

The Brownie of the Lake

by Andrew Lang
from *The Lilac Fairy Book*

Once upon a time there lived in France a man whose name was Jalm Riou. You might have walked a whole day without meeting anyone happier or more contented, for he had a large farm, plenty of money, and above all, a daughter called Barbaik, the most graceful dancer and the best-dressed girl in the whole country side. When she appeared on holidays in her embroidered cap, five petticoats, each one a little shorter than the other, and shoes with silver buckles, the women were all filled with envy, but little cared Barbaik what they might whisper behind her back as long as she knew that her clothes were finer than anyone else's and that she had more partners than any other girl.

Now amongst all the young men who wanted to marry Barbaik, the one whose heart was most set on her was her father's head man, but as his manners were rough and he was exceedingly ugly she would have nothing to say to him, and, what was worse, often made fun of him with the rest.

Jegu, for that was his name, of course heard of this, and it made him very unhappy. Still he would not leave the farm, and look for work elsewhere, as he might have done, for then he would never see Barbaik at all, and what was life worth to him without that?

One evening he was bringing back his horses from the fields, and stopped at a little lake on the way home to let them drink. He was tired with a long day's work, and stood with his hand on the mane of one of the animals, waiting till they had done, and thinking all the while of Barbaik, when a voice came out of the gorse close by.

'What is the matter, Jegu? You mustn't despair yet.'

The young man glanced up in surprise, and asked who was there.

'It is I, the brownie of the lake,' replied the voice.

'But where are you?' inquired Jegu.

‘Look close, and you will see me among the reeds in the form of a little green frog. I can take,’ he added proudly, ‘any shape I choose, and even, which is much harder, be invisible if I want to.’

‘Then show yourself to me in the shape in which your family generally appear,’ replied Jegu.

‘Certainly, if you wish,’ and the frog jumped on the back of one of the horses, and changed into a little dwarf, all dressed in green.

This transformation rather frightened Jegu, but the brownie bade him have no fears, for he would not do him any harm; indeed, he hoped that Jegu might find him of some use.

‘But why should you take all this interest in me?’ asked the peasant suspiciously.

‘Because of a service you did me last winter, which I have never forgotten,’ answered the little fellow. ‘You know, I am sure, that the korigans[FN#3: The spiteful fairies.] who dwell in the White Corn country have declared war on my people, because they say that they are the friends of man. We were therefore obliged to take refuge in distant lands, and to hide ourselves at first under different animal shapes. Since that time, partly from habit and partly to amuse ourselves, we have continued to transform ourselves, and it was in this way that I got to know you.’

‘How?’ exclaimed Jegu, filled with astonishment.

‘Do you remember when you were digging in the field near the river, three months ago, you found a robin redbreast caught in a net?’

‘Yes,’ answered Jegu, ‘I remember it very well, and I opened the net and let him go.’

‘Well, I was that robin redbreast, and ever since I have vowed to be your friend, and as you want to marry Barbaik, I will prove the truth of what I say by helping you to do so.’

‘Ah! my little brownie, if you can do that, there is nothing I won’t give you, except my soul.’

‘Then let me alone,’ rejoined the dwarf, ‘and I promise you that in a very few months you shall be master of the farm and of Barbaik.’

‘But how are you going to do it?’ exclaimed Jegu wonderingly.

‘That is my affair. Perhaps I may tell you later. Meanwhile you just eat and sleep, and don’t worry yourself about anything.’

Jegu declared that nothing could be easier, and then taking off his hat, he thanked the dwarf heartily, and led his horses back to the farm.

Next morning was a holiday, and Barbaik was awake earlier than usual, as she wished to get through her work as soon as possible, and be ready to start for a dance which was to be held some distance off. She went first to the cow-house, which it was her duty to keep clean, but to her amazement she found fresh straw put down, the racks filled with hay, the cows milked, and the pails standing neatly in a row.

‘Of course, Jegu must have done this in the hope of my giving him a dance,’ she thought to herself, and when she met him outside the door she stopped and thanked him for his help. To be sure, Jegu only replied roughly that he didn’t know what she was talking about, but this answer made her feel all the more certain that it was he and nobody else.

The same thing took place every day, and never had the cow-house been so clean nor the cows so fat. Morning and evening Barbaik found her earthen pots full of milk and a pound of butter freshly churned, ornamented with leaves. At the end of a few weeks she grew so used to this state of affairs that she only got up just in time to prepare breakfast.

Soon even this grew to be unnecessary, for a day arrived when, coming downstairs, she discovered that the house was swept, the furniture polished, the fire lit, and the food ready, so that she had nothing to do except to ring the great bell which summoned the labourers from the fields to come and eat it. This, also, she thought was the work of Jegu, and she could not help feeling that a husband of this sort would be very useful to a girl who liked to lie in bed and to amuse herself.

Indeed, Barbaik had only to express a wish for it to be satisfied. If the wind was cold or the sun was hot and she was afraid to go out lest her complexion should be spoilt, she need only to run down to the spring close by and say softly, 'I should like my churns to be full, and my wet linen to be stretched on the hedge to dry,' and she need never give another thought to the matter.

If she found the rye bread too hard to bake, or the oven taking too long to heat, she just murmured, 'I should like to see my six loaves on the shelf above the bread box,' and two hours after there they were.

