

## BIDDY GILLIGAN'S FAIRY

Some time or other, between two and three o'clock in the afternoon of each Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, Pat Nealon reached the little cabin where Biddy Gilligan lived. Pat was one of the local letter carriers attached to the post office in Lisnaskerry; and for the modest sum of ten shillings a week he, on these days, distributed the contents of the brown leather bag he carried among the inhabitants of the district lying south of the town.

The wind was blowing boisterously one late March afternoon, and Pat had long been due at Biddy's cabin, according to its inmate's calculation. She was a bent old woman of perhaps eighty years of age, with snow-white hair and curiously bright black eyes. As she sat on a stool by the hearth she kept an anxious look on the small window by which the letter carrier had to pass before reaching the door.

'It takes Pat longer than ever on his rounds,' she muttered querulously, as she placed a fresh sod on the fire. Then, with many a groan and ejaculation, she raised herself from her seat and hobbled, by the aid of a stick, to the door.

'Yonder he is at last,' she remarked to herself, as Pat came into view. A few moments brought him to the street.

'I was near giving you up, man,' Biddy said, in tones of mingled welcome and fault-finding. 'It must be long after three o'clock.'

'It wants a minute of three'; Pat consulted the watch he carried, 'a minute exactly.'

'It must be more,' the old woman disputed. 'Any-way the kettle's on the boil this hour past, so come in.'

The pair entered the house, and Pat produced two miniature packages containing tea and sugar, and a buttered bun from the bag he carried, and proceeded to prepare his meal. 'Biddy had taken her seat by the fire.

'There's milk in the bowl,' she said.

'All right,' Pat responded. 'Nothing strange?'

'Oh, nothing particular. The new curate was in yesterday evening and stayed a brave while.'

'Father Ryan. He's a fine young man entirely,' Pat said. 'Sure never a one of us ever heard the like of the sermon he preached last Sunday.'

Biddy sniffed. 'Oh, I suppose he can talk; but I haven't much opinion of him. He's fresh from college.'

'He is, I believe,' Pat assented.

'When I told him about the amount of land the Gilligans used to own, sure he didn't seem to take it in at all. And when I mentioned the fairies— Well, you should have seen the look he gave me. "My good woman," said he, "there isn't such a thing as a fairy."'

Pat was pouring out tea.

'Well?' he said laconically.

'I told him how every Saturday night in the year, let it blow fair or foul, there is a white shilling left under the door there.'

'And what did he say?' Pat had got settled to his meal.

'He laughed, and said it was a human fairy, and that I should have more sense than to believe in such nonsense. Father Brady never made a remark like that.'

'Did you hear that Ned O'Connor has got his ticket for America?' asked Pat, moving his stool to the fire.

'Not a word. How should I hear anything? And has he got his ticket?'

'Ay, and isn't it well? There is more rent and debt against the place than it is worth. Sure the old man, his father, was the terrible ill-doing man entirely.'

'And the mother always at death's door,' Biddy said. 'And who sent him the ticket?'

'His cousin, Peter O'Connor, that went to America seven years ago. Sure Mary Blake won't like Ned going away.'

'Mary Blake, a girl without a penny! Ned wouldn't be seen speaking to her.'

'Troth he would! It isn't many pennies he has himself, and Mary's the brave little girl.'

'I have no opinion of the Blakes,' the old woman said. 'Only for Denis Blake going to law with my father—God rest him—over a bit of bog that always belonged to the Gilligans, it isn't here I'd be now, Pat Nealon. And 'tis you yourself might know that.'

'Oh, to be sure. The law put both the men to the bad, that's what it did. Still, Mary Blake had no hand in it.' Pat laughed.

'You're like all men,' Biddy rejoined, contemptuously, 'easily taken with a handsome face, and I suppose Mary Blake has that, though I have no liking for her.'

'She works hard enough at the lace-making to support her bedridden mother. She's your nearest neighbor, too.'

