



ROBIN

Phil Parker

I'd been calling him Robin long before I realised who he was.

We met at my local. I say it like I've been drinking there for years. Three months; ever since I redefined myself. Or got divorced and made redundant, if you prefer.

We talked about the usual things, football, women (I avoided sharing my jaded views with him for all of thirty minutes) and cars. We'd buy each other pints, saying nothing of any significance. It helped me feel less lonely.



He didn't talk about himself much. He was a young guy, his job was something connected to the environment. He never explained, I didn't question. That wasn't what we did. We're blokes.

One summer night that all changed.

We'd taken to going home at the same time. He'd been preoccupied, staring into his pint and hardly speaking so I curtailed my happiness about my divorce being finalised and having first short story published.

We ambled through the dark village streets and I asked Robin if he was lonely. He said he was. I only nodded, waited for him to go on. Instead he stopped, turned and he looked at me.

I saw in his eyes something I hadn't noticed before. For a young guy he had old eyes. I don't know how else to explain it, but those fiercely blue eyes had a sadness and a wealth of experience you wouldn't see in a young guy.

He swept his arm to include the village and said, 'Neither of us fit in here, do we?'

I agreed. I mean, everyone was over seventy, there were more zimmer frames parked outside the pub than cars. When I said he was the youngest in the village he laughed so loud and long I thought he might be drunk. He talked about how the village had once been a vibrant place but now few young people wanted to live so far from cities and motorway links. I didn't ask how he'd know such a thing.

We reached a path leading into woods on the edge of the village. The cottage I was renting was in the other direction and I stopped to say good night. Before I got chance, he grabbed my elbow and yanked me with him along the path.

It's a pretty place. I'd walked it lots of times, getting ideas for my novel. It inspired



me, don't know why. There's a little stream that tinkles over stones. Sounds hackneyed but it does, like somebody playing a delicate xylophone. We followed the stream for a while and Robin was talking all the time now. He kept describing the village as it used to be, way back before cars poisoned the air he said. When the water in the

stream was so pure you could drink it free of the chemicals that now ran off the land and polluted it.

I followed him, uncertainty and some anxiety making my heart beat a little faster.

We reached a pool. It was formed by the stream tumbling into a basin formed by rocks, covered in moss and reeds. It was like something you would see in those expensive garden centres Debbie used to insist we visited. Except this was natural, and it was made all the more beautiful by the moonlight filtering through gaps in the oak trees. It gave the water a silvery sheen. I gasped when I saw it and Robin smiled, like he'd expected that reaction.

'Can you imagine living in a world that was entirely like this?' he asked.

I shook my head. He nodded in reply and leapt up onto some big rocks that looked out over the pool. I mean leapt like he was an Olympic athlete, or perhaps a mountain goat.

He stood there, book-ended by two pillars of rock stretching into the starry sky.

'I can't imagine this world like that anymore, either,' he said. 'It isn't the paradise it used to be and I don't fit in here any longer. There's no point staying in a world where you aren't happy, is there?'

I stood at the edge of the pool, looking up at him, a nimbus of moonlight surrounding him. What was he telling me? That he was leaving the village? Or worse, he was going to kill himself?

I've never been one to suffer poor communication, despite what Debbie used to say. I was a lecturer in English Literature, communication was the commonest word in the job description.

'You're not talking about suicide, are you?'

He laughed loudly again, hands on hips, bent double with guffaws of amusement.

'That's what I like about you! You make me laugh. I haven't done that in decades!'

I frowned. Not least because I felt foolish about the suicide assumption but also because he hadn't lived for that many decades to say something like that. I told him so.

He laughed again and performed a perfect somersault to land at my feet, not even the slightest degree of over-balance, inches away from the dark depths of the pool.

'How old do you think I am then?'

He was right in front of me, virtually invading my personal space, so I couldn't miss how the moonlight shone on skin that hadn't a wrinkle on it.

'Twenty-five?' I said. Years of playing that game with every girl I'd known told me to be conservative, in case it was true for blokes too.

He nodded and smiled. I'd guessed correctly it seemed.

