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The Fairy Wife

The Fairy Wife

by

Fred Hilary

When his beloved wife died, Malkus III, regent of the last mortal realm before the lands of Faerie, ordered that not only his court, but also the kingdom, from highest noble to lowliest peasant, enter a period of mourning lasting exactly three years and thirty one days. The number was no accident, for it was chosen to correspond to the length of courtship he had enjoyed with his irreplaceable Julia. These mourning days did not last long, however; in fact they came to an end after a little less than three months, when the Queen herself, or else her ghost, was glimpsed riding a white horse in the shadowy marches on the edge of the kingdom.

At first it was taken as an omen, and Malkus summoned interpreters of dreams and visions; after a second sighting the favourite saying was that she had indeed become a wandering spirit, but Malkus was at a loss to root out some discontent she had felt whilst living. The third time she was seen, however, settled it, for that time she was not seen riding alone, as at the first, her long raven hair weaving spells in the moonlight, her shimmering white horse almost a match for her much missed and mournful beauty. She was with another: not a human but a Fairy, a noble or king, dressed in dark velvet with a crown of onyx jewels upon his head; he and Julia were weaving dances around each other as they drove their horses in a wild gallop.

“What did you say?” Malkus said to the peasant witness of this third moonlight reverie, as the poor fellow cowered at the foot of the dais. “She was laughing?”

“Aye,” squirmed the thin, nervous-looking fellow. “But it was night, and you know what the moon can do. It’s what I thought I saw.”

“You were exact in the details. Laughing like a little village girl, you said. Or like the Queen of May.”

“I should not have presumed...”

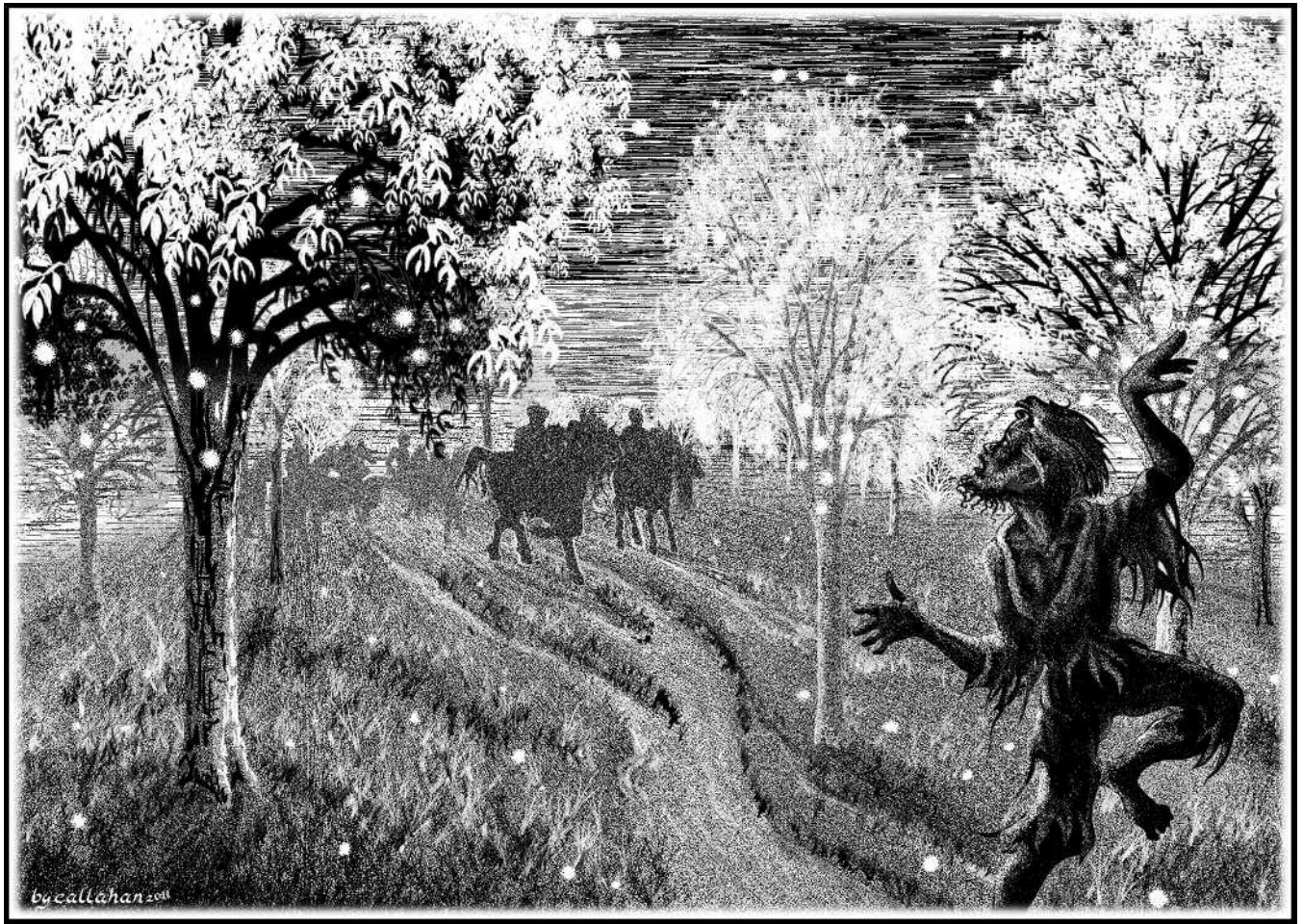
Malkus grunted. “Where did they ride off to?”

