

THE LAST NEWS OF THE FAIRIES.

BY THE AUTHOR OF "JOHN HALIFAX, GENTLEMAN."



HE last news of the Fairies! And very reliable news too, upon evidence as good as one can get with regard to most doubtful things. Not so very late neither—not much more than half a century old. That is, it can be little more than thirty years since the person who *saw* the fairies told the story of his seeing them to the person who told me—then a boy, and now only a middle-aged man. A man, too, whose truthfulness and honesty are proverbial in the village where he lives—which I do not intend to particularize more than by saying it was the West Riding of Yorkshire.

I myself have always had a lurking belief in fairies. There is an Italian proverb, *Se non è vero è ben trovato*: which means, freely translated—"If it isn't true it ought to be." And I still think, that if there are not fairies, it would be very nice if there were to be. Such as the fairy godmother of Cinderella, and the pretty harmless creatures of the Midsummer Night's Dream—Oberon, Titania, and Puck. Or the Queen of Fairies who carried away Thomas the Rhymer and the young Tamlane, as we read of in old Scotch ballads. Or the brownies and the pixies, the cobolds and the gnomes, the Neck and the Undine—all those various elves of water, earth, and under the earth, with which the fairy mythology of different nations makes us acquainted. I was well read in it once,

but have nearly forgotten it now. Still, I prick up my ears like an old horse at sound of the hunt, whenever there is the slightest reference to what is called folk-lore.

Many a time, when I was a child, I used to think how delightful it would be to catch a fairy—a little creature no bigger than a doll, only alive—quite alive, full of pranks and pretty ways. How enchanting to play with it, and talk to it, and cuddle it! Only it might not understand cuddling; and whether it would be able to converse with me in plain English, or would talk unintelligible fairy language, was a point on which I never could satisfy my mind. It did not matter much, as I never caught my fairy. But I certainly should have set a trap for it, or gone endless wanderings about the woods and moors in search of it, had I ever heard the story, or the two stories, which I am about to tell to you; though of course I do not expect you to believe them.

My informant was, as I have said, a middle-aged man, whom I met last summer in Yorkshire. I shall not give his name—lest he might not like it, or like to be considered responsible for my version of the story, though I have given it as accurately as I could remember. Therefore I shall merely call him "John."

One day John came to tea: and capital company he was;—self-educated, and very well educated too, for what I suppose would be called "one of the working classes." As if the "upper" classes did not work hard enough also sometimes! Highly intelligent by nature, with a strong shrewd Yorkshire wit, and a way of expressing himself that at once said what he meant to say in the best manner possible. No attempt whatever at "showing off," or appearing other than he was: an intensely honest man, whose word was his bond, and whose judgment might be fairly trusted on all points where he had had an opportunity of forming it. Modest—rather retiring than not—yet with plenty of self-respect: and a quiet conviction that "A man's a man for a' that." Such is the sort of man whose society I like—be his rank in life what it may. And I can truly say that though I have spent many a pleasant evening with the celebrated men of the earth, I never spent a pleasanter than with my friend John.

Towards the close of it, after he had been giving us endless stories about the habits and manners of the last generation in the village