

THE DUMB CLUCKS
from
'Fearsome Tales for Fiendish Kids'

Once Upon a Time, in the Land of Stargazy Pie, wedged between the twin peaks of Mounts Feak and Weeble, in the forest-clad Welly-Wally Valley, there was a village called Dork. Dork was not like other villages, because its villagers were all twits. And when I say twits, I mean real blockheaded boobies. These people believed anything that was told to them. The Earth is a spat-out piece of bubblegum on the hoof of a giant astral wildebeest. "Yum, scrum," they would say, "get chewing!" And they'd chew the earth half to bits before they realised that grass tasted disgusting and not like bubblegum at all. Ice cream cures the common cold. So, during the winter months, they'd discard their woolly vests and smother themselves in frozen vanilla ice cream. "Well, it must be working," they would say, "because nobody gets colds anymore." Nobody got colds, because everyone was too busy croaking from double pneumonia. People who wear glasses are incredibly stupid. Then why was it that when people removed their glasses to look wise, they bumped into the furniture and walked over cliffs? Because they were boneheads, that's why. Gullible, thick-skulled ninnies, who believed whatever was said to them and never once stopped to ask why.

The worst of the villagers was a family called the Clucks. They were always the first to believe the latest gossip, the first to listen to superstitious claptrap, the first to set the family cat on fire to make their plums grow. They were staggeringly stupid. Believing that putting your clothes on inside out stopped your jeans from wearing into holes and eating a raw egg every morning stopped you turning into a chicken.

"Did you know," announced Mr Cluck at breakfast one day, "that sticking wasp stings into the soles of your feet is completely painless and makes your toenails grow." The dumb Cluck children sat dumbly with their gawping gullets flopped open on their chests.

"Really?" said Mrs Cluck.

"Oh yes," monotoned her halfwitted husband. "I heard it on the radio, so it must be true." Baby Cluck had stunned a wasp in her porridge. She pulled out the stinger and stuck it into her foot.

"Waaaaaaaaaaaaah!" Her eyes exploded in gouts of tears as the pain shot through her leg and thumped into her shoulder.

"No, no," said Mr Cluck. "Tell her it doesn't hurt. It's good for her."

"Stop it, baby," demanded Mrs Cluck, "your father says it doesn't hurt." Well if daddy said it didn't hurt, then it didn't, but baby Cluck could have sworn that her foot was throbbing like a belisha beacon.

One day, Dork suffered a terrible thunderstorm. Black clouds as thick as socks thundered overhead. Water gushed down the twin peaks of Feak and Weeble, converging in a swirling, muddy whirlpool in the middle of the market square. The local schoolteacher had it on good authority that things grew faster in the rain and stood his smallest pupils outside in the playground to soak up the water. After an hour he brought them back inside and declared his experiment a palpable success. His puny pupils had indeed grown, or at least their arms and legs were now sticking out of their jumpers and trousers. What he failed to realise, was that the childrens' bodies had not grown an inch, it was just that their clothes had shrunk.

In the middle of the storm, a huge spike of lightning slashed across the sky, silhouetting a black figure on horseback at the end of the High Street. As he kicked his horse forward and moved into the village the rain stopped. By the time he was level with the school house, the sun was shining. Black horse, black boots, black moustache dangling from his top lip like a burnt worm. His clothes were torn and his hair was tangled like barbed wire. The villagers were unused to cheroot-chewing strangers in their midst and rushed hither and thither, shouting,

"Welcome the stranger, welcome the stranger. How do we welcome the stranger?"

"Kick him," came a tiny voice from the roof of the Dork Hotel. "That's how to do it."

"Don't be so stupid," replied another, "Guests should never be kicked. You should smother them in pig's grease and stick a feather up their nose!"

"Off with his head," wailed a woman carrying a doughnut. And a fourth voice shouted,

"Wait!" It was Mr Archibald Pojo, the cobbler. As the only sensible person in the village, he could always be relied upon to muster order out of chaos. Three generations of Dorks had learned to walk in a pair of Mr Pojo's no-nonsense, hardwearing, boat-like shoes. While the crowd waited to hear what Mr Pojo was going to say next, the stranger stopped in the market square. "Let's ask him who he is," suggested the cobbler.