“Into the forest. Beyond the marches -”

Malkus’s advisers exchanged worried glances. There was the same muttering breath. “Faerie,” they all whispered at once, though they quickly sealed their lips and hung their heads.

“Go unlock the crypt, then,” the king said wearily stepping down from his throne. He moved his flabby weight down from the dais and across the marble floor. “Open the casket. Bring baskets of rose petals. Let me look upon her once more. But hear this, if I find that these sightings have been lies, then the witnesses will be hanged in the morning. Hanged? Too slight a punishment to measure against my grief. Boiled alive. Drawn and quartered.”

In less than half an hour the truth was determined: the casket was empty, and the king emerged from the crypt bewildered and angry. On the day of her death, when she had supposedly succumbed while sleeping to some unknown ailment, he had seen her face and touched her skin. She had been cold, the light in her eyes gone. It had all been an enchantment, a trick: what other explanation could there be?



“Very well, then, I will ride into Faerie myself, with a small band of soldiers,” he declared, snapping out of his sullen mood. “I’ll need a guide. Is there no one who has been there?”

They fetched him Moon-eye Tom, taken by most to be a fool of the local village, but held by others to have been blessed by a visit to Faerie, these last claiming that all longed for the place but feared to cross its borders. Tom had been left such that he could not settle back into mortal life. He was noted to spend most of his time weeping over the

beauties he had left behind; when asked why he did not return, he would not answer in clear words, only: “When ye desire to catch between your fingers the west wind, when ye would drink the silver moonlight, it is all mocking, in the end, because no matter how long you stand on the high downs with an open fist as the wind blows against you, no matter how much you try to cup the moonlight in your hands, it’s as nothing. So I put myself away from where all those yearning thoughts come from.”

When the king's advisers told him that he must be their guide, he at first tried to escape the clutches of the soldiers, but then when they threatened him with death he relented.

And so the company, with the king in its midst, and the fool bounding along before it, went to the marches, and crossed into the forest, and left the mortal kingdom behind.

The king thought, at first, that they had entered a grove filled with numberless burning candles. There were innumerable tiny flames all about them, burning steadily with bright gold tongues, like the reflection of candles as it is caught in golden cups on feast days.

"They are ash trees," said Moon-eye, seeing his wonder.

Malkus looked beyond the tiny fires to the branches of the surrounding trees, and then he realized that these were not candles but the leaves themselves, burning with an unearthly flame that did not consume them. All he could say was, "they are not ash, surely, but some other kind."

"They are the ash trees of Faerie," replied Moon-eye. "They will soon be afire. For now, it is only the leaves which burn, but soon the whole tree will be lit thus."

"Is someone intent on burning the woods?"

