

Another Kind of Glamour

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“Ask the writer of your choice what his or her themes are and you may get a thoughtful and reasoned answer. You’re just as likely to get an expression much like that of a deer caught in the headlights of an oncoming truck. Themes aren’t created but rather discovered, and often the astute reader sorts it out long before we do. I was publishing for over ten years before realizing that one of my recurring themes is marriage: How it works and how it doesn’t. What it’s really all about. One good way to look at the subject is through the lens of an immortal union, where both the problems and the joys are magnified a thousand-fold. So it’s all metaphor. Except, of course, where it isn’t.”

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THE FAIRY BELLFLOWER woke me out of a sound sleep. “They’re at it again, Puck,” Bellflower said. I didn’t have to ask who. Just ‘what.’

“All right, all right!” I brushed off the vines and cobwebs, then paused a moment to commit a particularly stimulating dream to memory for later reference. “What did Oberon do this time?”

I knew better than to hope that it was Titania who’d started the row. If that had been so, Bellflower would be waking Titania’s favorite, not me.

“I’m not sure,” Bellflower said, her winsome little face scrunched in concentration, “but I think he told her the truth.”

“Oh, hell,” I said, fully awake now. This wasn’t like that business with the Indian boy or a harmless bit of infidelity. This was *serious*. “Which truth, Bellflower? Think carefully—this is important!”

“I’m not sure,” she repeated. “I wasn’t there for that part, Cowslip was.”

“Then why didn’t Cowslip come get me?”

“Because she apparently tried to step between them at one point and got turned into stone. You know how that slows her down.”

I winced. Sorting out Cowslip was going to take time, and I wasn’t sure how much we had. “Where are they now?”

“One went one way and one another. Cowslip hasn’t moved, so she’s still in the bower near the river.”

“All right, see if you can find your mistress and calm her down without getting transformed into anything inanimate.”

“Are you going to find Oberon?”

“I have no doubt he’ll summon me soon enough, but I think I’d better have a chat with Mistress Cowslip first.”

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Fortunately for Cowslip—and unfortunately for my nerves—facts weren’t the essence of Fairie. It was strange to think about, but despite the glamour and illusion that made up much of the daily life and appearance of our world, the essence of Fairie was truth. I sometimes imagine that truth is just another sort of glamour since, like glamour and appearance and illusion, truth is much more malleable than fact.

I was seeing the proof of that theory now, as I stood in the middle of Queen Titania’s favorite riverside bower, and regarded the remarkably lifelike white marble sculpture of the haughty Cowslip. I’d even think the sculptor had captured her dainty breasts and dear little upturned nose just perfectly if I didn’t know that the figure wasn’t a statue at all. The proof of that was the slowly returning color, just a tinge of pink around the cheeks and a hint of the rainbow in her wings that showed that the statue would soon enough be Cowslip once more.

While the fact was that Cowslip had been turned to stone, the *truth* was that Cowslip’s essence was that of a fay and a simple transmutation into marble was not going to change that. Cowslip was slowly becoming a fay again. A rather annoyed fay, to be precise.

“Mrgle dob nospart!” was the first thing she said, once her lips could move again.

“Your tongue’s still marble, luv,” I said. “Speak slower.”

She glared at me, now that her eyes worked well enough to glare at anything. “I *saided*, you’ Masser is a dog’s arsse!”

I tried not to smile. “Better. So, what did the dog’s arse do?”

The pink was returning to the rest of Cowslip’s body, albeit even more slowly than it had to her face. By my estimate she’d been stone for at least an hour, so it was about time. The evening’s comfortable twilight would yield to the harsh light of day very soon and some things simply can’t be mended in full light.

Cowslip didn't answer right away. First she wiggled her fingers, then her toes, then the rest of her body. She stretched like a cat and scratched a spot that clearly had been troubling her for some time.

I tried not to sound as impatient as I felt. "A bit more delicacy, Mistress Cowslip. There are gentlemen present."

"Sod that and sod *you*," she snapped. "Bad enough to be turned to stone and have an itch too! You try it sometime."

"Just tell me what happened. Please."

"Oberon happened. As if you didn't know!" Cowslip glared at me as if I were one and the same as my Lord.

