



# BILLY BEG AND THE GIANTS

## — IRELAND

Billy Beg was the son of a king in Ireland, which didn't mean exactly what you might think. In those days, being a king meant mostly that you had more cattle than anybody else for miles around. Since cattle were so important to Billy Beg's father, it was only natural that Billy Beg should pick a calf for a pet.

In the course of time, the calf grew into a mighty bull. He could knock a tree down just by scratching the place between his horns, and he could drink a brook dry at a single draft, which made the nearby farmers very nervous. But with Billy Beg he was gentle as a lamb. The two of them were very thick, Billy Beg and the bull, and they had many adventures together.

But sadly, good things cannot last forever, and so it was with the bull. When he felt his end was near, he wrapped his tail gently around Billy Beg and told him the news.

"Now," said the bull, "before I die, let me tell you what you must do. For I will be in no condition to tell you afterward."

"Dear bull," Billy sobbed.

"First, you must reach in my right ear," the bull said. "There you will find a stick. And the property of this stick is that when you wave it three times around your head it will give you the strength of a thousand men besides your own. And then," the bull continued, "you must cut a strip of my hide for a belt."

"Oh, no," said Billy Beg. "I couldn't."

"You must promise."

At that moment, Billy Beg could deny the bull nothing. "I promise."

"The property of the belt is that it will protect you from all harm," the bull said. Then he snorted once, pawed the ground, and died.

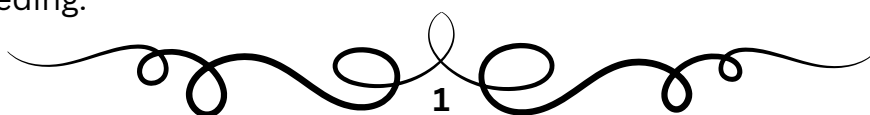
Billy Beg mourned the bull, but he remembered his promise. He reach into the bull's right ear and found the stick, and he cut a strip of the bull's hide and made a belt. He stayed in that place and mourned the bull for a year and a day, and then he set out into the world that is.

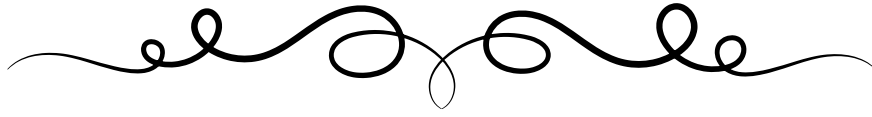
He had not gone far when he came to a farm. The farmhouse was large and should have been prosperous, for there were many cows waiting in the barnyard to be driven to pasture. But the whole look of the place was ramshackle and tumbledown.

"Hello," said Billy Beg to himself. "This farm must belong to some miser who is too mean to pay a boy to help with the cows. But it can't hurt to ask him. I've got to be doing something."

Just then the farmer came out of the barn, and Billy Beg said, "Would you be needing a boy now to help with the cows?"

"Indeed I would," the farmer said with a sorrowful face. "That's just what I would be needing."





“I’m your man,” Billy Beg said. And he drove the cows into the fields. Now, what the farmer had not bothered to tell Billy Beg was that he had no boy to look after his cows because in the forest near at hand lived three giants who were brothers. And every day the giants milked the cows, drank the milk, and ate the boy for dessert.

As soon as Billy Beg got the cows to the pasture, they began to graze like the well-bred cows that they were. Even if only giants were going to drink their milk, the cows didn’t want it to spoil. They had their pride, after all.

Billy Beg ate his lunch and lay down under a tree. He had not been sleeping long when he heard a terrible roar, and out of the forest came one of the giants. He was the smallest of the three, only as big as an oak tree, and with but two heads, both talking at once.

“First bites,” the blond head said.

“You had first bites last time,” the red head said. “That’s not fair.”

“He’s pretty small,” the blond head said. “There may not be more than one bite.”

“That’s why I’d better have first bites,” the red head said. “At least I don’t wolf everything down and keep us up all night with indigestion.”

“It’s my stomach,” the blond head said.

“It’s my stomach, too,” the red head said.

By this time, the giants had come to a stand in front of Billy Beg. “Oh, it’s you,” Billy Beg said. “I thought it was a swarm of bees I was hearing.”

“He’s a cool one, Tiny is. He’s so cool he can have a choice. How do you want to die? A blow from the hand or a swing of the back?” said the blond one.

“Well, gentlemen,” Billy Bet said, “or should I say sir? The truth is, I don’t think much of your choices, so I’ll just decline your offer.”

“Oh, he’s cool,” the red head said, and both heads roared with laughter and bit each other’s ears in delight.”

“You’ll be the death of me, Tiny, the blond said. “You will indeed.”