'Well, I don't see her, nor want to see her, that's all. I never had nor never will have any neighborhood with one of the name.'

'Oh, well,' Pat said pacifically, 'that's right enough, or anyway, it is your own affair. And now I must be going. There's a grain of the tea and sugar there; maybe you'll use it, Biddy.' Pat rose hastily. 'Good evening and good luck to you.'

Such was Pat's usual mode of departure. Biddy brewed the remainder of his tea and pondered, as she drank it, on what Father Ryan had said to her.

'A human fairy! I'd like to find out. Well, please God, I'll sit up next Saturday night and see for myself,' she muttered.

Biddy did as she said. On the following Saturday night she left the door pushed to, but unlatched, and took a position on a stool beside it. She had kept her place for a very lengthened period according to her reckoning, and was about to retire to bed satisfied that Father Ryan was totally wrong, when she caught the sound of a cautious step, and the next instant the gleam of something white beneath the door caught her eye. With a speed with which few would have credited her, Biddy flung open the door and made a grasp at the shawled figure that stood for a brief second thunder-struck. After that momentary pause the figure dashed away, leaving the shawl in Biddy's hands.

'And so the new curate was right,' the old woman soliloquised sadly as she sat huddled up over a smouldering sod. For years—ever since the rheumatism had taken such a grip of her—she had risen every Sunday morning to lift the silver coin from the threshold, in the belief that, however low the last of the Gilligans had fallen in the social scale, the fairy folk still remembered them. And now she knew that the shilling had been left weekly by a woman, and worse still, by a woman she did not love.

'Sure Mary Blake's mother had just such a Paisley shawl for her wedding! And Mary goes with the lace to the convent every Saturday, Pat says; and she could come home this way. Oh, dear, 'tis chilled I am to the heart!'

Whether old Biddy had caught cold by sitting at the door on the frosty March night, or whether the shattering of her cherished beliefs had, as she expressed it, chilled her to the bone, a neighbor who called to see the old woman, on her way back from second Mass at one of the country chapels, found her in such a bad state that she deemed it well to summon Father Ryan and the dispensary doctor. 'The two met in the evening in the cabin.

'She'll go out like the snuff of a candle,' the doctor said. 'Weak heart, bad circulation, and bronchitis.' And the priest set about preparing the lonely old woman for her last journey.

'And now, your Reverence,' Biddy said, when the last rites were administered, 'sure I have to ask your pardon. You were right about the fairies. The shilling was left by a neighbor, and there are a few things I'd like to dispose of.'

'Very well,' Father Ryan said kindly.

'I leave none of my own behind me,' Biddy went on, 'and I'd like Jane Conway, the woman that's outside, to have the few bits of things inside, except the bed and the fiddle I always intended to leave the bed—a fine feather bed it is—to Pat Nealon. He can get it.'

'And the fiddle?' the priest asked.

'It is in the case under the bed. Maybe your Reverence would pull it out. The fiddle was my father's, and he set terrible store by it. Sure he could all but make it speak.'

'To whom do you wish to give it?'

'To the fairy that left the shilling on the Saturday nights.' Biddy gave a wheezing laugh. 'That's her shawl inside the case.'

Father Ryan walked home through the purple dusk of the March evening with the fiddle and the Paisley shawl in the old black case under his arm. It so chanced that a former college friend who had been abroad studying music was his guest, and to him the priest told of Biddy's bequests.

'Let us see the fiddle,' Philip Derey said, and he gave a cry when he beheld it. 'Why, it is a Stradivarius; a genuine Stradivarius,' he cried after a brief examination. 'It is worth—' He mentioned a sum that sounded preposterous in the priest's ears.

And thus it was that Mary Blake became in course of time an heiress in a small way. Matt Gilligan's fiddle was sold by Philip Derey for a sum that enabled Ned O'Connor to clear up the debts on his farm and start farming afresh when he married Mary Blake, or, as Father Ryan termed her, 'Biddy Gilligan's Fairy.'—'Benziger's Magazine.'