"If I knew," I said, "I wouldn't be asking you. Bellflower said it was something about 'telling her the truth.' Did he really do that?"

"Lot of help *she* was," Cowslip muttered. "Did she stay and help me? Nooo—"

"Mistress Cowslip, the foundation of our existence is shattering all around us and you're going on about trifles! You and I both know there was nothing Bellflower could do for you at that point; she was right to find me instead. Will you please come back to the matter at hand?"

Cowslip turned up her glare. If she had been the sun, I would have been roasted. "Even if that's true, why should I tell you anything? So you can muddle things up even more? You're just like him. You're *all* like him!"

There it was again. As if I needed reminding how uneasy and tentative the alliance between the two great circles of power in the woodland was, and how easy to disrupt, and how thoroughly and quickly discord at the top filtered down to all beneath. It was fortunate that Bellflower found me quickly, or she probably wouldn't have bothered. Or maybe I was reading too much into it and Cowslip was just cranky. Being stone for any length of time tends to irritate a person.

"Cowslip, I humbly apologize for any and all inconveniences. I really want to help, but I can't if you won't tell me what's happened."

Cowslip's glare dimmed. Just a mite, and barely noticeable, but it was something. "It's the new moon," Cowslip said.

"Yes. And?"

She looked disgusted. “Don’t you know anything? This is their night! Or was Oberon’s time to be with my mistress and she with him. New beginnings and such. She’d been preparing for days, don’t ask me why. It’s too much bother for not much reward, in my experience.”

Since I was part of Cowslip’s experience it was hard not to take such remarks personally, but rising to obvious bait only got one gaffed. “And?”

“And Oberon insulted my mistress’s gown!”

I blinked. “That’s it?”

She just stared at me for a moment in what I assume was disbelief.

“Well, I answered your question and, to be fair, you just answered mine,” Cowslip said finally. “You really *don’t* know anything, do you?” She spread her delicate wings and flew away like an indignant wasp. I half expected her to come back and sting me for good measure.

I took a good look around, but the bower was deserted. I could see the river through a leaf-framed opening on the far side; throughout the shelter of the thicket was a thick, soft layer of moss. Here and there was an indentation, left by the queen or one of her retainers, but there was no one else there now that Cowslip had resumed her flesh and made her rather stormy exit. There were no pleasure boats on the river, no songs from the trees, no voices of any kind. Even the crickets were silent. The entire wood seemed both sullen and sulky. I looked past all that, toward the boundaries of Fairie, and then beyond.

I shouldn’t have been able to see beyond. There should have been that shimmer of glamour that kept anything beyond our wood lost in mists and unreality, which is the way we like it. Instead I saw lights, and they were not fairy lights. I heard the distant rumble of machines.

It’s worse than I thought.

Still no summons from Oberon. Not that it mattered at this point. I had to find him, and now. When I emerged from the bower, I saw Bellflower sitting on a stone across the glade and called to her.

“Mistress Cowslip wasn’t very co-operative. Have you seen Titania yet?”

“If I had I wouldn’t tell *you!*” Bellflower said. “Go away!”

It was only then that I noticed what Bellflower was doing. She was very carefully, petal by petal, shredding a daisy. I could almost imagine that the lights beyond Fairie became closer and the hellish machine sounds became louder with

each petal she tore.

“Why are you doing that?”

“Flowers are false,” Bellflower said sourly. “I’m punishing this one.”

“What is the poor blossom’s offence?”

“Mustardseed gave it to me,” she said, as if that explained everything. “Yet I know what he’s really up to. It won’t work. You tell him I said so when you see him.”

“Ummm...of course,” I said, backing away slowly. So now Bellflower was affected too. I should have known, but I’d never seen the discord spread so fast before. Well, Mustardseed was a friend of mine and normally I would have sought him out to warn him of Bellflower’s humour, but right now he was on his own; I had to find the King. Immediately wouldn’t be too soon, but still there was no summons, and I didn’t know where he was.

Think, sprite! You’ve just had a row with your lady. Where do you go from there?

I did think, and then I knew, and then I was gone, faster than that proverbial Tartar’s arrow ever dreamed.