“I’ll do my best,” Billy Beg said, and he waved his stick three times around his head to give him the strength of a thousand men besides his own. Then he picked up the giant and drove him into the ground up to his armpits. Both heads were still laughing when he lopped them off with his sword.

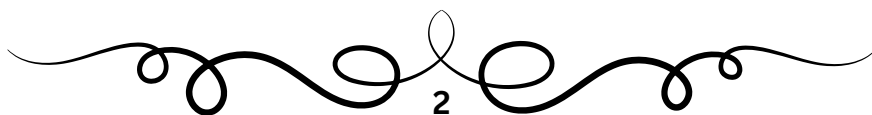
When it was evening, Billy Beg drove the cows back to the barn and helped the farmer milk them. “This is unusual,” the farmer said as he filled all of his pails, pots, kettles, and dishes from the house. “Tell me, how was it in the fields today?”

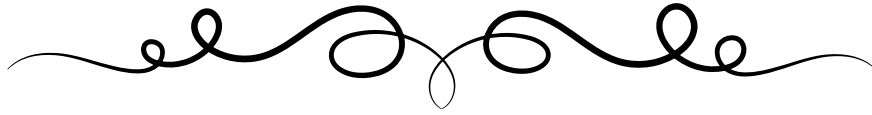
“It was all right,” Billy Beg said.

“And did you see anything while you were there?”

“Nothing worse than myself,” Billy Beg said.

The cows looked at each other and nodded. They thought Billy Beg was very cool indeed, but they also knew that the first giant was only the baby of the lot.





Next morning, Billy Beg walked to the pasture with his arm around the neck of the leader of the cows. She was a perfectly ordinary sort of cow, decent and self-respecting, but there was something about her eye that made him think of his bull, and that comforted him.

“You did very well yesterday, young man,” the cow said in an agreeable voice.

“Thank you, ma’am,” Billy Beg said.

“But you must remember that was only the smallest of the giants,” the cow said. “We talked it over in the barn last night, and none of us thinks you can last two minutes against this giant.”

“Thank you very much,” Billy Beg said. “The confidence of one’s friends lends strength to one’s arm.”

At noon Billy Beg sat down to eat his lunch and keep up his strength, and no sooner had he finished than there was a great roaring in the forest. The cows lay down to chew their cuds in resignation. They expected the giant to make short work of Billy Beg.

And well they might, for the giant who now came out of the forest was the size of a small mountain and had three heads.

“Here now,” the middle head said, “what have you done with our brother?”

“I didn’t know you had a brother. What was he like?”

“A dear little fellow,” the middle head said. “Full of fun. Wouldn’t harm an elephant. But let’s get down to business. How do you choose to die?”

“By a blow of the hand,” said the left head.

“Or a swing of the back,” said the right head.

“Or a stamp of the foot?” the middle head said. And the giant stamped on a great boulder, and the boulder went squish and drenched Billy Beg from head to foot.

“Blow,” the right head said.

“Swing,” the left head said.

“Squish, squish, squish!” the middle head shouted, stamping on rock after rock, with water squirting in all directions.

Billy Beg saw that he had better do something at once, or he and the cows would soon be swimming for their lives. So he waved his stick to give him the strength of a thousand men besides his own. And he laid hold of the giant.

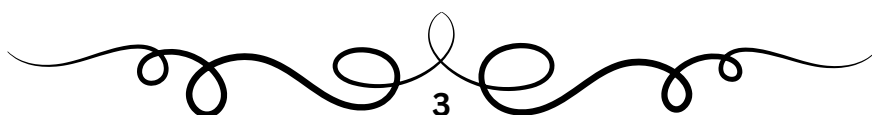
“One second,” the leader of the cows said. And Billy Beg picked up the giant and sank him in the ground up to his armpits.

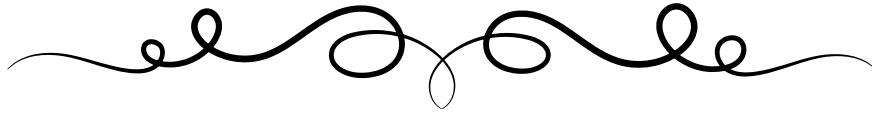
“Two seconds,” the leader of the cows said. The heads were all yelling at once.

“Blow!” “Swing!” “Squish!”

“Sweep,” Billy Beg said. And he cut off the heads with a single sweep of his sword.

“Three seconds,” the leader of the cows said.





“I’d have done better,” said Billy Beg, “only my sword caught in the scabbard.”

That night when the cows were milked, the milk filled all the pails and all the pots and kettles and dishes in the house. It filled the vat for making beer, and the trough for watering the cattle. It even filled the dry hollow where the ducks used to swim.

“This is really remarkable,” the farmer said. “What happened in the fields today?”

