

SOMETHING FOR NOTHING

BY JOANNE ROBERTS

MCMULLEN WAS A lazy lout. He was hiding out in the mulberry bush one afternoon when he smelled the tarts a-baking. Following his nose to his mother's kitchen, McMullen reached for a warm tart and received a rap on his fingers from Ma's wooden spoon.

"Boy, get on your legs and get to workin' in the fields," said his ma. "Farmer Duffy is always willing to pay a hard worker. Earn some gold, then you can win yourself a sweet-heart, build yourself a house, and be out from under my feet."

"Nay, Mammy," said McMullen, "'tis too hot a day for workin'. I'll take some tarts to tempt the faery folk instead. Then I'll have your wishes for me granted without lifting a finger."

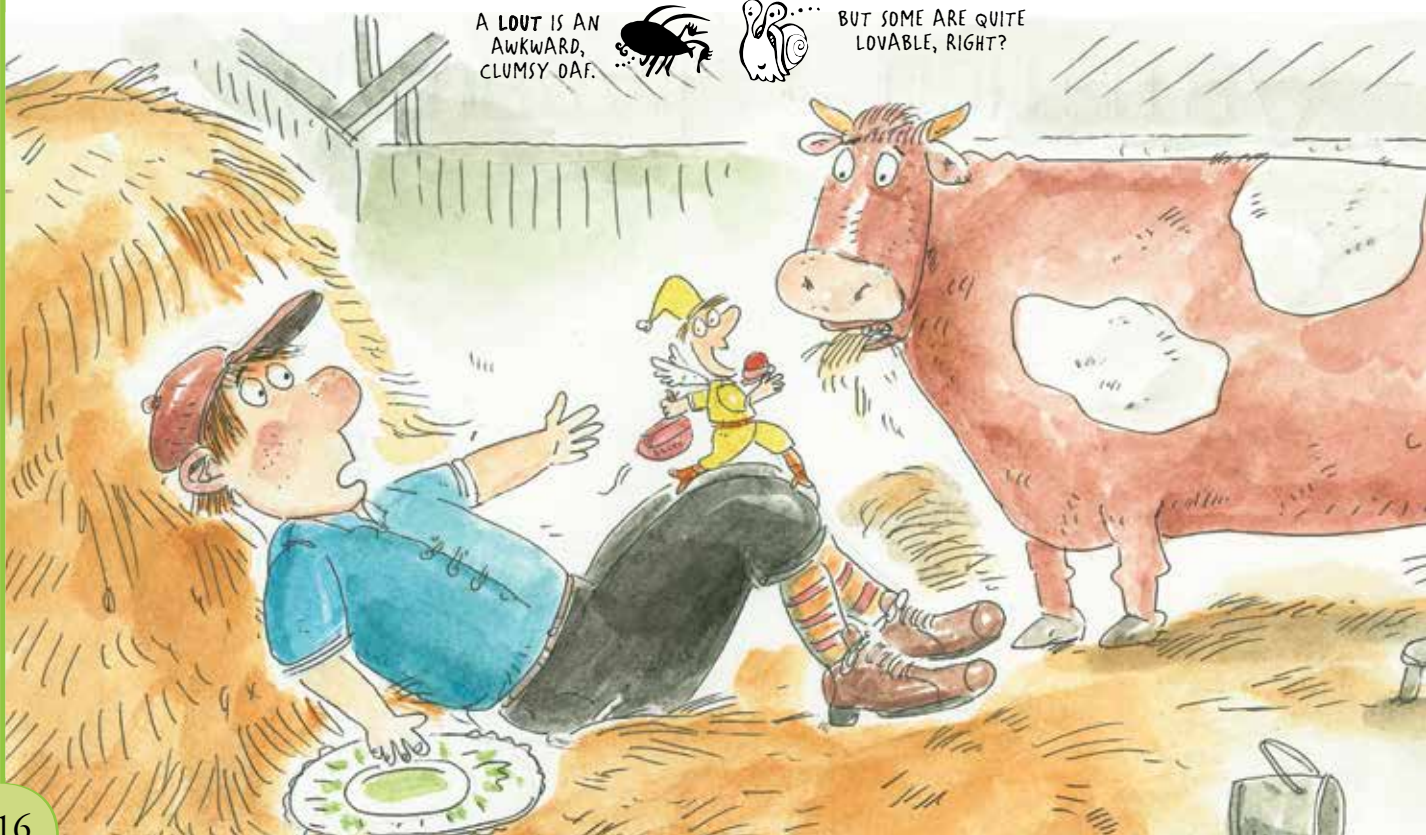
"Hush your nonsense," said his ma, grinning. "Off with you and get the stalls mucked, you foolish lad."

McMullen grabbed the plate of tarts and sauntered toward the cowshed. He nestled the plate in a patch of sunlight and settled onto the hay to wait for the faery folk. Waiting is hungry work. Before long he found himself

A LOUT IS AN
AWKWARD,
CLUMSY DAF.



BUT SOME ARE QUITE
LOVABLE, RIGHT?



eating first one tart, then another and another, though he fell asleep before he had cleaned the platter.