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Oberon and Titania were both Symbolically and Spiritually linked, and both were prisoners of this fact, slaves to their natures, as indeed we all were. As above, so below. When Titania rages, Oberon rages too. Yet the mirror of those two natures is not a perfect one. For instance, when Titania sulks, Oberon mopes and so do all the fay of his circle. I could feel the deep melancholy myself; it was only a strong sense of purpose that kept me from slinking off to find my own hidden place to pine and think sad thoughts. There was nothing at all stopping Oberon. At the moment the King of Fairie was in a mope of classic proportions, obvious even with his back turned squarely to his realm, as indeed his back was so turned at this very moment.

“Go away, Puck,” he said.

King Oberon sat at his favorite spot for such activity, a rocky outcropping near the boundaries of our known world. Even for a sprite like me, it was a bit of a stroll to get there, and when I did, there was King Oberon, staring off into space. Or at least would have been, had the boundary been solidly in place, and not leaking all over. Beyond the rippling haze of glamour, there was a kaliedescope of sights, sounds, and smells.

Not one of which belonged in Fairie.

“Your Majesty, don’t you see what’s happening?!”

He still didn’t look at me. “I already knew it was the end of the world. You think I need these strange sights and portents to convince me of that?”

“Then you know why it’s happening. I wasn’t able to get a coherent story out of either Bellflower or Cowslip, and I thought, perhaps, asking Queen Titania might not be the wisest course right now. If you’ll tell me what happened, Majesty, perhaps I can help.”

Oberon sighed, and the very trees began to drop their leaves in sympathy. “That’s just it—I have no idea.”

“Crowslip said that you insulted Queen Titania’s new gown.”

“What?” The leaves stopped dropping. Now King Oberon did turn and look at me, the area around the base of his horns blushing pink with indignation. “I did no such thing!” he said, his melancholy forgotten, at least for the moment.

I bowed. “Nor did I accuse you, Majesty. Certainly not! Yet that was what I was told. For my better understanding, perhaps you would tell me what it was you actually *did* say?”

Oberon frowned. “All I said was that the gown didn’t suit her.”

Oh. No bloody wonder Her Majesty had gone wilding. “And why did you say that, My Liege? You knew it wasn’t the answer she expected, or wanted.”

The king nodded. “I know. In either case I did not mean to insult her gown, and probably what I *should* have said was that it didn’t do her justice.”

“Well, certainly, *now* you know, but don’t you think—”

Oberon was shaking his head. “You don’t understand, Puck. That wasn’t what she expected to hear, true. I know it now, and I knew it then, too.”

I didn’t say anything for several long moments. I didn’t know what *to* say. Something like, “Oh, I see. You wanted the world to end,” or some such seemed so inadequate. It was Oberon who broke the silence.

“Puck, don’t you get the least bit tired of living in a world that is a fabric of lies? Don’t you want to, every now and again, tell the plain truth? I know I should have said, “Your gown is stunning, My Love,” or something near to it. Yet I said what I said because it was the simple truth—that gown did not suit her. No gown could; I have seen Titania in all her bare glory and, frankly, compared to that, a gown of sunlight and moonbeams is pretty much redundant.”

“Yes, well, if you had explained that—”

He brushed my words aside. “I’d still have insulted her gown and she would still be furious with me, though perhaps not quite as furious as she is now. But I’m not sorry I did it, Puck. I had to tell the truth this time, nor was I wrong to do so.”

All I could do was sigh. Children. I was dealing with children. You’d think after a few millennia I’d remember this. “Majesty, with all due respect: you are mistaken.”

The king stopped moping long enough to scowl. “Do not forget yourself, Puck Robin.”

There was a bit of the old fire in the king’s eyes. Just a bit, but enough. I

could work with that.

“I forget nothing, Majesty, try as I might. You are the King of Fairie, for that is your nature and is such that you can be nothing else. Yet so I am Puck. I was Puck when the continents separated. I was Puck when the glaciers did their slow dance across the entire world, and I am Puck now that all that we are is encased in this small globe beset on all sides and shivering like a bubble of seafoam. As such I will do Puck’s duty to his Liege. Look beyond where our borders shake and tell me what you see.”

Oberon glared at me, but he did as I asked. “I see lights and buildings and strange chariots. I see smoke and fire and things I do not understand.”