“Nothing much,” said Billy Beg.

“Did you see anything unusual?”

“Nothing worse than myself,” Billy Beg said.

The cows looked at each other and agreed that Billy Beg was a very promising lad, but none of them thought he had a chance against the last of the giants.

Again in the morning, Billy Beg and the cows went off to the fields. “Tell me,” said the leader of the cows, “do you feel strong today?”

“Middling strong,” Billy Beg said.

“I want you to know,” the cow said, “that we were so impressed with your work yesterday that we don’t believe the giant can finish you in less than two minutes. How’s that for a vote of confidence?”

“I’m touched,” said Billy Beg. But just between you and me, I expect to take care of this one in two seconds. I’ve greased my scabbard and sharpened my sword, and today I’m ready.”

“Ah, but you haven’t seen this giant,” the cow said.

“Ah, but I don’t need to if there’s only one of him.”

“One to be sure,” the cow said, “but he’s as big as a good-sized thunderstorm, and that’s not the worst of it.”

“Oh? And what is the worst of it? A dozen heads?”

“We don’t like to talk about it.”

“Well,” Billy Beg said, “I’ll just cross that bridge when we come to it.”

“You’re a brave lad, Billy Beg,” the cow said, and she went back to her friends.

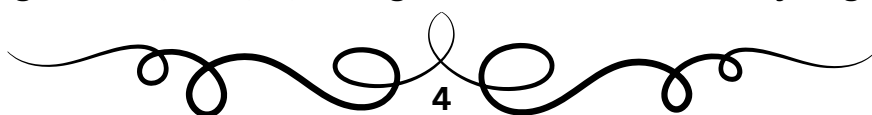
“I was nearly noon and Billy Beg, healthy boy that he was, sat down to eat. He made a good meal, and then the giant came running out of the forest, very angry and very large, and he with not a head to his name. His great square chunk of a body was covered with black armor, and on his chest was the face of the north wind, cheeks puffed, blowing with all its might.

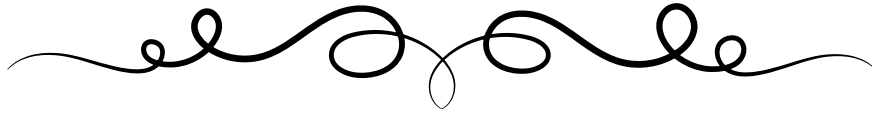
“Whew!” said Billy Beg.

There was a great roaring, rumbling noise in the air and Billy Beg at last made out that the giant was shouting at him.

“Well,” said Billy Beg to no one in particular, “at least he has a mouth somewhere.”

And the giant said, “Fee, Fi, Fo Feg. I smell the blood of Billy Beg.”





“And he has a nose, too,” said Billy Beg.

“Be he small or be he big, I’m going to feed him to my pig.”

Now Billy Beg was much too well brought up not to know what was expected of him at moments like this one, so he replied. “Fee, fi, fo fian. This is a very boastful giant. But a giant arm and giant leg are not too strong for Billy Beg.”

The giant made a grab at Billy Beg with his great fist.

“And eyes too,” Billy Beg said, jumping nimbly aside. “Wait,” he said to the giant.

“Aren’t you going to ask me if I would rather die by a blow of the hand or a swing of the back? It’s customary, you know.”

Of course the giant knew the rules as well as Billy Beg, so he drew himself up and asked the question. And Billy Beg, by way of an answer, waved the stick three times around his head to give him the strength of a thousand men besides his own. He picked up the giant and sank him into the ground up to his armpits. And then he stopped with his sword all ready. “No head,” said Billy Beg. He heard a great rumbling in the ground like an earthquake, so he got down for a good look at what the giant was doing. He saw the eye of the north wind looking up at him angrily.

“Oh,” said Billy Beg. “So this is one of those boyos whose heads actually grow beneath their shoulders.” And he brought down a terrific chop that went through the armor and split the giant.

“Five seconds,” the cow said. “A big slow, Billy Beg.”

“Consider the problems, woman,” Billy Beg said. “Consider the problems.”

“True,” the cow said. “I had forgotten the problems. Then it must be a record for no-headed giants.”

And Billy Beg and the cows went back to the farm and when the cows were milked that night, the milk filled every pail in the barn and every pot and kettle and dish in the house, to say nothing of the vat and the trough and the little hollow. Then the milk ran out of the barnyard and into the valley where it formed a lake seven miles long and seven miles wide and seven miles deep, which may be seen to this day by anyone who cares to go there.

“Did you see anything out of the ordinary today?” the farmer said.

“Nothing worse than myself,” Billy Beg said.

Everyone slept very well that night, Billy Beg and the farmer in their beds, and the cows in the barn.

