

A FAIRY TALE.

Once upon a time the lady-fays Ailie, Babee, Tip, Lalalu, Mar and some others went out in the early chirp of evening twilight to inhale the fragrance, for the fairies know that evening enhances the odour of flowers. They had not been long so occupied when they came running into the inner bower, exclaiming: "There is a great brute of a man coming!" Yowl, the gnome, who, despite of his name, is a good deal of a ladies' man, half drew his sword. Hastily re-sheathing it with a clang, in the manner that stage villains and boy cadets do, he declared himself ready to go forth and meet the mortal. Yelp, the other gnome, said he would go with him.

Many old people in the parish of which I write, Darby-cum-Joan-super-Gill, have, in their younger days, see fairies. It is well known that James Clod was affrighted by a fairy, or something, between Thornthorpe and Locksley-on-the-Green. Dick Doodersly had a tussel with one one night when coming from a fair, and arrived home all covered with mud. In short, a belief in the influence, lucky or unlucky, of the "Good People," is deep-seated, the present incumbent of the parish notwithstanding. The Christian reader cannot have forgotten that the reverend Brutum Fulmen succeeded Rev. Spoons, B.A., when that sainted young man went as missionary to the Tonquinese. And it is as well authenticated as anything can be that if a mortal has the courage to go into a fairy meeting and demand a piece of gold, the spirits are bound, by a fundamental law of their order, to give it to him.

In the main and sole street of the hamlet of Darby dwelt Abraham Chunk, a farm labourer by profession, a fine specimen of "his country's pride," with that stolidity, or solidity, and consequent insensibility to danger that is the first characteristic of the imported British peasant. Abram was of that type. Surly to his betters, he was boorish to his equals, but had a dim perception of something approaching to honour, which he called "seeing fair play." He was a useful man to farmer Mangold. He could plough and pitchfork and drive cattle, which he did partly by bawling at them and partly by kicking them in the ribs. His proclivity was toward pigs, and he had one of his own that he made much of. His wife kept him in clean jackets, and on holidays in huge stand-up shirt collars, so stiffly starched that they nearly cut his ears off. On this occasion, when he alarmed the lady fays by trespassing on their haunt, he wore a cast-off pair of the farmer's boots, a shapeless straw hat, a baggy red shirt a good deal patched, and trunks of that corrugated fabric first manufactured for the breeches of a king and called corduroy (*corde du roi*). He was, in fact, an unmitigated clodhopper; and he possessed one little human weakness, peculiar, I believe, to his class—he beat his wife.

All who are acquainted with the gossip of Our Village know that Abram Chunk, labourer, married Betsy Hunk, milkmaid, whose cheeks were of a lively red and the rest of her complexion like clouted cream. The history of his matrimonial venture will be elicited from himself by the Grand Inquisitor Yelp further on in this authentic narrative.

Incredible as it may appear, an idea once found its way into Abram's head. The natural result followed—he became a discontented man. He had often heard of fairy gold, and longed to possess some, representing as it did to his mind much beer. The legend of the rainbow that has a pot of money buried where its lower arc touches the earth had been familiar to him from his infancy. Abram's reasoning was sound so far as it went. The end of a rainbow *must* rest somewhere (it could not stand upon nothing), and if he could find where it did rest, he would find the pot. Several long futile tramps after "the bow in the clouds" induced him to the bolder step of attending a fairies' meeting and demanding a subsidy in coin. Hence his appearance on the scene of this record.

When Abram came hulking along toward the

fairy ring the sun had just disappeared behind one of the low-backed green hills, or rather mounds, that shut in the quiet landscape, making it a restful place, a rural amphitheatre. I do not know the name of the hill behind which the sun had just dipped, but I call it Al Borak after Mahomet's ass. The twilight was cool and pleasant when Abram's rough bulk hove in sight. Looking toward the centre of the ring he saw he was not alone. An elderly person, of rather diminutive stature, was within the ring, leaning contemplatively on a spade.

Description is not my forte. I will only add that the contemplative gardener looked like a figure by Watteau, a letterweight of Dresden, or old Adam out of a vaudeville. It is needless to say that the simulacrum of our first parent was the gnome Yowl, who is never so dangerous as when he looks respectable.

"Be you a fairy?" quoth Abraham.

The gardener gracefully bent his back in the curve of a reaping hook, or new moon, lifted his three-cornered hat about two feet off his head in the fine old style of the most polished of *régimes*, laid his hand on where his heart might be supposed to be, drew his heels accurately together, straightened himself, and again rested leisurely on his spade, a most attractive little person, but uttered never a word.

"Seems to me you are more of a French markee. Too civil by half for my money," said Abraham, not a bit abashed. "I've come for a piece o' fairy gold, and I ain't going till I get it!"

Yowl leaned upon his spade, and, putting his forefinger in the flapped pocket of the long embroidered silk waistcoat that reached to his thighs, brought out a snuff-box set with brilliants and having a portrait of Titania on the lid. From this he extracted a pinch of *pulvillio*, which he leisurely sniffed with seeming relish. Then he courteously intimated that the fairy people had no coined money just then; that owing to the unsettled state of things in Alsace large amounts of bullion had been withdrawn from the Bank of England; funds were at 78½; railway securities much depressed; and, in brief, that Mr. Gladstone's unfortunate vacillating policy tended to keep money very short—very short indeed.

