

# *The Cow, the Magpie and the scallywag Tramp*

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There was a cow. She had horns. She was black and white. All the other cows were creamy brown and didn't have horns. They lived in a field bounded by briars and one gate to go in and out of. It was always closed, except when the farmer came to visit.

One day the black and white cow was munching grass when along came a magpie and landed on her head.

"Chuck! Chuck!" said the magpie. "What kind of tree are you?"

"Moo," said the cow.

"A moo-tree," said the magpie. "How fascinating. I shall build my nest right here between these two branches," and off she flew to gather sticks. Soon enough she had a nest built between the cow's horns and lined it with grass and feathers. Then she settled down to lay eggs.

"Squawk," she cried when she laid the first egg.

"Moo," said the cow.

"I shall call that egg One Moo," said the magpie, and settled down to lay the second egg.

"Squawk," said the magpie when the next egg was laid.

"Moo, moo," said the cow.

"I shall call that egg Two Moos," said the magpie, settling down to lay the third egg.

"Squawk," said the magpie when the third egg was laid.

"Moo, moo, moo," said the cow.

"And that one will be Three Moos," said the magpie, going all dreamy-eyed and broody as she set about hatching her eggs, One, Two and Three Moos.

By and by along came the farmer.

"What's that thing on my favorite cow's head?" he said, coming over—but as soon as he got close the magpie cried, "Run, Cow, run! The farmer will steal my eggs," and off the cow galloped. The farmer chased the cow round and round the field but couldn't catch her. At last he went home for supper but was so out of breath that he left the gate ajar. The wind came – whoooooosh – and blew it open.

"Moo," said the cow, leaving the field and trotting click-clack down the lane.

The cow had a grand time. She grazed the lush verges, drank fresh water from the streams and snoozed under trees. The magpie was just as happy for the farmer was not in sight.

A lazyman's hour later a tramp came hobbling down the road. He was sunburnt, ragged,



footsore and weary. As his gaping boots ate the miles he muttered to himself, bemoaning his fate and dishing out pieces of his mind.

"Why do I have such terrible luck?" he groaned. "Why am I always out of penny and pocket, with nothing to eat but wayside salad and crusts begged at the door? What have I done to displease the Lords of Fate? Even the most feckless wanderer deserves better than I?"

On and on went this miserable engine of complaint, but he stopped in this tracks when he saw the cow with the nest on her head.

"How now, Pied Cow," said the surprised tramp by way of greeting, "what's that on your head?" but the cow ignored him and kept on munching daisies.

"Oh, it's a fine thing that even a cow is ignoring me," sighed the tramp, tossing his hands in despair. "Everyone ignores me, scallywag tramp that I am, always in the wind and weather, never a roof over my head, and the sun and rain beating on my poor body and bothering my lonely soul," and with that last piece of misery he lay down on the grass beside the cow and took a nap.

"You! You!" said a butcher, kicking the tramp's foot. "Is that your cow?"

"She's a fine cow," said the scallywag tramp, waking up, "though she gives me nothing but heartache the way she pays me no attention and eats the star daisies on the grass."

The butcher ignored his moaning. "What's that contraption on her head?" he asked.

"That's her crown, for sure," said the tramp gloomily. "Now you see why I am nothing but a lowly soul to her, for she is the Queen of Cows and the finest ever. See, even the magpie pays her homage and sits on her head."

"I'll buy her for ten dollars," said the butcher.

"Ten dollars!" exclaimed the tramp, brightening to see such easy money.

Just then one of the magpie's eggs hatched.

"Cheep," cried the chick.

"Fine," said the butcher. "I'll give you twenty dollars."

"Twenty dollars!" exclaimed the tramp, doubly surprised.

No sooner had he spoken when the second chick hatched.

"Cheep! Cheep!" it called loudly.

"You drive a hard bargain," said the butcher. "I'll give you forty dollars for that Queen of Cows with the finest crown."

The tramp could hardly believe his ears. "Forty dollars!" he exclaimed.

He opened his mouth to say yes, but just then the third chick hatched.

"Cheep! Cheep! Cheep!" it called loudly.

"Oh, you're a tough man, a cruel man," said the butcher. "Only a king could pay such a fortune."

"Cheep! Cheep! Cheep! Cheep!" cried all the chicks together.

"But I suppose you are right," said the butcher, pulling out his purse of golden coins. "Such a magnificent cow I never saw in all my life. Here's eighty dollars."

The tramp was speechless. He took the money and flew down the road, hardly believing his good fortune. No longer was he down in the mouth and melancholy. No longer was he bemoaning his burdensome fate. He whistled and sang and was in such a fine mood that he greeted every sparrow and crow he met with a tip of his hat and a 'Good day to you, kind birdies!' But what was his surprise when hours later he heard the click-clack click-clack of the cow coming up the road behind him and the butcher nowhere in sight.