Now, as to this next part. What I'm going to write will sound stupid and you'll re-read it, because you won't be sure you read it correctly. So, let me make this clear, what happened made me stare, eyes wide open as I pinched my bare arm in the hope I'd wake up. The pinch hurt and I didn't wake up.

Robin's face began to change. Lines formed across his forehead and little wrinkles at the edge of his eyes appeared. His skin formed occasional brown blemishes and developed



dark patches around the eyes and cheek bones. His jaw line turned slightly flabby and grew chords of skin that stretched from his chin to his throat.

That was when I pinched myself.

'How old now?'

I won't go into the rest of the conversation. It was little more than repeated monosyllabic grunts interspersed with the shaking of my head. You see, within a few seconds, all those features on his face were erased and the young man I knew, stared back at me, mischief being the main expression that sat on his face.

That was when he told me who he was.

I kept on shaking my head when he told me he was a fairy.

I don't think I moved otherwise. It felt right to stand there, in the middle of a wood, in the middle of the night, motionless except to shake my head at the impossibility of what was happening. The transformation was a glamour apparently, a disguise.

There must have been some of my synapses located in a dim and underused section of my brain which now flared into operation, despite my otherwise numb senses. Because when I asked him to tell me his full name, I wasn't as surprised as I might have been.

He told me he was Robin Goodfellow.

I knew the name of course. I'd have deserved that redundancy if I hadn't recognised it. In Shakespeare's *Midsummer Night's Dream*, he's called Puck, the servant to the king of the fairies, Oberon.

He sat me down on a fallen tree trunk at the side of the pool. For a few seconds there was a loud roaring sound in my ears and darkness formed at the edge of my vision. He pushed my head down so I could stare at a wood louse amble along the base of the tree trunk. When I looked up at him again, I wasn't sure what I'd find.

He was the same bloke I'd been drinking with for three months. Yet he was a fairy, one who'd featured in Shakespeare's greatest comedy. The thought had no sooner entered



my head than the roaring sounds returned and I resumed my examination of wood louse behaviour.

I was like that for a while. I felt stupid and pathetic but it isn't every day you learn that a legend can be real and kneel in front of you, with mild concern in its sharp blue eyes.

He talked as I slowly recovered. There are two courts it appears, just like in the play. The Bright Court sounds a bit fluffy and romantic though he assures me it's not. The Dark Court is exactly as it sounds, and these were the guys he'd abandoned.

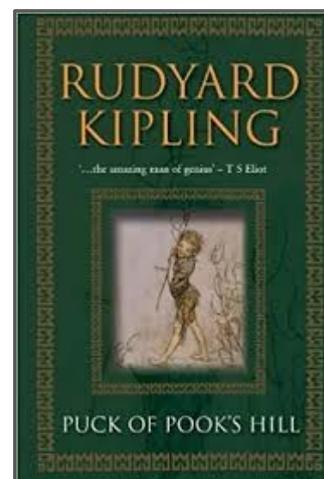
As a servant to Oberon, Robin made the job sound like being the muscle for your typical East End gangster. Just a few of his anecdotes had me shivering, and it wasn't from the night's breezes either. He'd come to our world – realm he calls it – to avoid it all.

It didn't make sense that he was now choosing to go back to that kind of life and I told him so. He said he understood but there was a lot more to the story than he had time to tell me now. He'd arranged a meeting with someone who could help but I had to make myself scarce. (Those are my words, not his; I suppose I'm just making him sound like a gangster now).

I made my way back along the path to the village alone and bewildered. Apart from a light blue flicking light behind me, which might have been summer lightning, but probably wasn't, I left Robin to his negotiations.

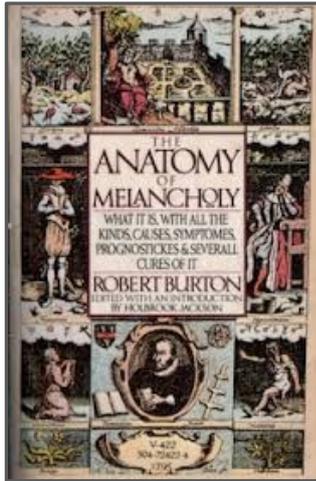
By the time I reached home those synapses were kicking in and I had every reference book I possessed spread out on my dining table. It groaned with the weight.