Abraham bumptiously stuck to his text, reiterating his demand for gold, and, heavily throwing himself down in the fairy ring, took a rind of bacon and a jack-knife out of his pocket and began to pare and eat. The polite gardener gradually grew indistinct till he faded from view.

Suddenly a storm of sounds of alarm, contempt and indignation broke out, here, there and everywhere, like cracking of whips in the air. One voice, recognizable as Quip's, cried: "O, the odious wretch!" Then a chorus of hissing was heard, till one would have thought the place was swarming with wasps. Now, really when voices are shrieking at you without you seeing where the voices come from, it produces rather a creeping sensation on the nerves. Despite his stolidity, the intruder on the fairies began to feel a shade of timidity. Nevertheless, with the pluck of his class he mumbled: "I waits here till I gets it."

"Abram!" croaked a voice, harsh and austere.

The dolt looked up and beheld an elderly raven, with a grey cloak pinned around his neck, seated on a stone eight or ten feet above our dunder-head's level of vision. He had come there to be astonished, so he was not much astonished. "Sir to you!" he said, gruffly.

"Abram Chunk," resumed the raven, "what about your wife?"

The intelligent reader will be at no loss to understand that the raven was our friend Yelp, associate of the quondam dapper gardener.

"Lor!" thought Chunk to himself, but without expressing it aloud, "who wants to hear about my old woman?"

"I—and I—and I—and all of us!" cried voices of invisible fairies.

"Abram, you sodden-pate!" continued the raven, in a judicial manner, "narrate to us every incident relating to that unfortunate old lady. Mark me! You gave her a black eye this morning. Yesterday you called her opprobrious names.

Day before that you maliciously kicked over her black teapot and broke it, and for weeks have been in the way of stealing the eggs with which she buys tea and sugar—the necessities of her life. If you cancel or palliate one single circumstance, we will tear you limb from limb. We are fairies. I am a malignant kelpie. We are all here—dozens of us. So look out!"

"Yes, my lord. O, yes, your honour. Where shall I begin?"

"At the beginning," said Yelp.

"Well, then, your worship," quoth Abraham, "I fell in love wi' Betsy Hunk down to the Sheepcotes and she felled in love wi' me."

Laughing echoes in the manner of the Greek chorus "Ha! ha! ha! ha!"

Abram—"And I asked if she could bake and boil taters and cabbage and would pig in along o' me, and we went to parson and parson spliced us and charged nought for his fee."

Again the chorus of "Ha, ha, ha!" intermingled with cries of "Horrid!"

Yelp—"And what was the result of this auspicious alliance?"

Abram—"Two dollars a week and fourteen little 'uns, and they all died small and the rest of 'em went out to service."

Yelp—"Abram, thou son of a clod-compelling sire, be careful in thy confessions! Is this what thou promised to do to thy wife? to beat her? to lend her occasional kicks? to call the mother of your heirs unpleasant names? to knock over her teapot and rob her hen-roost? O Abraham!"

Abram—"What for does she aggravate me?"

Yelp—"How so?"

Abram—"Wants to stint me of my beer."

Yelp—"Think again, Abram. You are in the Court of the Fairies."

Abram reflected a minute and muttered: "Hard if a man mayn't lather his own wife."

Such a storm of objurgation burst out that I trust, gentle reader, neither you nor I may ever experience. A mellow hunting-horn suddenly blew a call, of the intensely cheerful description, a well known encouragement to hounds when the quarry is in view. Yelp danced up and down, first on one foot and then on the other, and shrieking as a sportsman cheers on his pack. "So ho! dogs, at him! A Blitz! a Flibertygibbet! a Tacko'wisp! a Spitz! Take him, Xip! at him, boy! Soho la! tantara!" with other encouraging cries of the chase. At the same instant Xip and Jack-o'-lamp and Flibertygibbet and Blitz and Spitz and all the sprites, in the shape of diminutive black-and-tan terriers, flew on the wife-beater and began to worry him. They bit his topboots, his legs, his arms, his nose, his ears. They dragged out his hair, rent his smock to ribbons, devoured his hat. The shock of their assault threw him down, and he rolled over and over like a tun. The fairies were delighted and barked a joyous approval.

Meantime Abram rolled about and bellowed like an Andalusian toro in the arena of Seville. "O! O! O!" he hallooed. "Mercy! mercy! mercy! O holy poker!"

"Don't say that!" shouted Yelp, furiously, at the same time expanding into a raven about eight feet high. "If you dare to pronounce sacred names we will rend you into mincemeat!"

"I won't," groaned Abram. "O! O! O! I won't. O lordy! O lordy! O lordy!"

At the exclamation the whole phantom pack of terriers disappeared, Xip, who was a vicious little whelp (he was only a parcell-devel, after all—see holy George Herbert, page 10), taking care to secure a final mouthful of corduroy. Twilight had closed in meanwhile, and it was nearly dark.

Abram, poor wretch, crawled home, almost in a state of nudity, and with his person all marked over with bites, as from rats' teeth. Scarcely able to stand, he knocked at the door, which was humbly, and with trepidation, opened by Betsy, his wife. Exhausted, he fell at her feet, and, in a state of contrition, promised never to do so any more. Did Betsy forgive him and take him to her bosom? Alas! no. Seeing him repentant and completely at her mercy, she flew at him like a tigress, dragged out what remained of his hair,