"Well fancy that," said the scallywag tramp, pleased as a cat. "I believe this cow has taken a liking to me," and he set off down the road at a jaunty clip in hopes that the butcher wouldn't find him.

How far he traveled we'll never know but the next afternoon a cheese maker saw him passing.

"That's a right magnificent cow with a fine full udder," said the cheese maker, sizing up the cow from back to front. "What's that contraption on her head?"

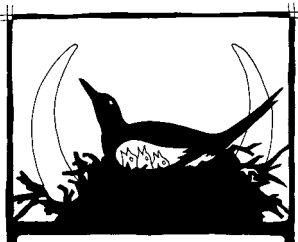
"Her crown," said the tramp proudly. "She's the very Queen of Cows."

"I'll give you a full twenty dollars for her," said the cheese maker.

"Twenty dollars!" said the tramp loudly, trying to hide his delight behind a long face.

"Cheep!" cried One Moo Magpie.

"I'll give forty good, sound dollars then," said the cheese maker, giving the tramp a crooked glance.



"Forty dollars!" exclaimed the tramp, hacking and coughing to hide his grin.

"Cheep! Cheep!" cried Two Moos Magpie.

"By my cloth and whey," said the cheese maker, "you are a tough customer. I'll give you eighty top dollars for that Queen of Cows."

"Eighty dollars!" shouted the tramp as loud as he could, grabbing his hat and covering his face as if in despair.

"Cheep! Cheep! Cheep!" cried Three Moos Magpie.

"Now that's enough out of you," said the cheese maker grimly. "Here's one hundred and sixty dollars and a useless wag such as yourself will take it whether you want to or not," and he pushed a bag of golden coins into the tramp's hand and led the cow away.

Off the scallywag tramp hastened. Oh, did he whistle and sing and greet every bird, beast and worm on his way. But no sooner was he seven miles distant than he heard the click-clack click-clack of the cow's hooves on the road behind him. The tramp rubbed his eyes in disbelief. He grabbed the cow's halter and ran away down the road, his two bags of coins jingling loudly from his belt.

"Oh, I'm a richy-rich man," sang the tramp to himself. "There'll be a roof over my head for many a stormy night now!"

He traveled far, and further, not daring to stop for fear of the butcher or cheese maker hearing of his whereabouts. But on the third day he came to a kingdom he'd never tramped before. Soon enough the kingdom's castle loomed over his head and as he passed by the royal king himself looked out the window.



"What kind of a cow is that?" called the king down to him. "And what's that thing on her head?"

"She's the Queen of Cows," replied the tramp as bold as brass. "And that's her crown upon her fine head."

"How much for her?" asked the king.

"A fortune," said the tramp.

"I'll give you a hundred," said the king, thinking it a fine price for any tramp's cow. But the chicks cried out in unison, "Cheep!"

"Five hundred then," said the king, surprised that the tramp hadn't even blinked an eye at his offering.

"Cheep! Cheep!" cried the chicks.

"By blunderbusses!" exclaimed the king. "You are a hard bargainer. A thousand dollars then."

"Cheep! Cheep! Cheep!" cried the chicks loudly, for it'd been a while since they'd been fed and the sun was getting high in the sky.

"Oh, you're a terrible man to please," said the king. "A tough man, a gritty man who knows what he wants. I'll give you half my kingdom for that cow and the hand of my daughter in marriage—take it or leave it."

This offer had the tramp gawping in wonder and before the chicks could utter another sound he threw his hat over their nest to keep them quiet, and cried, "Done, your Majesty! It's a deal!"

And that's how the tramp, the cow, the magpie and her chicks come to live at the king's castle. The cow was happy for she had nothing but the best fields for grazing. The magpies were happy for the worms in this kingdom were extra fat and no one dared to bother them in their royal nest. But the tramp was miserable. The princess was a terror.

"You expect me to marry this lump?" screeched the princess at her dad.

"But he drove a hard bargain," said the king.

"Nonsense!" said the princess. "I'll marry no one so smelly and ragged as him!"

So the tramp's clothes were thrown away. He was bathed in milk and honey. He was scrubbed and scraped until his skin was as red as a rash. The hair on his head was cut and the hair in his nose pulled out. His nails were trimmed and painted. He was forced into fine clothes and high heels. He was powdered and perfumed.



"Well, it's a beginning," said the princess, turning her nose up. "Now fix his speech."

The tramp was given lessons in speaking properly. He had to say 'Lah-dee-dah' and 'Snippety-snappety-snoop' until he didn't know who was speaking when he opened his mouth.

"Oh, lordy," said the princess, sniffing at his new voice. "Now, where's my jewelry. I want jewelry."

The tramp had to borrow money against his future half of the kingdom to buy the princess rings, bracelets, necklaces, pins, buckles and combs made of precious pearls. He had to buy her clothes of finest silks, brocades, satins and samites woven through with silver and golden thread. He had to order the finest of horses, carriages, feasts, sports, entertainments and trinkets. The princess nagged and scolded and demanded until the tramp was as poor as he ever was before—and they weren't even married yet!