"Ooh yes," responded the crowd. "What a brilliant idea! Hoorah for Mr Pojo! Who are you?" they shouted at the stranger, who was looping a revolver around his index finger. His narrow-set eyes squinted as he spat a dollop of chewed red betel nut into the gutter and pushed his wide-brimmed black hat back off his forehead. His jaw was unshaven, like a nailbrush. Mr Cluck, his wife and their five-strong brood had slipped in next to the cobbler and were gazing gormlessly at the stranger, while he sucked his teeth and shifted his bottom lazily across his saddle.

"I'm the son of God!" he drawled, and everybody gasped. Mr Pojo laughed.

"That's a good one!" he said. "And I'm Pope John Paul the Second!"

"Pleased to meet you," said the traveller. "I've brought a message from my dad." Mr Pojo snorted at the ridiculousness of this cowboy's claims. Ambassadors from the Almighty usually had a touch of angel about them - wings and a halo, minimum - this man was tarred from top to toe with the Devil's slime. Any fool could see that...Mr Pojo surveyed the moony faces in the crowd...Any fool, but Mr Cluck and the rest of the Dorks. They were all cheering.

"Oh welcome, Son of God, who comes bearing a message from his dad!" shouted Mr Cluck. "What are you doing here?"

"I've got a message of course," said the stranger.

"Oh yes," nodded Mr Cluck. "So, what is it? It must be really important."

"It is," replied the cosmic cowboy, bluntly. "The boss wants me to give you some good news."

There was an expectant buzz from the crowd. "Now I won't tell you a lie, I CAN'T tell you a lie - that's one of the problems with being the son of God - so you'll just have to believe me when I say that dad has given me permission, for today and today only, to grant you all one wish!"

"Really?" blinked Mrs Cluck, excitedly. "Any wish?"

"ANY wish."

"I wish I had a hoverboard," said Cluck Boy Number One.

"And I want a doll that spits," added Daughter Number Two.

"Sssh!" hissed Mrs Cluck to her children. "Don't be so greedy," and she turned her smile on the black-booted angel. "Would God grant me a new set of hair curlers?" she enquired.

"Hair curlers? No problem," said the divine being. "God also does a nice line in electric blankets and toasters if any of you other ladies are interested." Six hands shot up. "See me after," he winked, "round the back."

"Could God mend my golf clubs?" asked Mr Cluck.

"God will not only mend your golf clubs, but he'll chuck in six free golf balls as well!"

"Wow!" said Mr Cluck. "I could get to like this God."

"Well, that's the idea," said his son. "You see, he's coming down here in a few hours and he's looking for somewhere to stay."

"Well, why doesn't he stay with us?" offered Mrs Cluck, who was quite over excited and silly about the prospect of owning new hair curlers. "We could put the Z bed up in the spare room, and we've got an extra blanket in the loft."

"If you're sure. I know that dad would love to stay with you. In fact, he was saying only the other day how much he wanted to meet the Cluck family."

"Really?" beamed Mr Cluck.

"Oh, stop it!" giggled his wife. "Now, you're making me blush!"

The village was bursting with communal pride. That God should have chosen Dork for a state visit was frankly unbelievable, but his son had said that he was coming and that was good enough for them. Mr Pojo, however, was not convinced.

"Look," he explained to Mr and Mrs Cluck, "I appreciate that having God as a house guest is a very great honour, but just suppose that this man is not a messenger from heaven at all, but a conman."

The Clucks gawped blankly. "A liar," simplified the cobbler. "A thief."

"Oh no, he definitely knows God," protested Mr Cluck. "He wouldn't be able to grant our wishes if he didn't."

"Have you seen him grant any of your wishes?" retorted Mr Pojo, raising his voice so that others might heed his warning. "Don't trust this man! Nobody pretends to grant wishes for nothing!"

"Killjoy!" shouted the crowd, and "party-pooper!"

"Good people, believe me," reassured the butter-wouldn't-melt-in-his-mouth-messenger, who had the muleish mob eating out of the palm of his hand, "I'm here to give not to take. God is kind and generous and wants virtually nothing in return for granting your wishes."