First on my checklist of references was the book I'd grown up with and called a friend. *'Puck of Pook's Hill'* was the novel that almost wrecked Rudyard Kipling's career. From the man that brought us Jungle Book came a story Victorian England struggled to comprehend. A young man befriending two children, introducing them to the world of fairies, was all too fanciful for a nation bred on the worship of science and engineering. At least Kipling hadn't been hoodwinked like poor old Conan Doyle with his fairy encounter. Kipling's fairy hadn't been one of the 'painty-winged' creations the story's protagonist abhorred. They



looked and sounded human. I wondered if Kipling could have known the young man I'd met. I was starting to wonder.

My research showed he went back further than that. His first appearance was in 1582, a traveller's guide to Kent and Sussex of all things, by Reginald Scot, who warned tourists that Robin Goodfellow was a trickster. Fourteen years later Shakespeare portrayed him the same way.



Shakespeare's old rival, Ben Jonson, even contributed to Robin's growing reputation, calling him a 'knavish sprite' in 1628. Elizabethan writer Robert Burton referred to him in his 'Anatomy of Melancholy'. Almost a hundred years later Robin featured in 'Hudibras', an epic poem referred to by Samuel Pepys no less. Within the next hundred years there was an almanac named after him and a reference in The Westminster Review of 1828.

It left me pondering one mystery.

How could someone live over four hundred years? I decided it had to be the glamour he created, if he'd gone public with the idea, my fairy friend would make a million from the cosmetics industry. Something told me it was more than that.

I woke with my head resting on one arm which now felt heavy and useless. For a brief moment I wondered if I had dreamed everything but the clutter of open books told me otherwise. There was also the incessant knocking on my door.

I stumbled clumsily to the back door, only partly awake and feeling like I should still be asleep. I glanced at the clock, it was three thirty, I really should be asleep.

I opened the door.

Clinging to the wooden frame was the young man I'd left in the woods four hours before. Except now his youthful good looks were ruined, he looked like a poster promoting accident and emergency care. Blood trickled down his face from a scalp wound, his perfect features were bruised and scratched and his pale blue shirt was stained by a large patch of glistening gore.

Despite my sleepy brain, my body kicked up adrenalin levels and I caught hold of the youth as his grip on the doorframe slipped and he fell into my arms. He was lighter than I imagined so I picked him up, kicked the door closed behind me, carried him into the lounge and laid him on the sofa.

He lapsed in and out of consciousness for the next few minutes. It was helpful in one way, I was able to clean up his wounds without needing to worry about the pain I was creating.

Adrenalin levels rose further with a loud crash from outside and the sound of stamping feet. I didn't have his conscious mind available to tell me if the noises were something I should worry about.

I decided for myself. The hammering on my front door helped me decide.

I hurtled into the kitchen and locked the back door and flipped the catches of the window locks and pulled curtains closed with a speed and agility that amazed me. I also picked up the baseball bat that I kept in the downstairs cloakroom. After you've lived in east London you come to appreciate the need for personal protection.

The hammering continued and I was glad the cottage was old enough to still possess thick oak doors. I hadn't noticed much before, but now the selection of iron horseshoes nailed on the doorframe might be to my advantage. Fairies didn't like cold iron, Robin had said as much in Kipling's *Puck of Pook's Hill*. They didn't like salt either.

I plucked out of a kitchen cupboard a salt cellar and emptied it onto a plate, ready to throw at anything which tried to get in.

The hammering continued and was joined by loud thumping sounds against my back door. I could hear scratching noises against the wall, where a trellis supported climbing roses. Something else was clambering up the wall and ruining my roses probably.

Like a gazelle I sprinted upstairs and locked the windows tight. Just as I closed the curtains, I saw a large dark shape appear by the side of the window frame. Claws reached out and tried to find purchase on the windowsill, without success. There was a muffled growl and a loud bump, a chance to be grateful for PVC window frames.