"The woods burn themselves."

When the king gave a puzzled look, Moon-eye shuffled off and paused beside one of the tree boles.

"This is now autumn. The time when the leaves turn from gold to red, and from red to flame. And after that, after they have burned for the time that has been declared, they will turn to smoke, and the tree will catch fire, and then there will be left only ash, but ash in which the new seedlings will take root."

They left the glade of the burning leaves behind, and passed on to another glade, and

yet another, and in each there was a new wonder, each one inclined to incite madness. In one glade it was as if the stars themselves had descended to the earth, as if they had declined in deference to the king, for all around the passing troop there were bright silver orbs, glittering with many points of light, whirling around in spheres and tracing shapes familiar to the watchers of the heavens; now they took the shape of Orion, with his great sword, and soon after formed themselves into the Great Bear; and on went the dance of shapes and lights.

As they passed from one glade to the next, King Malkus felt a throb of longing and sadness. These beauties were beyond the dreams of his kingdom; they enchanted and bedazzled where his own beloved places, the places he and Julia had cultivated these past years, merely titillated. There is an excess of beauty here, he said to himself. It is right that they say mortals go mad.

But it was not all beautiful, for the path as it wound around went through darker and more sinister country, terrible and frightful in proportion to mortal places as its beauty was to mortal beauty. They rode through a sickening swamp, through a dark forest where the trees threaded their branches like spider's webs, until the road rose to a fearsome crag, and on the leveling top a high plateau suddenly stretched before them, and there stood a castle, bejeweled by the moon; and all sense of terror fled, and longing returned, in all except the king himself.

"I don't trust it," said King Malkus, as the horses began to stamp either in excitement or fear. "It is treacherous beauty."

"It may be, yes," said Moon-eye. But his words were lost on the king, for Malkus had already ridden forth to a green sward beside the open drawbridge, a place where a moonlit pool glittered.

The Fairy King – who other could be so

richly attired, with velvet black cloak and onyx crown - stood on the opposite bank of the pool as King Malkus alit from his horse, driven by spurring jealousy. The king stepped to the bank and watched his rival on the other side, scarcely ten feet away.

"I have awaited your coming," said the Fairy King, with a bow so slight it seemed like mockery. "Do not think I have foreseen it, for though there are some here who read the stars or who, as in your country, pick among the innards of birds, I am not one of them. I needed no divination; I simply knew your heart. I weighed it, and I knew it would drive you here."

"Where is Julia?" said the King, growling, with no trace of the nobility he normally displayed on public occasions.

"She is in joy. I do not mean she is happy. Not content, as she might be with pretty tinkling fountains and landscaped gardens. Delighted? Not even that, for all the love you gave her, though in truth you put her in a cage. She spends her days in willful happiness, and her wild nights riding over all the breadth of this heady moon-enchanted country, and she never tires, she never ceases in her longing for more.

"What comparable thing can you give her?" He opened his fist, and a small bird, seemingly made of china but in fact a living form, fluttered out and alit on a ledge beside the drawbridge, to sing with a haunting melody the likes of which Malkus had never heard. "Can you match her whims with every beautiful thing, can you give her songbirds when she has enough of silence? Can you cast a bathing pool at her feet?" He waved his hand and a spring of water suddenly jetted up from between the grass and rocks on the other side of the drawbridge. The water spread swiftly, more swiftly than mortal flowing, until it became a second pool that reflected the moonlight. "Do you think

she ever loved you as she loves me? I, whose love transfigures her mortal form and spirit?"

"She is my wife!"

"By the laws of your country, not mine. She was young. She knew little about the life she would settle into."

"Very well, then, it seems I must take her by force."

"You can ride an entire army in here. The forests will confound you. The swamp will take your knights. There is nothing you can threaten me with, and no flame or axe will penetrate the gates of this castle."

As if the matter were decided, there was suddenly a pall on the moon, and when it cleared there was no one standing there on the other bank, and the drawbridge had been raised, and the king was standing alone beside his horse. When he returned to his men he spoke of the Fairy King, but all of them owned to have seen nothing, as if the pall had dimmed things all the while; all except Moon-eye, who perhaps because his wanderings in Faerie had given him penetrative sight, bore witness to the exchange and the wonders that flowed from the hands of Oberon.