"So there is a catch!" triumphed the cobbler. "You do want something."

"Is smashing all the mirrors in Dork much of a price to pay for meeting God?" challenged the black cowboy. The crowd thought not. In fact they seemed to think it was a price well worth paying.

"Smashing mirrors!" exclaimed Mr Pojo. "What has God to fear from mirrors?"

"He doesn't like to see his grisled face in the morning before he's shaved," was the feeble reply.

"God has got a long white beard," said Mr Pojo. "Nobody will believe that."

"I believe it," piped up Mr Cluck. "I don't like looking at my face in the morning, either."

"Hear hear!" tub-thumped Mrs Cluck. "Ra-ra!" went the crowd. And puff-puff went the self-important chest of Mr Cluck.

"Now go!" urged the messenger on horseback. "Tear down your mirrors, fly to the boundaries of your village and splinter a girdle of broken glass around Dork!" The crowd cheered and dispersed like shrapnel exploding off a bomb, leaving Mr Pojo and the son of God facing each other across the market square.

"You don't fool me!" scoffed the cobbler. "What are you up to?" The man in black struck a match across his beard and re-lit his cheroot.

"Wouldn't you just love to know," he whispered.

When the crowd returned an hour later, having destroyed every mirror in Dork and scattered the glass around the village, they were as excitable as a bus-load of kids on a school outing.

"We've done it!" waved Mr Cluck, the buttons on his waistcoat popping with pride. "You can call your dad and tell him we're ready for him now."

"We've baked him some Angel Cakes, as well," announced Mrs Cluck, thrusting a plate of steaming, burnt buns under the messenger's nose. "So he won't go hungry."

"God never goes hungry," smiled the cowboy, wickedly. "Now there is just one more thing you must do before God will show his face."

"Before you grant our wishes?" asked Mr Cluck.

"Exactly," replied the messenger. Mr Pojo shook his head. This was it - the demand that would sell the villagers' souls to the Devil.

"God wants you to take off your shoes and burn them," directed the stranger. The cobbler leapt to his feet.

"You can't burn my shoes!" he bellowed. "What sort of messenger are you? Destroying my life's work to dupe these people! I won't let you do it, d'you hear!"

"God will not grant your wishes if you don't burn your shoes," threatened the heavenly messenger.

"We must all go barefoot before God as a sign of humility." Mr Pojo turned to his fellow villagers and pleaded with their common sense (what little they had).

"There is no God!" he shouted into a void. "He is lying!" The crowd gasped, and the cobbler suddenly realised what he had just said. "No, you misunderstand me. I meant that his God does not exist." But the damage was done.

"Blasphemy!" roared the cowboy. "Infidel! Take this disbeliever to the village walls and cast him out!" The mob surged forward and bore Mr Pojo to the outer reaches of the village, where they hurled him over the ring of broken mirror glass that now encircled Dork like a trail of glittering gunpowder.

The burning of the shoes was a splendidly roasty affair, where the villagers danced barefoot around the bonfire and sang songs until the last of their soles had been consumed by the flames.

"Now what?" asked a sweating Mr Cluck. "We've smashed our mirrors and burnt our shoes. It must be time to grant our wishes."

"Nearly," prevaricated the messenger, spitting blood-red betel nuts into the fire. "God is almost ready to grant you your heart's desire, but he needs you to do one more thing for him first, just to prove that you love him."

"Oh but we do," blurted Mr Cluck, thinking largely of his new golf balls.

"Then you won't mind covering yourselves in mustard, will you?" said the cowboy, simply.

"I beg your pardon?" queried Mrs Cluck.

"Mustard or tomato ketchup, he likes both." The Dorks were a little non-plussed by this remark.

"Or mayonnaise, if you prefer. What's the problem?"

"Oh no problem," volunteered Mr Cluck. "It's just that...why?"

"Why not?" asked the son of God, innocently.

"He's going to eat you," came the tiny, far-away voice of Mr Pojo from the depths of the forest, but it was so tiny that only a fieldmouse heard it.

"Look, if you really must know," sighed the cowboy, "God's got a very sensitive nose. He cannot abide the stench of little people, which is why he asks you to cover up your smell with condiments and relishes." He surveyed the sea of expressionless faces in front of him. Did the Dorks believe him or not?

