over that she got very down-hearted and very angry entirely with Jack. “And O, Jack,” she says, “you are a stupid good-for-nothing fellow. We have neither money nor meat in the house, and here you

have lost two of my good cows, and I have only one left now. To-morrow morning," she says, "you must be up early and take this cow to the fair and sell her. See to get something to lift my heart up."

"I will do that," says Jack, says he. So he went to his bed, and early in the morning he was up and turned out the spotty cow and went to the fair.

When Jack got to the fair, he saw a crowd gathered in a ring in the street. "I wonder what they are looking at, anyhow," says he. He pushed through the crowd, and there he saw the same wee man he had seen before, with a Bum-clock; and when he put the Bum-clock on the ground, he whistled, and the Bum-clock began to dance, and the men, women, and children in the street, and Jack and the spotty cow began to dance and jig also, and everything on the street and about it, the wheels and reels, the pots and pans, began to jig, and the houses themselves began to dance likewise. And when the man lifted the Bum-clock and put it in his pocket, everybody stopped jiggling and dancing and everyone laughed loud. The wee man turned, and saw Jack.

"Jack, my brave boy," says he, "you will never be right fixed until you have this Bum-clock, for it is a very fancy thing to have."

"O, but," says Jack, says he, "I have no money."

"No matter for that," says the man; "you have a cow, and that is as good as money to me."

"Well," says Jack, "I have a poor mother who is very down-hearted at home, and she sent me to the fair to sell this cow and raise some money and lift her heart."

"O, but Jack," says the wee man, "this Bum-clock is the very thing to lift her heart, for when you put down your Harp and Bee and Mouse on the floor, and put the Bum-clock along with them, she will laugh if she never laughed in her life before."

"Well, that is surely true," says Jack, says he, "and I think I will make a swap with you."

So Jack gave the cow to the man and took the Bum-clock himself, and started for home. His mother was glad to see Jack back, and says she, "Jack, I see that you have sold the cow."

"I did that, mother," says Jack.

“Did you sell her well, Jack?” says the mother.

“Very well indeed, mother,” says Jack.

“How much did you get for her?” says the mother.

“I didn’t take any money for her, mother, but value,” says Jack, and he takes out of his pocket the Bum-clock and the Mouse, and set them on the floor and began to whistle, and the Bee began to play the Harp and the Mouse and the Bum-clock stood up on their hind legs and began to dance, and Jack’s mother laughed very hearty, and everything in the house, the wheels and the reels, and the pots and pans, went jigging and hopping over the floor, and the house itself went jigging and hopping about likewise.

When Jack lifted up the animals and put them in his pocket, everything stopped, and the mother laughed for a good while. But after a while, when she came to herself, and saw what Jack had done and how they were now without either money, or food, or a cow, she got very, very angry at Jack, and scolded him hard, and then sat down and began to cry.

Poor Jack, when he looked at himself, confessed that he was a stupid fool entirely. “And what,” says he, “shall I now do for my poor mother?” He went out along the road, thinking and thinking, and he met a wee woman who said, “Good-morrow to you, Jack,” says she, “how is it you are not trying for the king’s daughter of Ireland?”

“What do you mean?” says Jack.

Says she: “Didn’t you hear what the whole world has heard, that the King of Ireland has a daughter who hasn’t laughed for seven years, and he has promised to give her in marriage, and to give the kingdom along with her to any man who will take three laughs out of her.”

“If that is so,” says Jack, says he, “it is not here I should be.”

Back to the house he went, and gathers together the Bee, the Harp, the Mouse, and the Bum-clock, and putting them into his pocket, he bade his mother good-bye, and told her it wouldn’t be long till she got news from him, and off he hurries.

When he reached the castle, there was a ring of spikes all round the castle and men’s heads on nearly every

spike there.

“What heads are these?” Jack asked one of the king’s soldiers.

“Any man that comes here trying to win the king’s daughter and fails to make her laugh three times, loses his head and has it stuck on a spike. These are the heads of the men that failed,” says he.

“A mighty big crowd,” says Jack, says he. Then Jack sent word to tell the king’s daughter and the king that there was a new man who had come to win her.

In a very little time the king and the king’s daughter and the king’s court all came out and sat themselves down on gold and silver chairs in front of the castle, and ordered Jack to be brought in until he should have his trial. Jack, before he went, took out of his pocket the Bee, the Harp, the Mouse, the Bum-clock, and he gave the Harp to the Bee, and he tied a string to one and the other, and took the end of the string himself, and marched into the castle yard before all the court, with his animals coming on a string behind him.

When the queen and the king and the court and the princes saw poor ragged Jack with his Bee, and Mouse, and Bum-clock hopping behind him on a string, they set up one roar of laughter that was long and loud enough, and when the king’s daughter herself lifted her head and looked to see what they were laughing at, and saw Jack and his paraphernalia, she opened her mouth and she let out of her such a laugh as was never heard before.

Then Jack dropped a low courtesy, and said, “Thank you, my lady; I have one of the three parts of you won.”

Then he drew up his animals in a circle, and began to whistle, and the minute he did, the Bee began to play the Harp, and the Mouse and the Bum-clock stood up on their hind legs, got hold of each other, and began to dance, and the king and the king’s court and Jack himself began to dance and jig, and everything about the king’s castle, pots and pans, wheels and reels, and the castle itself began to dance also. And the king’s daughter, when she saw this, opened her mouth again, and let out of her a laugh twice louder than she let before, and Jack, in the middle of his jiggling, drops another courtesy, and says, “Thank you, my lady; that is two of the three parts of you won.”

Jack and his menagerie went on playing and dancing, but Jack could not get the third laugh out of the king’s daughter, and the poor fellow saw his big head in danger of going on the spike. Then the brave Mouse came to Jack’s help and wheeled round upon its heel, and at it did so its tail swiped into the Bum-clock’s mouth, and the

Bum-clock began to cough and cough and cough. And when the king's daughter saw this she opened her mouth again, and she let the loudest and hardest and merriest laugh that was ever heard before or since; and, "Thank you, my lady," says Jack, dropping another courtesy; "I have all of you won."

Then when Jack stopped his menagerie, the king took himself and the menagerie within the castle. He was washed and combed, and dressed in a suit of silk and satin, with all kinds of gold and silver ornaments, and then was led before the king's daughter. And true enough she confessed that a handsomer and finer fellow than Jack she had never seen, and she was very willing to be his wife.

Jack sent for his poor old mother and brought her to the wedding, which lasted nine days and nine nights, every night better than the other. All the lords and ladies and gentry of Ireland were at the wedding. I was at it, too, and got brogues, broth and slippers of bread and came jigging home on my head.

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