If she was too lazy to walk all the way to market along a dirty road, she would say out loud the night before, 'Why am I not already back from Morlaix with my milk pot empty, my butter bowl inside it, a pound of wild cherries on my wooden plate, and the money I have gained in my apron pocket?' and in the morning when she got up, lo and behold! there were standing at the foot of her bed the empty milk pot with the butter bowl inside, the black cherries on the wooden plate, and six new pieces of silver in the pocket of her apron. And she believed that all this was owing to Jegu, and she could no longer do without him, even in her thoughts.

When things had reached this pass, the brownie told the young man that he had better ask Barbaik to marry him, and this time the girl did not turn rudely away, but listened patiently to the end. In her eyes he was as ugly and awkward as ever, but he would certainly make a most useful husband, and she could sleep every morning till breakfast time, just like a young lady, and as for the rest of the day, it would not be half long enough for all she meant to do. She would wear the beautiful dresses that came when she wished for them, and visit her neighbours, who would be dying of envy all the while, and she would be able to dance as much as she wished. Jegu would always be there to work for her and save for her, and watch over her. So, like a well-brought-up girl, Barbaik answered that it should be as her father pleased, knowing quite well that old Riou had often said that after he was dead there was no one so capable of carrying on the farm.

The marriage took place the following month, and a few days later the old man died quite suddenly. Now Jegu had everything to see to himself, and somehow it did not seem so easy as when the farmer was alive. But once more the brownie stepped in, and was better than ten labourers. It was he who ploughed and sowed and reaped, and if, as

happened, occasionally, it was needful to get the work done quickly, the brownie called in some of his friends, and as soon as it was light a host of little dwarfs might have been seen in the fields, busy with hoe, fork or sickle. But by the time the people were about all was finished, and the little fellows had disappeared.

And all the payment the brownie ever asked for was a bowl of broth. From the very day of her marriage Barbaik had noted with surprise and rage that things ceased to be done for her as they had been done all the weeks and months before. She complained to Jegu of his laziness, and he only stared at her, not understanding what she was talking about. But the brownie, who was standing by, burst out laughing, and confessed that all the good offices she spoke of had been performed by him, for the sake of Jegu, but that now he had other business to do, and it was high time that she looked after her house herself.

Barbaik was furious. Each morning when she was obliged to get up before dawn to milk the cows and go to market, and each evening when she had to sit up till midnight in order to churn the butter, her heart was filled with rage against the brownie who had caused her to expect a life of ease and pleasure. But when she looked at Jegu and beheld his red face, squinting eyes, and untidy hair, her anger was doubled.

‘If it had not been for you, you miserable dwarf!’ she would say between her teeth, ‘if it had not been for you I should never have married that man, and I should still have been going to dances, where the young men would have brought me present of nuts and cherries, and told me that I was the prettiest girl in the parish. While now I can receive no presents except from my husband. I can never dance, except with my husband. Oh, you wretched dwarf, I will never, never forgive you!’

In spite of her fierce words, no one knew better than Barbaik how to put her pride in her pocket when it suited her, and after receiving an invitation to a wedding, she begged the brownie to get her a horse to ride there. To her great joy he consented, bidding her set out for the city of the dwarfs and to tell them exactly what she wanted. Full of excitement, Barbaik started on her journey. It was not long, and when she reached the town she went straight to the dwarfs, who were holding counsel in a wide green place, and said to them, ‘Listen, my

friends! I have come to beg you to lend me a black horse, with eyes, a mouth, ears, bridle and saddle.'

She had hardly spoken when the horse appeared, and mounting on his back she started for the village where the wedding was to be held.

At first she was so delighted with the chance of a holiday from the work which she hated, that she noticed nothing, but very soon it struck her as odd that as she passed along the roads full of people they all laughed as they looked at her horse. At length she caught some words uttered by one man to another. 'Why, the farmer's wife has sold her horse's tail!' and turned in her saddle. Yes; it was true. Her horse had no tail! She had forgotten to ask for one, and the wicked dwarfs had carried out her orders to the letter!

'Well, at any rate, I shall soon be there,' she thought, and shaking the reins, tried to urge the horse to a gallop. But it was of no use; he declined to move out of a walk; and she was forced to hear all the jokes that were made upon her.

In the evening she returned to the farm more angry than ever, and quite determined to revenge herself on the brownie whenever she had the chance, which happened to be very soon.

It was the spring, and just the time of year when the dwarfs held their fete, so one day the brownie asked Jegu if he might bring his friends to have supper in the great barn, and whether he would allow them to dance there. Of course, Jegu was only too pleased to be able to do anything for the brownie, and he ordered Barbaik to spread her best table-cloths in the barn, and to make a quantity of little loaves and pancakes, and, besides, to keep all the milk given by the cows that morning. He expected she would refuse, as he knew she hated the dwarfs, but she said nothing, and prepared the supper as he had bidden her.

When all was ready, the dwarfs, in new green suits, came bustling in, very happy and merry, and took their seats at the table. But in a moment they all sprang up with a cry, and ran away screaming, for Barbaik had placed pans of hot coals under their feet, and all their poor little toes were burnt.

‘You won’t forget that in a hurry,’ she said, smiling grimly to herself, but in a moment they were back again with large pots of water, which they poured on the fire. Then they joined hands and danced round it, singing:

Wicked traitress, Barne Riou, Our poor toes are burned by you; Now we hurry from your hall-- Bad luck light upon you all.

That evening they left the country for ever, and Jegu, without their help, grew poorer and poorer, and at last died of misery, while Barbaik was glad to find work in the market of Morlaix.

From ‘Le Foyer Breton,’ par E. Souvestre.