Back downstairs and my patient was gaining consciousness again.

‘School bell,’ he mumbled hoarsely as he tried to sit up and failed.

I look at him dumbly, wondering if he was hallucinating.

‘In the corner of the fireplace. Bell. Ring it. Keeping ringing it.’

The effort finished him off. Robin’s bright blue eyes rolled up into his head and he was out cold again.

It was an old-fashioned inglenook fireplace, the sort that attracts you to old house like this one. You soon change your mind. On such a warm night there was no need for a fire, I reached behind the brick archway to find a dusty round object. An old school bell, complete with wooden handle.

I strode to the front door, furious at the inconvenience and lack of consideration these invaders were causing. You couldn’t have got more British unless you’d wrapped me in the Union flag. I threw open the door, where dark night and dark shadows greeted me, and I rang that bell for all I was worth. It clanged loud enough to wake the dead and perhaps that was what it did. Because from the darkness came the most unearthly howls of torment you could imagine.

I rang that bell until I thought my hand was going to drop off. By which time the howling had diminished as my visitors fled into the night. I closed the door, after trickling some of the salt in a line along the threshold. I’d seen it done in a film once.

Robin was awake when I got back, face pale and glistening with sweat, fingers in his ears. He smiled bravely at me as I asked how he was.

He’d survive, he’d suffered worse and all he needed to do was rest.

I asked the obvious question.

His previous employer had gotten wind of his impending return. His beating was a message along the lines of letting him know the prodigal son was not welcome. I think his assailants had every intention of repeating the message on him until he’d sought sanctuary in the one place where he knew he’d be safe.

The cottage’s previous inhabitant had been an ally too, he told me. We were interrupted by a knock on the door. I picked up the bell in one hand, the baseball bat in the other and opened the door.

A vision was standing there.

I don't mean a religious one, though she'd easily make me believe in miracles. No, it was the combination of a mass of strawberry-blond curls, the darkest brown eyes I had ever seen and the body of an underwear model.

She looked at me earnestly and asked if she could come in. I answered by gaping open-mouthed and nodding my head. A loquacious response.

She ministered to Robin, making me slightly jealous of his injuries. She had been his contact and their assignation had been interrupted. He hadn't intended to return to his employers, quite the reverse, he'd asked to join the opposition. The Bright Court.

This woman was their appointed representative.

I liked the Bright Court.

I was rather superfluous. Their discussions were all about how he might still return and the political fall-out if he did. I don't remember all of it; I was obsessed with looking at this beautiful girl. I'd worked out very quickly that this could be a glamour. I didn't care. She gave glamour a new definition.

I don't care how much that sounds like the tag-line for a new product range either.

The rosy pink light of dawn was fighting through the curtains when I was eventually re-introduced to the conversation. Her name was Catherine and she was human. There was no glamour, not in the way the fairies use the word anyway.

She had some fairy ancestry which was why she'd acted as the go-between. Robin was seen as having gone native, by choosing to lead his life in our realm. There had been some kind of accord agreed many years ago, she told me, forbidding fairies from coming here. It explained why we didn't encounter them in the way humans had in the past.

The arrival of the attackers last night had obviously been against the terms of the agreement and there would be trouble back at the ranch. There would be more trouble here too, Oberon's mobsters wouldn't be happy about my campanology, we could expect another visit, one not so easily distracted.

Fairies they may be but they still sounded more like gangsters to me.

The need to escape the cottage for this reason was obvious to Robin and I. Catherine insisted in patching up her patient for the journey, otherwise he'd lose more blood and never make it. Blood would also make him easy to track. She had a point.

We set off through the village as the first bright yellow rays of sun lit up the sky. Thankfully no one was up and about to ask why two people were marching a blood-soaked youth through a sleepy English village. It could have been a scene in *Midsomer Murders*.

We reached the woods and were attacked.

It was more like twilight beneath the trees and the shadows hid our assailants long enough for us to be surrounded. There was no warning, no threats made, just the rush of dark figures towards us. If I'm honest I couldn't describe them, I'd be useless on *CrimeWatch*. Some were human in appearance, others shambled like long-armed apes covered in black fur.