"OK," said Mr Cluck, accepting the cowboy's explanation with a cheery smile. "I believe you. Break out the mustard!"

"Before you do," interrupted the stranger, "I must just check that dad's in." Then he removed a mobile telephone from his jacket pocket and punched in the numbers 666. "Hello," he said. "Hello, is that God?" The village held its breath. "They're ready for you now if you want to pop down...Yes...Yes...Yes, I understand. Ciao." He slotted the aerial back into its hole and grinned at the crowd. "He'll be down in a jiffy," he announced. "Just feeding the Pit Bulls."

Mr and Mrs Cluck were smearing ketchup behind their childrens' ears, when the first of God's heavy footsteps rumbled through the valley.

"Imagine us shaking hands with Deity!" squealed Mrs Cluck.

"Imagine us sharing toast with him at the breakfast table," added her husband. "Nobody will believe us. In fact, I can hardly believe it's happening myself!" The second footfall shook the ground and fractured the village water pump, sending a spray of water high into the air. "They won't be able to call us the dumb Clucks anymore, will they, dear?"

"Certainly not," said Mrs Cluck.

"English or French?"

"French please. It takes brains and vision to do what you've done today, daddy Cluck." The third footstep caused a minor earthquake underneath the clock tower, sending the big hand crashing to the ground like a thunderbolt from Heaven.

"That's right," agreed Mr Cluck, tenderly plopping a glob of French mustard onto his wife's back.

"Today, we meet God, and tomorrow you can put your hair in curlers while I play a round of golf."

The fourth step had the crowd running for cover as a huge, cold, shadow swept across the square, and a large foot, the size of an ocean liner planted itself firmly on the top of Mount Weeble. "He's big then," stated Mr Cluck, who had no reason to believe that the ginormous black boot, ten times as high as the Empire State Building did not belong to God. Even when the one-eyed cyclops, with the pugilist's nose and stubbly beard thrust its ugly mug through the clouds, Mr Cluck was still in no doubt that he was staring at the face of Mr Infinite Beauty Himself. Only when the face split in half and revealed a stench of rotten teeth did Mr Cluck start to have his doubts. Only when the putrid breath rolled down the side of the mountain, like warm, gassy manure, did he turn to his wife with a quizzical look. Only when the fat, purple tongue smacked the fat, porky lips, did he ask himself if he had possibly been a touch too trusting of the cosmic cowboy and a mite too keen to dismiss Mr Pojo's warning. And only when the stomach belched and the knotted hand crammed the village church into the mouth, did Mr Cluck realise that he had been fooled. That this was not God, as the cowboy had promised, but an uncouth colossus with the table manners of an untrained warthog.

The giant tossed his straggly hair out of his eyes and roared with laughter. Spittle clung to his bottom lip and whirled around the Welly-Wally valley like a foaming Ferris wheel.

"YOU HAVE DONE WELL SON! I LIKE THE LOOK OF THIS PLACE AND I LIKE THE SMELL OF THESE OVEN-READY DORKS!" He sniffed in deeply and uprooted a couple of tall pine trees. They were sucked up by the draught and plugged his nostrils like two furry caterpillars.

"Excuse me," enquired Mr Cluck's teeny-tiny voice underneath the giant's little toe, "but where's God?"

"GOD?" queried the giant. "NEVER HEARD OF HIM!"

"He's the most powerful being in the Universe," explained Mr Cluck, much to the admiration of his wife and children, who thought him extremely brave to be conversing with this gross freak of

nature. In fact he was just plain stupid, but the two are often confused. The giant was becoming agitated.

"I'M GOING TO CHEW YOU IN HALF IF YOU DON'T SHUT UP!" he snapped.

"Why?" pushed Mr Cluck. "Do you normally eat people?"

"I'LL GIVE YOU A CLUE," chuckled the giant. "MY NAME IS GIZZARD-GUZZLING, SINUS-SNAFFLING, OFFAL-OOMPING, BONE-BREAKING, SKIN-SUCKING, FLESH-FLAYING, KIDNEY-CRUNCHING, BRAIN-BOILING, NECK-NIBBLING, LIVER-LICKING NIGEL!"

