



Coat O'Clay

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English

Easy

10 min read

Once on a time, in the parts of Lindsey, there lived a wise woman. Some said she was a witch, but they said it in a whisper, lest she should overhear and do them a mischief, and truly it was not a thing one could be sure of, for she was never known to hurt any one, which, if she were a witch, she would have been sure to do. But she could tell you what your sickness was, and how to cure it with herbs, and she could mix rare possets that would drive the pain out of you in a twinkling; and she could advise you what to do if your cows were ill, or if you'd got into trouble, and tell the maids whether their sweethearts were likely to be faithful.

But she was ill-pleased if folks questioned her too much or too long, and she sore disliked fools. A many came to her asking foolish things, as was their nature, and to them she never gave counsel—at least of a kind that could aid them much.

Well, one day, as she sat at her door paring potatoes, over the stile and up the path came a tall lad with a long nose and goggle eyes and his hands in his pockets.

“That’s a fool, if ever was one, and a fool’s luck in his face,” said the wise woman to herself with a nod of her head, and threw a potato skin over her left shoulder to keep off ill-chance.

“Good-day, missis,” said the fool. “I be come to see thee.”

“So thou art,” said the wise woman; “I see that. How’s all in thy folk this year?”

“Oh, fairly,” answered he. “But they say I be a fool.”

“Ay, so thou art,” nodded she, and threw away a bad potato. “I see that too. But wouldst o’ me? I keep no brains for sale.”

“Well, see now. Mother says I’ll ne’er be wiser all my born days; but folks tell us thou canst do everything. Can’t thee teach me a bit, so they’ll think me a clever fellow at home?”

“Hout-tout!” said the wise woman; “thou ‘rt a bigger fool than I thought. Nay, I can’t teach thee nought, lad; but I tell thee summat. Thou ‘lt be a fool all thy days till thou gets a coat o’ clay; and then thou ‘lt know more than me.”

“Hi, missis; what sort of a coat’s that?” said he.

“That’s none o’ my business,” answered she, “Thou ‘st got to find out that.”

And she took up her potatoes and went into her house.

The fool took off his cap and scratched his head.

“It’s a queer kind of coat to look for, sure-ly,” said he, “I never heard of a coat o’ clay. But then I be a fool, that’s true.”

So he walked on till he came to the drain near by, with just a pickle of water and a foot of mud in it.

“Here’s muck,” said the fool, much pleased, and he got in and rolled in it spluttering. “Hi, yi!” said he—for he had his mouth full—“I’ve got a coat o’ clay now to be sure. I’ll go home and tell my mother I’m a wise man and not a fool any longer.” And he went on home.

Presently he came to a cottage with a lass at the door.

“Morning, fool,” said she; “hast thou been ducked in the horse-pond?”

“Fool yourself,” said he, “the wise woman says I’ll know more ‘n she when I get a coat o’ clay, and here it is. Shall I marry thee, lass?”

“Ay,” said she, for she thought she’d like a fool for a husband, “when shall it be?”

“I’ll come and fetch thee when I’ve told my mother,” said the fool, and he gave her his lucky penny and went on.

When he got home his mother was on the doorstep.

“Mother, I ‘ve got a coat o’ clay,” said he.

“Coat o’ muck,” said she; “and what of that?”

“Wise woman said I’d know more than she when I got a coat o’ clay,” said he, “so I down in the drain and got one, and I’m not a fool any longer.”

“Very good,” said his mother, “now thou canst get a wife.”

“Ay,” said he, “I’m going to marry so-an’-so.”

“What!” said his mother, “that lass? No, and that thou ‘lt not. She’s nought but a brat, with ne’er a cow or a cabbage o’ her own.”

“But I gave her my luck penny,” said the fool.

“Then thou ‘rt a bigger fool than ever, for all thy coat o’ clay!” said his mother, and banged the door in his face.

“Dang it!” said the fool, and scratched his head, “that’s not the right sort o’ clay sure-ly.”

So back he went to the highroad and sat down on the bank of the river close by, looking at the water, which was cool and clear.

By-and-by he fell asleep, and before he knew what he was about—plump—he rolled off into the river with a splash, and scrambled out, dripping like a drowned rat.

“Dear, dear,” said he, “I’d better go and get dry in the sun.” So up he went to the highroad, and lay down in the dust, rolling about so that the sun should get at him all over.