My friend was wounded badly and an incredibly attractive, sexy girl looked at me with desperation in her dark brown eyes. What else could I do?

I went in to attack mode.

I don't possess the skills of a ninja or the fighting prowess of a soldier. What I do possess is a temper. Ask Debbie. So, with the baseball bat I'd thoughtfully brought with me plus a bag full of salt, for the next few minutes I noisily and brutally went berserk.

That's why I couldn't describe our attackers, they were little more than a blur while I clubbed them and hurled salt in their astonished faces. They clearly hadn't expected to meet that kind of assault. The last two of our assailants fled into the woods, screaming.

I remember holding my bat, eyes wide, ready for anything to leap out at me, adrenalin pumping through my body to keep me wired. I remember Robin and Catherine staring at me, equally as wide-eyed, in undisguised astonishment. It took me several minutes to regain my sanity. I stepped over the prostrate forms with a sense of satisfaction I'd never felt before. Perhaps I should have felt guilt. But growing up in east London teaches you one thing: survive, no matter what.

We stumbled along the path to the pool in the woods. No one said very much, I was too breathless to speak, Robin was struggling to stay conscious and Catherine, I suspect, was just too scared.



While I dabbed Robin's chest wound with fresh water, it had opened up again during the attack, Catherine performed a strange ritual. The two columns of rock were an archway, the top of which was covered in ivy. She strode beneath its arch in an anti-clockwise circle; widdershins. It was a word I hadn't encountered for years until she explained what she was doing.

The portal she summoned appeared as she completed her third circuit. It was beautiful. Like a shimmering waterfall of fizzing energy, its petrol-blue fluorescence trickled downwards to be earthed by the damp ground beneath the arch. The stone archway provided a similar earthing mechanism. Through the curtain of light, I could see woodland though its trees and bushes looked decidedly different to that around me.

'Is that your home?' I asked Robin.

He nodded, sadly, his shoulders slumped forward. I wasn't certain if it was because of the pain or the moment of departure. He had one arm around Catherine's shoulder. They both were looking at me.

'They'll be back,' Robin said, gesturing with his head in the direction of our assailants. 'You've made enemies and Oberon isn't the sort to forgive. I can assure you of that.'

I grinned half-heartedly. 'I'll go to the police. Demand protection. I'm a wanted man by a gang of fairies. They're certain to listen to me.'

Catherine's dark eyes glistened in the early morning light. 'They'll attack next time with real violence. Tonight was just a warning, a gesture. You're not safe. That's why I left.'

I shrugged, manfully.

‘Get home, get yourself better Robin. I hope you’ll be happier with this other court. You’ve been lonely for too long. No one should suffer a fate like that.’

The young man stared at me, eyebrows raised. ‘Says you,’ he replied. ‘The guy who leads the loneliest life and won’t have a drinking companion now either.’

I shrugged again. I couldn’t deny it.

‘Come with us,’ Catherine blurted out suddenly. ‘I can explain what’s happened. Oberon has broken the terms of the protocol by attacking us here. As the guy that defended two members of the Bright Court, I’d say you deserve a home with us.’

Robin smiled at me.

‘The beer isn’t as good,’ he said. ‘But I’d enjoy having you around. You make me laugh.’

‘Apparently,’ I replied. ‘You’re not the trickster you used to be, you know. Your reputation had quite an impact on our culture.’

He smiled. ‘You just grow up.’

‘Will you come with us?’ Catherine asked. Her eager expression made the decision for me. That’s why I’ve written it all down for anyone that’s interested. Catherine brought me back to the cottage a few nights later to pick up a few of my things. No one will miss me. I doubt anyone will believe this note. We’re in the twenty-first century, fairy tales are old fashioned, kids prefer computer games.

People will say I went mad and I’m living a hermit’s existence in a cave somewhere. Let them.

If you want to find me, you know where I am. Come and look me up. I’ll be easy to find, just ask for the human bloke that’s Robin’s friend.