

# The Faery Feast

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There was once a farmer who farmed the hills above Llanpwllldwrfach and was as mean of spirit as the grey bare hills where his sheep grazed in the driving rain. He would prefer never to sell any of his sheep than to sell just one at a price that was too low.

He never let his wife bake a new loaf until every last slice of the old had been eaten, no matter how stale it had become. And, it need not be said, all that hard bread was eaten without a scrape of butter, because that luxury had to be bought from his neighbour or traded in the village. His wife, whose cunning had grown in step with her disappointment, kept a small tin of mutton fat that she carefully collected when her husband let her roast the carcass of an old ewe that had missed its footing on a crag or had simply decided to die and on which the ravens and worms had not already dined too heavily.

One spring morning when the lambs chased each other in a mad packs of boundless and bounding joy, the farmer was walking his land. He liked to check that his neighbours had not moved any of the boundary walls in the night. He liked to watch for signs of predators that he felt sure must be stealing from his flock. He liked to look down on his old cottage to be sure there was no tell-tale smoke from the chimney that would announce his wife's profligate use of firewood. And, most of all, he liked to count his sheep and lambs and perform detailed calculations of how much they would bring at market.

As the farmer approached the Watching Stone that stands on the ridge overlooking the village, he heard a tinkling of bells like flowers ringing in the breeze. Dropping to a crouch, the farmer watched as a procession of the Fair Folk stepped out from behind the rock, walked under the rowan tree that stood guard there, and set off along the ridge away from where the farmer hid. The farmer quickly covered one eye so that the fairies would not know he was watching them, and gave thanks that the wind blew from the south so that his scent was carried away and did not alert the fey folk of his presence.

Once the troupe had gone from sight and the chiming of their bells was lost in the air, the farmer rose up and decided to investigate. Fairy palaces, he knew, were often said to be full of treasure. Rich pickings would surely await him with the owners far away.

Passing under the boughs of the old rowan tree, the farmer held his breath and stepped briskly into the rock.

He found himself in a great hall lit with a hundred candles and warmed by two great fires, one at each end of the chamber. A long table ran down the length of the room with soft chairs arranged at comfortable intervals. In the middle of one side were two thrones of ancient carved wood with high backs and antlers mounted overhead – clearly where the lady and her lord would expect to sit.

Laid out on the table was a vast feast. There were pies and fresh fruit, cheeses and roasts, steamed vegetables and salads, pâtés and pasties. As he admired the food, the farmer realised just how hungry he was. He had had an early start, had walked many miles, and today had been a stale bread day.

So he walked along the table picking at bits and pieces as he went. A biscuit here, a radish there. Soon his search for riches had turned into an interest in dining.

He pulled out a chair, seated himself at the table, and took a large helping of potato salad. It made him feel more hungry, so he popped a hardboiled egg into his mouth and reached for the pickled onions.

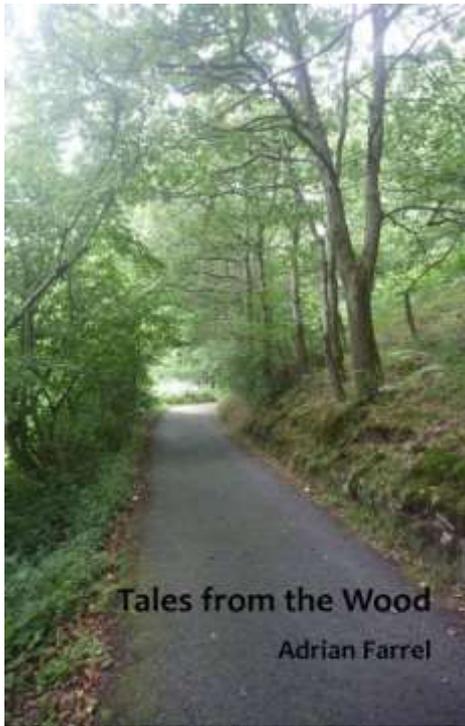
Now he was getting into his stride. He cut a large slice of bread, loaded it with roast beef, spooned mustard on top and set about this hearty dish with the silver cutlery at his place.

He grew hungrier as he ate, and reached for a game pie as he still chewed the beef.

And on he ate, and eating was not sated. He ate more yet was never filled. And always craving, still fed himself freely and with increasing desperation until, his lips sore from the passage of food, tears of pain and frustration in his eyes, he shovelled the food ever more furiously to his mouth.

Once he stabbed his tongue with the tines of his fork. Once he caught the roof of his mouth with the splintered bone of a goose leg on which he gnawed. More than once he bit his own cheek in his frenzy. And yet the only sustenance he received from his labours was what he drew from his own blood that he swallowed.

For all I know, he sits there still. Forever eating; chewing and swallowing. Forever desiring, but going unsatisfied. Or perhaps the fairies took pity on him and turned him to ash.



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