I nodded. “Precisely. What you are seeing, My Liege, are the facts.”

He frowned then. “Facts?”

“Facts,” I repeated. “The fact is that the world you see beyond our borders is what’s real. That is a world that can be measured, counted, weighed. A world of facts. Unlike Fairie, which has none of these properties.”

Oberon nodded. “A lie, then, as I said. That is what we are.”

“No, Majesty. The fact is the world we see beyond our borders. The truth is that there *are* borders. That the writ of facts *does not run here*. The truth beyond our borders is whatever the humans choose to make of those facts that surround them, but *here in Fairie the truth is what we collectively say it is*. We are not built on a fabric of lies, Majesty, despite what glamour makes to appear real. We are built on *truth*. A shaky, fragile truth, I will grant you. But truth nonetheless.”

“Oh,” said Oberon, and that was all.

“Do you understand now, Majesty? Your truth was not dangerous because it counteracts a lie—it was dangerous because it conflicts with Titania’s own truth that her gown was lovely! Whether she actually knows that or not is beside the point. All she knows is that she is justifiably furious at you. *That* is her truth now.”

Oberon looked stunned. “But Puckit’s such a small thing.”

“As a seed is small until grown, as a rock underneath a hoof is small until trodden, as a vine stretched between two alders is small, until you trip over it. When Titania’s truth and your truth collided, all our truths were put in disarray. Including the one that matters most to us: the existence of Fairie. For that one truth to hold, we need peace and harmony between the rod and the spindle. I do not forget myself or my place, Majesty. I merely remind you of yours.”

Oberon was still moping, but a more pensive strain of melancholy seemed to be taking hold. I knew I was getting through to him, but would it be soon enough? In a moment I thought I had my answer—the ground shook and I looked around. The leaves on the great oaks began to quiver, then rained down and swirled around us as if snatched by a cold autumn wind. “Majesty, we’re running out of time!”

“I suppose,” Oberon said grimly, “we will have to find the Queen. In her current mood or mine, that may not be wise.”

It took me a moment to realize what he meant, but the signs were all there: his face was as red as a forge and I’d almost swear the horns on his forehead had grown an inch in the time we were talking. Oberon, King of Fairie, was furious, and nearly from one instant to the next. And here I thought Titania was mercurial.

“Majesty, what are you going to do when you see her?”

“You will leave that to me, Puck Robin. Find my Queen.”

“Find? But you always know—”

“Your King commands you. Go!”

By the bond they shared, King Oberon and Queen Titania always knew where the other was. Yet for as long as Fairie had lasted or would last, Oberon was its king and a command was a command. One moment I was standing beside Oberon and the next I was gone, and a blink wouldn’t have separated the distance between the two states.

“Bloody hell.”

Oberon didn’t need me to find Titania, so clearly he just wanted me out of his sight, and by his command there was nothing else I could do but search in vain. Well, sod me but I knew the danger. I had told my king the simple truth and that was no doubt as reckless and irresponsible as what Oberon had told Titania. Yet what else could I have done?

Frantically I searched, but Titania was nowhere to be found; it wasn’t within my power to find the Fairie Queen if she didn’t wish it so. I could circle the Earth in a heartbeat and it wouldn’t be quick enough. I could feel the fabric of our reality tearing like a rotten veil. Soon the real world would rush in and once that happened there would be no way on heaven or earth to push it out again.

Don’t you ever get the least bit weary of living in a world that is nothing but a fabric of lies?

I remembered what Oberon said. The lie part wasn’t true, well, not yet

anyway, but part of me understood what he meant. Perhaps it was better this way. No more careful balance, no more patching and mending the threadbare truths and keeping the mortal's reality at bay. Let the royal children rip it all to shreds in a fit of pique for all I cared. I had failed. I was tired. I wanted to rest. I picked the first soft and mossy place I came to and lay down.

“And just what do you think you're doing, sprite?”

Cowslip sat cross-legged on the branch of an oak tree a few feet above me, staring down.

“Resting,” I said. “Waiting in a comfortable spot for the world to end.”

“Liar. You're moping. That's what you all do at times like this. Bloody useless, the lot of you.”