They camped that night beside a grove of trees on the edge of a swamp. The king did not speak for a long time, and took himself apart, and it was left to the king's chief adviser, the chamberlain, to try to speak to him.

"Do you not think it might be better to accept things as they are?" whispered his chamberlain, not knowing what else to say, for in truth even the knights were afraid and wanted to return to their own lands.

The king looked up, shocked. "I am sorry if I speak frankly," said the chamberlain. "But the woman has chosen the Fairy King. Could you love her, now, even if you got her back?"

The king hung his head. "I want to talk

to her. I want to hear her side of things, not this tyrant king's. For that is what I think he is – surely he has enchanted her. He has made her believe she loves him; it was he who talked her into the subterfuge in the first place.”

“The king will not let you into the castle.”

Suddenly Malkus looked over at Moon-eye. “Is there a way?”

Moon-eye chuckled. “To enter the castle of King Oberon? Or match your wits with his? If there be, who would dare it? Mayhap there is someone who can help you, though.”

“Who? Speak up!”

“The Queen.”

“Julia? But that’s exactly the problem. I can’t see her.”

“Mind that Julia is the queen in your country, not in this. The Fairy King has given up his consort for your pretty wife. If you find the Fairy Queen, his Titania, you may find that she takes your side. Oh wicked Oberon, he is ever unfaithful. Makes a quarry of mortal women as well as Fair, and afterwards, flings them aside like mouldy potatoes. The Queen is angry with him.”

“Where is she?”

“In the castle, of course. All goes on under her nose. But she rides abroad, under moonlight, and there you may find her, on one of her wanderings. Ask her, my King, what can be done against Oberon. Terrible and beautiful she is, more than a match for her husband. I have seen her, down by the lake in midsummer, seeking to avenge her husband’s discrepancies with indiscretions of her own. Mayhap she will be there in autumn too.”

“Where is this lake? Lead me there.”

Moon-eye sprang to his feet, and went bounding off on a path through the swamp. “Come, then, my king, but come alone, for we cannot be bridled with men and horses.”

He saw the king’s hesitation, and the muttering of the knights and advisors, and added: “Do not doubt my service, for who else has guided you into this pathless realm? If I wanted to deceive you, I could have done so before now, and offered up all your souls to the watchers in the trees. Come, before the night is out, before Titania returns to her bower.”

The king took a deep breath and went after him. He was not used to running; his belt felt tight, and his legs staggered under the weight of his armour, but he kept Moon-eye in sight as he sprang through the high reeds and dodged among the pools of black, brackish water.

He ran until he was out of breath, and it was with great relief that he saw that Moon-eye had come to a halt some distance in front. The man turned to him, and seemed to bow before darting off to the left, in a dash that was more of a leap, and out of sight.

“He has betrayed me,” the king thought, but hardly had the idea formed when he saw, beyond where Moon-eye had fled, the gleaming waters of a lake, and on the edge of it another figure, a woman’s shape, mantled and crowned like a queen – who else but Titania, her back to him, looking out onto the shining water.

He stepped up to her with trepidation, and trembled when she turned to him, as if his very breath had alerted her, for he had made no sound.

It was as if the Queen was as terrible and beautiful as all the wonders of Faerie combined; as if, as an immortal, she stood in relation to her realm as creator to created; the shock of the beauty almost drove Malkus to his knees, and he staggered there, his mouth finding no words.

He lowered his eyes, then, remembering his cause, looked into her face and shivered. Her eyes were a mocking fire, and they

seemed to burn into his very soul. In an instant, he knew that he did not have to explain his coming; that like her husband she could tell all from a single glance.

"Come with me, on a dalliance this night," she said, clutching his hand and leading him, speechless and relenting, through the long reeds by the water's edge.

She threw back a glance as she led, saying, "Do you love this woman?"

Malkus was out of breath as he answered, but somehow he knew that to her every word was clear. "I did, yes. Before."