Presently, when he sat up and looked down at himself, he found that the dust had caked into a sort of skin over his wet clothes till you could not see an inch of them, they were so well covered. “Hi, yi!” said he, “here’s a coat o’ clay ready made, and a fine one. See now, I’m a clever fellow this time sure-ly, for I’ve found what I wanted without looking for it! Wow, but it’s a fine feeling to be so smart!”

And he sat and scratched his head, and thought about his own cleverness.

But all of a sudden, round the corner came the squire on horseback, full gallop, as if the boggles were after him; but the fool had to jump, even though the squire pulled his horse back on his haunches.

“What the dickens,” said the squire, “do you mean by lying in the middle of the road like that?”

“Well, master,” said the fool, “I fell into the water and got wet, so I lay down in the road to get dry; and I lay down a fool an’ got up a wise man.”

“How’s that?” said the squire.

So the fool told him about the wise woman and the coat o’ clay.

“Ah, ah!” laughed the squire, “whoever heard of a wise man lying in the middle of the highroad to be ridden over? Lad, take my word for it, you are a bigger fool than ever,” and he rode on laughing.

“Dang it!” said the fool, as he scratched his head. “I’ve not got the right sort of coat yet, then.” And he choked and spluttered in the dust that the squire’s horse had raised.

So on he went in a melancholy mood till he came to an inn, and the landlord at his door smoking.

“Well, fool,” said he, “thou ‘rt fine and dirty.”

“Ay,” said the fool, “I be dirty outside an’ dusty in, but it’s not the right thing yet.”

And he told the landlord all about the wise woman and the coat o’ clay.

“Hout-tout!” said the landlord, with a wink. “I know what’s wrong. Thou ‘st got a skin o’ dirt outside and all dry dust inside. Thou must moisten it, lad, with a good drink, and then thou ‘lt have a real all-over coat o’ clay.”

“Hi,” said the fool, “that’s a good word.”

So down he sat and began to drink. But it was wonderful how much liquor it took to moisten so much dust; and each time he got to the bottom of the pot he found he was still dry. At last he began to feel very merry and pleased with himself.

“Hi, yi!” said he. “I’ve got a real coat o’ clay now outside and in—what a difference it do make, to be sure. I feel another man now—so smart.”

And he told the landlord he was certainly a wise man now, though he couldn’t speak over-distinctly after drinking so much. So up he got, and thought he would go home and tell his mother she hadn’t a fool for a son any more.

But just as he was trying to get through the inn-door which would scarcely keep still long enough for him to find it, up came the landlord and caught him by the sleeve.

“See here, master,” said he, “thou hasn’t paid for thy score—where’s thy money?”

“Haven’t any!” said the fool, and pulled out his pockets to show they were empty.

“What!” said the landlord, and swore; “thou ‘st drunk all my liquor and haven’t got nought to pay for it with!”

“Hi!” said the fool. “You told me to drink so as to get a coat o’ clay; but as I’m a wise man now I don’t mind helping thee along in the world a bit, for though I’m a smart fellow I’m not too proud to my friends.”

“Wise man! smart fellow!” said the landlord, “and help me along, wilt thee? Dang it! thou ‘rt the biggest fool I ever saw, and it’s I’ll help thee first—out o’ this!”

And he kicked him out of the door into the road and swore at him.

“Hum,” said the fool, as he lay in the dust, “I’m not so wise as I thought. I guess I’ll go back to the wise woman and tell her there’s a screw loose somewhere.”

So up he got and went along to her house, and found her sitting at the door.

“So thou ‘rt come back,” said she, with a nod. “What dost thou want with me now?”

So he sat down and told her how he’d tried to get a coat o’ clay, and he wasn’t any wiser for all of it.

“No,” said the wise woman, “thou ‘rt a bigger fool than ever, my lad.”

“So they all say,” sighed the fool; “but where can I get the right sort of coat o’ clay, then, missis?”

“When thou ‘rt done with this world, and thy folk put thee in the ground,” said the wise woman. “That’s the only coat o’ clay as ‘ll make such as thee wise, lad. Born a fool, die a fool, and be a fool thy life long, and that’s the truth!”

And she went into the house and shut the door.

“Dang it,” said the fool. “I must tell my mother she was right after all, and that she’ll never have a wise man for a son!”

And he went off home.

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