Finally the tramp could take it no more. Wearing his princely clothes he saddled a royal horse and set his back to the castle before the sun had flown into the sky. The horse didn't take long to figure out that no true royalty sat upon his back. Ignoring his shouts of 'Whoa!', 'Halt!' and 'Stop before I'm killed altogether!' the horse bolted, leaping wildly over hedge

and brake before tossing the tramp headlong into a stand of thorny gorse. The saddle, not properly cinched, came sailing along with him.

Picking himself up the tramp eyed the fancy saddle. "That might sell for a penny or two," said his scallywag self, and hefting it up he wobbled down to the road on his high heels. He staggered along until he had the goodly sense to throw his useless, pinching shoes away and go barefoot. Only then was he truly glad to see the empty highway, to hear nothing but the birds singing, to feel the fresh wind on his face and to see the clouds floating by. He jaunted forwards, saddle on shoulder, as quickly as his skinny legs could carry him, desiring to put many miles between his person and the princess. But wouldn't you know it wasn't long before he heard the cow click-clacking down the road to join him.

"What are you doing here?" he asked the cow, pleased as a peacock to see her.

"Moo," said the cow.

"Cheep! Cheep! Cheep!" cried the chicks.

"Chuck! Chuck!" said the magpie.

"And the same to you, my lovelies," said the tramp, peering about but seeing nary a one or the other following the cow.



He placed the saddle on the beast. It fit perfectly, and since the cow neither bucked nor heaved he thought he'd sit on it and give his legs a rest. Well, the cow didn't mind him at all! Cocking his feathered hat at an angle, off the tramp set down the open road, him on the cow's back, the nest on the cow's head and the mother magpie and her three chicks sitting like queens on parade.

Now it wasn't far they'd gone when the twisty road turned a corner and there sat the cheese maker looking miserable on the grassy verge.

"That cow looks mighty familiar," said the cheese maker, standing up and staring.

"This is no cow," said the tramp hastily, breaking out in a sweat. "It's a new type of royal horse. If you want, I'll sell her to you, saddle and all."

"Cheep! Cheep! Cheep!" chirped the magpie chicks.

"Cheep? Cheep!" said the cheese maker. "Cheep nonsense! What would I do with such a silly slow horse? I wouldn't give a lumpy turnip for her," and off he marched down the road.

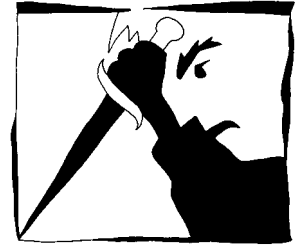
Then the tramp set his back to the morning, traveling highways and byways until he passed the butcher limping footsore and weary.

"That looks like the cow I bought for a fortune," said the butcher, peering hard at the beast. "She ran away and I lost my business. I've been searching for her ever since."

"Ach, don't be silly," said the scallywag tramp, stopping himself from biting his nails. "This is the new royal horse. I'll sell her to you, saddle and all, for a mere hundred dollars."

"That is no royal horse," shouted the butcher, whipping out his butcher's knife. "That's the very pied cow I bought from a scallywag tramp in rags!"

The tramp didn't wait—and neither did the cow. At the sight of the knife they took off towards the distant hills, the magpie crying 'Chuck-chuck!' and the chicks peeping 'Cheep-cheep-cheep!'



How far the cow, the tramp and the magpies traveled we'll never find out, but it wasn't long after the butcher was left behind that they passed the gate of a field beside a farmhouse. The cow stopped. The field was full of creamy brown cows, and no matter how much the tramp hooshed or hawed his steed wouldn't move an inch or twitch a muscle except to swing her tail at the flies.

"What's wrong with you, you old beast?" said the tramp, taking off the saddle and sitting on it beside the gate post.

Just then the farmer came out of his farmhouse. The wind caught the door and slammed it shut with a bang.

BANG!

"Chuck-chuck! Cheep-cheep!" cried the magpies, taking fright and flying away.

"Moo! Moo!" said the cow, shaking her head and sending the nest of sticks flying in all directions.

"There you are, you old Dilly Dally," said the farmer to the cow. "I was wondering where you went," and he opened the gate and let her back into the pasture.

He turned to the tramp. "And why is a fancy tramp sitting on that horse chair on such a sunny day?" he asked.

"Looking for a buyer of this magnificent saddle," said the scallywag tramp. "I'll sell it to you for a golden dollar."

"A dollar!" exclaimed the farmer. "For that old thing! I'll give you a penny."

The tramp scratched the back of his head. A smile crossed his face. "A penny it is," he said, taking the crooked copper and putting it into his pocket. Off he hiked down the road, the sun and the weather beating his body brown and wasn't he singing and happy and as free as a lark on the wing.