Titania abruptly stopped, and facing him, giggled when she saw the shadows under his eyes. "Before?"

"Well, yes, I love her still. But before this night I never saw the Queen of Faerie, and now it is as if I have entered a dream, where the shadow of longing has been replaced with a fiery dart."

"What is she, this Queen of yours? A delicate thing? A rose that folds its petals under winter rain? Perhaps a delicate, captive bird, which has never known the hawk or the sky?"

Titania threw back her robe from her shoulders, and tossed out her glorious hair, which was of russet threaded with silver. "You have never known other than her, have you, king? Not the pale virgins for your bed, when the Queen turned her face away; not the dark women of court, the sorceresses of summer isle. All are as one, all of nature, all the same."

She put her lips to his, and the last of his resistance left him. They fell into a bed of rushes, only a foot or two from the water, and with that embrace the king left all his grief and loss behind him, and waves of desire broke upon him, and they made love, and that single act blotted out all the enchantments of Faerie.

He knew, even as it took place, that he

had no command of himself, for the Queen had put him under an enchantment, and it all seemed an ecstatic spell.

It was some time before either of them spoke, for hand in hand they watched the stars above the lake, which danced to a quicker rhythm than their movement in the mortal realm. Then, the Queen turned to him and said: "What of your Julia now? You came here, wanting the keys to the castle. Do you still seek to get her back?"

The king rose and stood looking at his reflection in the lake water. "I don't know. Until this night, yes, I would have given anything. But now..."

"You have tasted something other than mortal love. Like your wife, you are enchanted, king." She smiled, then broke into laughter. "What do you wish now? Do you wish to follow me everywhere on my nighttime wanderings, to witness my reveries and be driven mad by jealous desire?"

Malkus staggered. The pain, as he heard her words, was like a dart in his chest. Was she mocking him? Parting the reeds, he went away from the lake, and the Queen followed after him.

"What if I could do this thing for you? What if I could let you into the castle? Would you then give up what you have tasted here this night? Do you think that Julia could do the same? That you would both go back to your mortal kingdom, and regain happiness?"

He kept walking, and she followed. "No," he said, at length. "No, I cannot give her up. Even for all the passion you have offered me, and which in any case cannot be mine, except for a fleeting moment. I have sat idle too long. I do not want your help in getting in to the castle. I will find my own way."

He knew, as he kept walking, not really knowing where he was going, that he could

not lose her unless she herself permitted it. But, when by what was either luck or enchantment, he caught sight of the others, she was gone, and he knew that he alone would have to find a way into the castle, and that Moon-eye's plan had failed.

He joined the others and by his command they broke camp: they would not wait until morning, but ride back to the plateau and the castle; they saw no more of the Queen that night.

Reaching the windy plateau again, they rode to the gates of the castle, and Malkus, for the first time since he was a young man, leapt down from his horse before it had properly halted, putting out his hand to halt his knights. "Ride from here once I am inside," he said. "I will win her by force of arms. There is nothing you can do to help me. Oberon will bewitch you in an instant. Since there is so little chance for armies, as he said, then we should settle it one king to another."

"Arms against an enchanter?" said the chamberlain, shaking his head.

"Indeed I will try. There are legends still told to babes and stripling boys about heroes, men who fought against enchanters, against monsters and dragons. Well, my belt feels tight, but my sword feels light. I will storm the castle quietly, and we shall see. Something the Queen said made me understand. Julia has been a caged bird. I do not think I was free of blame in this, but I will not let Oberon keep her captive, even if she herself does not recognize it as such. I will see that it is put to an end by my own hand."

But how was he going to get in? He would knock, of course. His gauntlets thudded against the iron door. There was a long pause, with his knights still watching him fearfully from the green sward, then he was inside, shouldering past the Fairy guard

at the doorway, climbing the stairs, out of breath but carried forward by sheer reckless will. At the top of the highest tower there were more guards, but these were quickly felled by his sword. He hardly stopped to catch a breath, and he gave no thought to what he was doing.

Then he stood at the entrance to the bedchamber. He broke open the door and saw the bed empty, the curtains of the casement open, and a figure standing at the window, her back turned to him, looking out at the moon. He was sure, then, though she was clothed differently, that it was Julia.