Was she right? Had the King's melancholy got to me? Yet the king's period of moping had apparently ended. So why wasn't I angry too? And why in blazes was Cowslip talking to me?

“A little while ago you wouldn't have spoken to me, even to be insulting.”

She grinned, and I was suddenly reminded what a sweet face she had. “Insulting you is fun. Why should I give it up just because Themselves are having a row?”

Matters were worse even than I had thought. It was bad enough when all the fay shared their sovereign's moods, but when the link was broken, well, surely it was the end of Fairie. And yet, Cowslip sounded almost like herself again. I looked around. Fairie was still here; nothing at all had changed, so far as I could see. I looked to the border... and I couldn't see it beyond the mist. All was Fairie, as far as my eye could see. I had a sudden suspicion.

“Cowslip, do you know where Titania is?”

“Of course I do, and if you had any brains in that fat pan of yours, so would you.” Cowslip cocked her head to one side, listening. “I must away, sprite,” and she was gone.

I sat up, and then stood up. All was quiet. Whatever summons Cowslip had responded to, it wasn't meant for me. The wood around me was suddenly bathed in a gentle golden glow.

“Greetings, Puck.”

The light resolved itself. It was a glow of regal glamour, and in the center of it

stood King Oberon and Queen Titania, arm in arm, smiling at the world but mostly at each other. Behind them were attendants Bellflower, Cowslip, Mustardseed, and the entire host of the fay in solemn procession.

“Majesties?”

The Queen smiled at me. “We are having a dance and revel in the middle glade, Good Robin. Will you join us there?”

I bowed low. “Of, of course, Majesty.”

Later I caught Oberon alone, but barely. Titania had grandly and conspicuously retired early and it was clear Oberon would join her presently, if he—and all of us—knew what was good for him.

“What happened? And why did you send me after the Queen, My Liege?” I asked.

He smiled a little wistfully. “Because I didn’t want you to witness what I had to do to make matters right, Puck Robin,” he said. “Things were bad enough. Did you know that, while our world was falling apart, she still took the time to tell me exactly what she thought of me, thoroughly and at length and with great inventiveness? I’m almost sorry I sent you away for that part; you would have enjoyed it immensely, I’m sure.”

“Then why are we all still here? And why were you so angry, My Liege?”

“Because I wasn’t wrong.”

The more I heard the less sense it made. “You were angry for being right?”

He laughed then. “No, Puck. I was angry because I *was* right, and yet I was still going to go apologize to my Queen.”

“And you made things right between Yourself and Her Majesty, so easily?”

He laughed then. “Easily? Puck, weren’t you listening? I had to *apologize!* It’s not something I like doing, and I certainly needed no more witnesses to my shame. Yet I am king enough to realize—with a little reminder on your part—that there are more important things than being right. Fairie is one. Titania, my love, is the other.”

Cowslip appeared at the edge of the wood, looking Ominous. Oberon nodded. “Tell the Queen I will join her straight away.” She disappeared then, looking worried. Oberon turned back to me. “I must go now, Puck. Matters are too easily undone.”

I nodded. So easily that, doubtless, they would become undone again. “This may be important later, so I have to ask, Your Majesty: what did you say to her?”

He shrugged. “I said that I loved her, that she was more important to me than all the world. That she *was* the world.”

I frowned. “And she believed you?”

He looked at me very seriously then. “Why shouldn’t she believe me, Puck? After all, it *is* the truth.”

Oberon took his leave then, nor did I say anything more. After all, it wasn’t the first time the Fairie Queen had loved an ass. Still, so were we all and truth was a risky business all around. I wasn’t sure how many more wild roaming truths Fairie could stand. Yet, and despite the odds, peace had been achieved in Fairie because this time Oberon and Titania’s truths were in harmony. So Oberon went to meet his Queen and I went to get some well-deserved sleep. Or at least I started to, when Cowslip appeared again looking, if anything, even more Ominous.

“And where do you think you’re going, sprite?”

“That depends,” I said quickly.

“On what, Puck?”

“On you.”

Cowslip smiled and took my hand. So much for my sleep, but I knew the risks. Truth is a dangerous thing, as I said before, and living by it always brings consequences.

Some, fortunately, were more agreeable than others.