McMullen dreamed of a fine house, a loving wife, and a field of gold, but his dreams were interrupted by a tug on his fingers. He awoke with a start. Someone was stealing the last tart from his grasp.

“Scat, rat!” he hollered. Then his eyes popped, for he realized ’twas no rat but a wee faerie man, who crammed the tart into his mouth before McMullen could snatch it back again.

“Pardon me, little sir,” said McMullen, “but since you’ve eaten my jam tart, you’ll be needing to give me three wishes.”

The faerie grimaced. “’Tis true, I suppose, for you can’t get something for nothing.”

“My mam is harping on me to build a house of my own. Housebuilding is hard work, and I’ve no mind to do it. So if you please, I wish for a fine house in exchange for that tart.”

“Granted,” said the faerie. The bag at his side began to swell bigger than a prize cabbage. The little man plunged his hand

in and drew out a cottage. Beautiful it was, but barely big enough for a spaniel—certainly not for a man.

“What’s this?” cried McMullen.

“’Tis a house, as you wished,” replied the faerie. “Fit for a good hard-workin’ dog, for every man should have a faithful dog at his side, and ’twould do you no good to let him sleep in the rain.”

“I’d meant a house for meself, as I thought was plain as porridge. That one’s a bit small,” said McMullen.

“Fair’s fair,” said the faerie. “It was, after all, a very small tart.”

“Fine, fine. You’ve tricked me out of a proper home, but there’s places cozy enough if you’ll only give me a wife to share it with.”

“You can’t get something for nothing,” said the faerie. “Since you’ve no more tarts, you’ll get no more wishes.”

“I can get you tarts aplenty,” said McMullen. “Only fetch me a wife, sir. Any one will do. I suppose one is as good as another.”

The faerie looked into his bag. “I’ve no wee lass in here,” said the faerie. “Are you sure you’d like me to bring you a wife? You didn’t seem much pleased by the house I gave you.”

McMullen sighed. “Nothing less will satisfy my mam, and wooing and winning take time and hard work. Besides, as you can see, I’m no county prize. You’re like to do better for me than I can for meself.”

McMullen led the way down the lane to the miller’s cottage. Many a day he’d lifted a tart from those cooling on the miller’s



Illustrated by Keith Bendis

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window sill. Sure enough, a lovely plateful perched in the cottage window.

McMullen passed a few tarts to the faerie, who gobbled them up with magical speed. “Granted!” the faerie cried through a mouthful of crumbs and jam.

No sooner had he spoken than McMullen felt a hand on his shoulder.

“Why, McMullen, I’ve been looking everywhere for you,” said a womanly voice.

McMullen nearly jumped out of his stockings. Turning round he came face to face with a red-cheeked woman as old as his ma.

“Do I know you?” he gulped.

“Nay, we’ve not met, but my husband, Farmer Duffy, sent me to fetch you.”

McMullen choked. “Your husband?”

“Aye,” said the woman. “He’s got a mind to hire you to work the barley fields today.”

McMullen cast a dark look at the faerie, who had hidden himself behind the asters. To the farmer’s wife he said, “I’ll come along to please my mam, though I’ve important business to finish before the day is through.”

The goodwife nodded and bustled ahead toward Farmer Duffy’s land. McMullen turned furious eyes on the faerie, who darted in and out among the hedgerows. “When I wished for

a wife, I wasn’t asking for someone else’s,” hissed McMullen in a fierce whisper.

The faerie held up his wee finger. “After all, the tarts were someone else’s, too. And you did say one wife was good as another.”

McMullen grunted. “Very well, man. Have it your way. But I won’t be fooled again. I’ve thought it out good and proper, and it seems to me all my trials will be over if you grant me a field of gold. You’ve cheated me

out of my first two wishes, but with a field full of gold I could afford both a wife and a house, and maybe a dog to boot.”

“Yes, well, you can’t get something for nothing,” said the faerie, licking jam from his fingers.

“Just wait a bit. I’ll take me turn in the field and earn the coin to buy you the best tarts in the county. Then you’ll supply me with that field of gold, and no funny business. Proper payment for a proper wish-come-true.”

“As you say,” said the wee man. “I’ll be back when the coins hit your palm.”

McMullen sweated and strained through the day, till he was wrung out like Saturday’s washing. When the sun dipped low, Farmer Duffy appeared among the hired lads, shaking their hands and rewarding them with a few silvers apiece. McMullen stared at the coins, pushing them around his palm. He thought there never was a sweeter sight till he looked up at the plump lass who offered him a cup of cold water and a tart or two. “To tide you over till you reach home, wife, and a decent supper,” she said.

“There’ll be supper at home, sure enough,” said McMullen with a wink, “but it’ll only be me old mammy waiting there for me.”

A smile dimpled the lass’s cheek. “I’m sure me Da would be proud to have a fine hard-workin’ man such as yourself to dine with us this evening.” And she looped her arm in his, leading the dazed and pleased McMullen to Farmer Duffy’s kitchen.

McMullen glanced back over his shoulder in time to see the setting sun turning the barley fields into an ocean of gold. And he thought he heard something on the wind whisper the word, “Granted!”



YOU CAN'T GET SOMETHING FOR NOTHING, BUT CAN YOU GET NOTHING FOR SOMETHING?



IT HAPPENS.