"Where is the King of Fairy?" Malkus demanded.

The voice was familiar, but faint, as though from far away. "He has gone to hunt other fledglings."

"He has abandoned you? I knew it would be so. I feared it, yet I hoped. Still, if he comes back, I will kill him if I can. I must."

"You could not kill him. None can. He is immortal."

"Then I will die by my right of arms. Come back, Julia, to my kingdom. Give up this moony enchantment. These things that can never be yours."

"Never be mine?" she said, her back still turned. "Oh, that they could be mine forever. If it is true, then I will die in pursuit of them. I will follow these enchantments all my days."

"You love the King, then? You love Oberon."

"Yes, I love him. But in his company I love the wild dances. The moonlight reveries. I love riding bareback through these magical forests. I love to walk next to the Fairy sea."

"Then you won't come back?"

"What is enchantment, Malkus?"

He didn't understand what she meant by

the question. "Spells? Illusion? The thing that Oberon has that I, being mortal, cannot."

"I will tell you what it means to me. Enchantment means spells on our senses. When we believe that the tears of the moon bejewel the grass. When we are caged but even the sky holds no bounds."

She turned then. As she did so, her shape seemed to grow, so that she was at once taller, and more imposing than Julia;

crypt, or does she indeed dally elsewhere with Oberon?"

"Don't you understand? All along I was the Fairy Queen," she said. "I was Titania. I put on a mask for you, but now I have put it off again."

He nodded, pained.

"No, you don't really grasp what I mean. I was once the Fairy Queen. I was a wanderer in moonlight forests, I was Titania in all but name. You caught me, you caged me, and loved me, and I became Julia, but you have forgotten what it is to hunt me. You have forgotten what it is to enchant. Do you not wonder why it took you so long to court me? You, a king."

"I thought you died."

"Perhaps I did. Perhaps I will, without the enchantment I was used to. That is why I brought you here. That is why I worked this beguiling magic, and used Moon-eye Tom to bring you to me, and the peasants who bore witness to my nighttime rides. Was I not your Queen of Faerie once, before our settled life took over? Have you forgotten that we were both under a spell? You were Oberon, and to win me you used every enchantment, and we feasted on beauty together.

"Look in the mirror over there. You will see not a fattened, weary king but the King of Faerie, the king that you once were.

more beautiful and more commanding. It was the Queen. Not his queen, not Julia, but the Fairy Queen.

"It's been you all along?" Malkus gasped. "Where is Julia?"

"So you have found me. You have hunted me here," said Titania, laughing.

"So you transformed yourself? I have been deceived? Does Julia still lie in the

Before the castle, when you stood beside the pool, and Oberon matched you on the opposing bank, it was your own reflection, your own former self, that told you that you could not hold me, because you could not work wonders as he could. And it is true indeed, that you have forgotten that all the time of our first love we walked in fairy woods, we made every thrush into a nightingale, we thought every trickle a fountain, we chased beauty with a desire that was never sated. I have put on this face again, for it is the face of the Queen of Fairy, as yours was once the face of Oberon himself. Look in the mirror."

He turned to the mirror and gasped. He saw not Malkus, the aging and paunched king, but Oberon, the proud and handsome, Oberon dressed in black samite, the garb of a king and warrior, a hunter. He turned back to the Queen, to Julia, to Titania, and saw she had paced once more towards the window. She cast a laughing look back, winking at him. "You broke your way into this tower. That means that you have learned again how to win. You have transformed yourself into the King of Fairy once more. Look down! It's no mere reflection now. You have become Oberon again. That means that you know how to enchant. Do you still know how to hunt?"

And with this she stepped over the threshold, and where once there was a woman, even a Queen of Fairy, there was now a tiny bird, spreading its wings into the moonlight.

The king stepped after her. There, on the edge of the casement, he cast a look down,

as if doubting, but saw that she was right, that he was indeed the lean, black-garbed king of Faerie. And no longer hesitating, he he plunged towards the moon, and became a hawk. He took to wing, and tasted the magical air, and pursued her that night and all his days.