There was a pause while Mr Cluck considered this.

"I had a cousin called Nigel once," he said. "He was a vegetarian."

"WELL I HATE VEGETABLES!" bellowed the giant. "GIVE ME RAW, DRIPPING FLESH ANY DAY OF THE WEEK."

"I think what dad's trying to say," grinned the smug stranger on horseback, "is that he's only here for one reason. To woofle you all up like chocolate ants."

"CRUNCH CRUNCH! THAT'S LUNCH!" slavered the unwashed man mountain.

"But you said he was God," complained Mr Cluck. "What about granting our wishes?"

"I lied!" ridiculed the man in black. "My dad's never granted a wish in his life. You need a Fairy Godmother for that!" Then the giant smacked his beefy lips and tucked his handkerchief into the top of his shirt.

"RIGHT," he drooled, with a glint in his single eye, "WHO AM I GOING TO EAT FIRST?"

Now they may have been stupid, but the people of Dork could recognise a threat from a man-eating monster when it stared them in the face.

"Run!" shouted Mrs Cluck. "He's gnashing this way!" But of course, running was easier said than done, because none of them had any shoes on. And when they did reach the outskirts of Dork and could see the edge of the forest that would hide them from the great, guzzling giant, the villagers had to stop, because in their bare feet they could not cross the ring of broken glass that encircled the village. They had been gulled by their own greed. If only they had listened to Mr Pojo, who had recognised the cowboy's con trick and had realised that the stranger's promises of fame and fortune were worthless. But it was too late now. The cyclops's scheming son had locked the village with a bracelet of glass. He had trussed the villagers up good and tight, and had delivered them on a plate to his famished father, like butter-basted Christmas Turkeys.

Giant Nigel placed his chin upon the ground at one end of the village and opened his mouth.

"I'M A HOOVER!" he bellowed, sucking air through his teeth and moving his face slowly up the High Street. It was like a tornado in reverse. The villagers flew through the air like straws in the back-draught of a combine harvester, thumping into the giant's gums and sliding down his teeth onto his tongue. He was eating fifteen people in a single mouthful, crunching their bones like an anteater chomping termites. The Clucks had retreated into their coal cellar, hoping that Nigel would not find them, but as he hovered closer, the entire house was sucked out of the ground leaving them exposed in a huddle.

"Oh dear!" whispered Mrs Cluck to her husband.

"What's the problem?" he enquired, glancing up to see a fifty foot nose sniffing their way.

"I've left the oven on," she replied, "with a soufflé in. If I don't take it out soon, it'll be ruined."

"Perhaps we could ask Nigel to turn the gas down," suggested Mr Cluck, aware that the giant's mouth was now only three houses away, but marshmallow-brain Mrs Cluck couldn't make up her mind. "I'll have to hurry you, mummy Cluck," prodded her witless husband, "we're next on the

menu!" But even as he spoke, the dumb Clucks were sucked into the giant's mouth, where they were licked, swilled, chewed and pasted, before being washed down with an extremely palatable vintage duck pond.

Dork was wiped off the face of the map. When Gizzard-guzzling, sinus-snaffling, offal-oomphing, bone-breaking, skin-sucking, flesh-flaying, kidney-crunching, brain-boiling, neck-nibbling, liver-licking Nigel had eaten his fill, there was not a building left standing, nor a tree, a human being, a dog or a blade of grass.

"DELICIOUS!" he burped. "I'M STUFFED TO BURSTING!"

"Now then," enquired his scheming son, "where shall we go for supper?"

"I FANCY INDIAN TONIGHT," said 'normous Nigel.

"Bombay it is then," said the cosmic cowboy, and his father took one giant step to the right, and walked out of the Land of Stargazy Pie without showing his passport.

Nowadays in the Land of Stargazy Pie, wedged between the twin peaks of Mounts Feak and Weeble, in the forest-clad Welly-Wally Valley, there is a new village called Pojo. In contrast to Dork, it is full of the most questioning people in the world, people who refuse to believe what they are told, people who trust no-one but themselves. In their own narrow way, of course, they are just as dumb as the people of Dork, but you try telling that to their founding father, Mr Pojo. He just won't believe you.