



## The Bum Bet

*Poland*

A very wealthy aristocrat lived in a mansion at the centre of his vast lands. He had moved the local village away from his grand house, and built a wall round the gardens and parkland. Yet sometimes he still heard some sounds wafting over his lawns.

After dinner each evening, the aristocrat went to a private room to check on his investments, capital values and cash-in-hand. He loved to count, and re-count over a solitary glass of whisky. But on recent evenings he had been disturbed by the sound of loud music from the village. It sounded like a party! What had the locals to be happy about given the rents he was charging them? But these parties seemed to be getting bigger.

So the next day, the aristocrat had himself driven to the village. The landlord of the pub, where the parties took place, came out to meet him, and show him round.

‘How can the people here afford parties?’ complained the aristocrat.

‘Oh, the parties are free,’ replied the publican.

‘Free!’

‘Yes, I pay for them from my bets. I always win a wager. Look!’ And he pointed at cardboard boxes which were overflowing with used banknotes. ‘Why don’t we make a bet? I’m willing to stake all this cash.’

‘How much is it?’

‘Hundred thousand or so.’

‘What’s the bet?’

‘That by tomorrow morning you’ll have a pimple on your bum.’

‘How dare you! Who do you think you’re speaking to? I come of the purest, highest blood..... A hundred thousand you say. Alright, I agree. Come to my mansion tomorrow and bring the money, all of it!’

And off the rich aristocrat went, still angry, but fixated by the sight of all those banknotes. That night he could not concentrate on counting. He shifted uncomfortably in his seat. Was that an itch, or irritation he felt?

He went to bed early, but tossed and turned. Going to his luxury bathroom, he struggled to get a clear rear view of his buttocks. He couldn’t feel any inflammation, but just to be sure he applied some creams and soothing skin lotions. Then he had to lie on one side, or the other, in bed. He rose early and struggled again with a variety of mirrors. To his relief, everything seemed ok.

The pub landlord arrived on time, and was ushered into a private chamber, where the aristocrat unveiled his unblemished skin.

‘Aye,’ confirmed, the publican cheerily, ‘smooth as a baby’s bum! I’ll unload the cash.’

The aristocrat could not wait to count the used banknotes - £103,769. He was delighted but tired after his long night, so he had dinner early. At least there would be no more parties.

But just as he was retiring with a lone whisky, he heard music. It couldn’t be! But it was, louder than ever, like a rock band. What did they have to celebrate? It was blasting over the lawns.

In a rage, he leapt into a car, and raced over to the village. The pub was packed; there were outdoor bars and stages, with several bands playing. The place was full of people from neighbouring towns and villages.

The publican spied his visitor and went over to welcome the aristocrat.

‘What the hell’s going on?’ he shouted over the din.

‘I’m having a mega party! Everyone’s come to do whoopee.’

‘I can see that, but you’ve just lost your bet – to me!’

‘But, I’ve won another bigger big bet, against the King.’

‘What bet?’

‘I bet the king a million pounds that today, you would show me your bare arse. He didn’t believe me. But you did. Everyone’s talking about it.’

The aristocrat fled in shock and never showed his face, or any other part of his anatomy, in the village again. □

Adapted by Donald Smith (2021).

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## Comments

This story is Donald Smith's Scottish version of a Polish folk tale told by Michal Malinowski, the founder of The Storyteller Museum of Poland. Donald Smith, well-known playwright, founder and first director of the National Theatre of Scotland, and director of the Scottish International Storytelling Festival, included it in the book *Overtuning the Narrative: Storytelling and Activism* (Smith, 2024), also published by The Earth Stories Collection Press.

In this book, Donald says about ‘The Bum Bet’ that ‘The tale picks up on the absurd belief of some billionaires that they live on a different planet from the rest of humanity’ (ibid., p. 140). But this funny story is an illustration of what Donald Smith previously explained in the section ‘The rebellion through laughter’:

Storytelling often uses humour to be subversive. Folk tales undermine authority figures, and satirise hypocrisy. Sometimes this is done with anarchic, comic zest – listeners are invited to join in the rebellion through laughter.

Nasruddin, the Middle Eastern trickster and sage, is a classic example of subversive humour. One day he arrived by chance at a rich man's house just as a feast was starting. But Nasruddin was refused entry because he was dressed in shabby everyday clothes. So he went home and put on his finest clothes. Then he returned and was shown to the top table at the feast. But when Nasruddin was served food, he poured it over his gown, and stuck tasty titbits in his turban. His host was furious, accusing Nasruddin of spoiling his party. 'Ah,' replied Nasruddin, 'it is not me but my clothes that are welcome here, so it is only right that they be fed first.'

In Scotland, subversive stories are very popular. (ibid., p. 139)

## Sources

Smith, D. (2024). The bum bet. In Cutanda et al., *Overturning the Narrative: Storytelling and Activism* (pp. 140-143). Barcelona: TESC Press.

## Associated text of the Earth Charter

The Way Forward: Let ours be a time remembered for ... the joyful celebration of life.

## Other passages that this story illustrates

Principle 10a: Promote the equitable distribution of wealth within nations and among nations.

Principle 10d: Require multinational corporations and international financial organizations to act transparently in the public good, and hold them accountable for the consequences of their activities.