

The Three Sillies

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Once upon a time, when folk were not so wise as they are nowadays, there lived a farmer and his wife who had one daughter. And she, being a pretty lass, was courted by the young squire when he came home from his travels.

Now every evening he would stroll over from the Hall to see her and stop to supper in the farmhouse, and every evening the daughter would go down into the cellar to draw the cider for supper.

So one evening when she had gone down to draw the cider and had turned the tap as usual, she happened to look up at the ceiling, and there she saw a big wooden mallet stuck in one of the beams.

It must have been there for ages and ages, for it was all covered with cobwebs; but somehow or another she had never noticed it before, and at once she began thinking how dangerous it was to have the mallet just there.

“For,” thought she, “supposing him and me was married, and supposing we was to have a son, and supposing he were to grow up to be a man, and supposing he were to come down to draw cider like as I’m doing, and supposing the mallet were to fall on his head and kill him, how dreadful it would be!”

And with that she put down the candle she was carrying and, seating herself on a cask, began to cry. And she cried and cried and cried.

Now, upstairs, they began to wonder why she was so long drawing the cider; so after a time her mother went down to the cellar to see what had come to her, and found her, seated on the cask, crying ever so hard, and the cider running all over the floor.

“Lawks a mercy me!” cried her mother, “whatever is the matter?”

“O mother!” says she between her sobs, “it’s that horrid mallet. Supposing him and me was married, and supposing we was to have a son, and supposing he was to grow up to be a man, and supposing he was to come down to draw cider like as I’m doing, and supposing the mallet were to fall on his head and kill him, how dreadful it would be!”

“Dear heart!” said the mother, seating herself beside her daughter and beginning to cry: “How dreadful it would be!”

So they both sat a-crying.

Now after a time, when they did not come back, the farmer began to wonder what had happened, and going down to the cellar found them seated side by side on the cask, crying hard, and the cider running all over the floor.

“Zounds!” says he, “whatever is the matter?”

“Just look at that horrid mallet up there, father,” moaned the mother. “Supposing our daughter was to marry her sweetheart, and supposing they was to have a son, and supposing he was to grow to man’s estate, and supposing he was to come down to draw cider like as we’re doing, and supposing that there mallet was to fall on his head and kill him, how dreadful it would be!”

“Dreadful indeed!” said the father and, seating himself beside his wife and daughter, started a-crying too.

Now upstairs the young squire wanted his supper; so at last he lost patience and went down into the cellar to see for himself what they were all after. And there he found them seated side by side on the cask a-crying, with their feet all a-wash in cider, for the floor was fair flooded. So the first thing he did was to run straight and turn off the tap. Then he said:

“What are you three after, sitting there crying like babies, and letting good cider run over the floor?”

Then they all three began with one voice, “Look at that horrid mallet! Supposing you and me/she was married, and supposing we/you had a son, and supposing he was to grow to man’s estate, and supposing he was to come down here to draw cider like as we be, and supposing that there mallet was to fall down on his head and kill him, how dreadful it would be!”

Then the young squire burst out a-laughing, and laughed till he was tired. But at last he reached up to the old mallet and pulled it out, and put it safe on the floor. And he shook his head and said, “I’ve travelled far and I’ve travelled fast, but never have I met with three such sillies as you three. Now I can’t marry one of the three biggest sillies in the world. So I shall start again on my travels, and if I can find three bigger sillies than you three, then I’ll come back and be married—not otherwise.”

So he wished them good-bye and started again on his travels, leaving them all crying; this time because the marriage was off!

Well, the young man travelled far and he travelled fast, but never did he find a bigger silly, until one day he came upon an old woman's cottage that had some grass growing on the thatched roof.

And the old woman was trying her best to cudgel her cow into going up a ladder to eat the grass. But the poor thing was afraid and durst not go. Then the old woman tried coaxing, but it wouldn't go. You never saw such a sight! The cow getting more and more flustered and obstinate, the old woman getting hotter and hotter.

At last the young squire said, "It would be easier if you went up the ladder, cut the grass, and threw it down for the cow to eat."

"A likely story that," says the old woman. "A cow can cut grass for herself. And the foolish thing will be quite safe up there, for I'll tie a rope round her neck, pass the rope down the chimney, and fasten t'other end to my wrist, so as when I'm doing my bit o' washing, she can't fall off the roof without my knowing it. So mind your own business, young sir."

Well, after a while the old woman coaxed and codgered and bullied and badgered the cow up the ladder, and when she got it on to the roof she tied a rope round its neck, passed the rope down the chimney, and fastened t'other end to her wrist. Then she went about her bit of washing, and young squire he went on his way.

But he hadn't gone but a bit when he heard the awfulest hullabaloo. He galloped back, and found that the cow had fallen off the roof and got strangled by the rope round its neck, while the weight of the cow had pulled the old woman by her wrist up the chimney, where she had got stuck half-way and been smothered by the soot!

"That is one bigger silly," quoth the young squire as he journeyed on. "So now for two more!"

He did not find any, however, till late one night he arrived at a little inn. And the inn was so full that he had to share a room with another traveller. Now his room-fellow proved quite a pleasant fellow, and they forgathered, and each slept well in his bed.

But next morning, when they were dressing, what does the stranger do but carefully hang his breeches on the knobs of the tallboy!

"What are you doing?" asks young squire.

"I'm putting on my breeches," says the stranger; and with that he goes to the other end of the room, takes a little run, and tried to jump into the breeches.

But he didn't succeed, so he took another run and another try, and another and another and another, until he got quite hot and flustered, as the old woman had got over her cow that wouldn't go up the ladder. And all the time young squire was laughing fit to split, for never in his life did he see anything so comical.

Then the stranger stopped a while and mopped his face with his handkerchief, for he was all in a sweat. "It's very well laughing," says he, "but breeches are the most awkwardest things to get into that ever were. It takes me the best part of an hour every morning before I get them on. How do you manage yours?"

Then young squire showed him, as well as he could for laughing, how to put on his breeches, and the stranger was ever so grateful and said he never should have thought of that way.

"So that," quoth young squire to himself, "is a second bigger silly." But he travelled far and he travelled fast without finding the third, until one bright night when the moon was shining right overhead he came upon a village. And outside the village was a pond, and round about the pond was a great crowd of villagers. And some had got rakes, and some had got pitchforks, and some had got brooms. And they were as busy as busy, shouting out, and raking, and forking, and sweeping away at the pond.

"What is the matter?" cried young squire, jumping off his horse to help. "Has any one fallen in?"

"Aye! Matter enough," says they. "Can't 'ee see moon's fallen into the pond, an' we can't get her out nohow."

And with that they set to again raking, and forking, and sweeping away. Then the young squire burst out laughing, told them they were fools for their pains, and bade them look up over their heads where the moon was riding broad and full. But they wouldn't, and they wouldn't believe that what they saw in the water was only a reflection. And when he insisted they began to abuse him roundly and threaten to duck him in the pond. So he got on his horse again as quickly as he could, leaving them raking, and forking, and sweeping away; and for all we know they may be at it yet!

But the young squire said to himself, "There are many more sillies in this world than I thought for; so I'll just go back and marry the farmer's daughter. She is no sillier than the rest."

So they were married, and if they didn't live happy ever after, that has nothing to do with the story of the three sillies.

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