

JOHN MORRESSY

CONHOON AND THE FAIRY DANCER

LIKE ALL SOLITARY MEN, the wizard Conhoon of the Three Gifts had his likes and dislikes. The latter far outnumbered the former.

High among his likes was the unhurried consumption of a bowl of porridge every morning, an occasion for meditation upon his grievances and the decline of the world beyond his walls. Chief among Conhoon's dislikes was the disturbance of this or any other aspect of his life. When on a fine spring morning he heard a heavy tread approaching his cottage, he scowled into his almost emptied bowl. Nearer and nearer came the steps, measured and confident. There could be no mistake: a visitor was about to arrive. With a muttered grumble of annoyance, Conhoon scooped up the last spoonful of porridge, gulped it down, wiped his mouth on the back of his hand, wiped his hand, in turn, on his beard, and dried his fingers on his shirt in case a quick spell requiring digital dexterity should become necessary.

He rose, still muttering, and started for the door. Before he reached it, three heavy blows set his house to trembling. Irritation blossomed into indignation. Pausing only to growl a quick protective spell, Conhoon drew the latch, flung open the door, and scowled upon a man tall in stature, magnificent in appearance, bold in bearing: a hero, and no mistake.

The stranger was splendidly attired in fine linen and wool and supple leather. A golden torc hung at his neck, and golden bands encircled his sculpted biceps and powerful wrists. With his left hand cocked casually against his hip, he stood with the other holding his spear at a jaunty angle of approximately forty degrees from the vertical. Undaunted by the wizard's fierce glare, he looked into Conhoon's face with composure.

Conhoon was no more impressed by heroes than he was by anyone else. "And who are you, with a knock at the door that near shook my house down?" he demanded in welcome.

The stranger announced himself in a voice that most people would consider pleasant to hear. It was deep and resonant, and contained no hint of affront at his gruff reception. "I am Corbal the Bold, greatest hero of this land," said he.

Conhoon looked him over suspiciously. "I have heard that name. It's Brugal's boy you are, him of the unfailing bow and unerring arrows."

"I am, and I seek the counsel of a wizard."

"Do you, now? And if you are Brugal's boy, haven't you an uncle, Blind Liam, who is a wizard near as good as myself?"

"Great and wise as he is, Blind Liam is no use to me, for he has a gels on him

that forbids him to work certain classes of magic, and it is one of that forbidden kind that I need at the present moment. I seek the hand of the fair Noreen, princess of the Silver Wood."

Conhoon made a little snorting sound that might have been a laugh. "Then it's a long way you've come for nothing, and another wizard entirely you'll have to find for yourself. Conhoon of the Three Gifts does not work love charms."

As the wizard made to shut the door, Corbal the Bold stopped it with his hand. "I seek no love charms," he said, flashing a smile that shone like the sun on fresh-fallen snow. "Sure, a man like myself has no need of them. A glance from me is love charm enough to win the hand of the fairest in the land. It's surprised I am that a wizard as clever as yourself did not notice that at once."

"Then go and win her," said Conhoon, "and cease to bar my door, or very shortly you will not be so good to look upon."

"I have already won the fair Noreen as my wife, and it's happy we've been for three years. But now I seek her hand."

Conhoon gave him a close hard look. "It's confused I am by your words. If this is a game, boyo...."

Raising his open palm in a conciliatory gesture and shaking his long auburn locks, Corbal said, "It's too wise I am to play games on a wizard, even an inhospitable one who keeps me standing outside his door without offering me a place to sit and a sup to drink after my long journey."

Conhoon reluctantly opened the door and muttered an ungracious invitation to enter. Corbal stooped to pass through, glanced about the untidy room, and seated himself on a three-legged stool. Conhoon took up the jug of milk that stood on the table and looked about uncertainly for a clean drinking vessel. Finding none either clean or dirty, he held out the pitcher to his guest.

"Have some milk," he said.

"It's generous you are." Corbal took the pitcher and drained it at a single draft. With a satisfied sigh, he said, "Long and far have I traveled, and my thirst was great."

"There's porridge, if you don't mind scraping the pot."

"I am not here to eat, but to win the aid of the wizard who can help me find the hand of my wife."

"And what is the problem with it?"

Corbal's brow darkened, and he said, "A wicked spell has been put on the fair Noreen, and her small white hand has been changed for a lobster's claw."

Conhoon looked interested. "It may be that you need do no searching at all, if you can have the spell undone."

"I know nothing of that. I know only that I am pledged to seek and search over

land and sea, and through the air if that is needful, enduring all weathers and braving all dangers until I find the hand of the fair Noreen, whose beauty is such that the angels of heaven --"

"And will Blind Liam not help you?" Conhoon broke in.

"My uncle's power extends only to the birds of the air and the beasts of the wild wood, and to certain fish of the sea. If he tampered with a spell of the Good People he would be done in, surely. But he gave me good advice."

"And what did he tell you?"

"He told that you have dealt with the Good People." Conhoon's brows lowered, and he frowned. "I have."

"They fear your name."

"It's wise they are to fear it."

"You've beaten them at their own tricks. There's few can say that."

"Few? There's none, boyo!"

"Indeed there is not. My uncle is wiser than any seven men in Ireland, and it's he who told me that no man but Conhoon can help me get back the hand of my fair Noreen."

"The Good People are a nasty tricky lot," said Conhoon.

"Well I know it. Wasn't it one of them who cast the spell that has my fair Noreen picking up her food like a smith using tongs?"

That was the sort of trick one might expect of the fairy host. They looked like angels, except for the few who chose to look like devils. The women were achingly beautiful and graceful as swaying flowers, the men deep-browed as philosophers, some of them, others as handsome as gods, or nimble as cats, and all of them with a quality that dazzled the eye and confused the mind; but they were a capricious lot, like willful children free of all restraint, as ready to blight a poor farmer's crops and strike down his cattle as they were to carry off a lovely child and leave one of their own withered ancients in its place; and all for the sake of a moment's diversion. Wise it was to avoid them, and wiser still never to speak their name, but to call them by a honeyed euphemism --The Good People, or The Noble Folk, or something such -- lest they overhear and take umbrage.

"What did the woman do to offend them?" the wizard asked.

Corbal's eyes narrowed and his jaw set. "The People Outside Us need no reason for their wickedness. We offered them kindness and hospitality when they passed through our county. Their mean little hearts took offense at the sight of a happy marriage and a fine-looking husband and a beautiful good woman in her grace and generosity, and they played the trick on her hand. Then off they

went,
laughing and singing, worse luck to them."

"That is their way. The best of them is no good at all. It's fortunate you are that they did no more."

"Is that your help to me, telling me to be glad things are no worse?"

"It is good advice. Are you certain, now, you did nothing at all to provoke them, neither one of you nor any of your household? Not a thoughtless word, or a
careless gesture, or a sideways look?"

Corbal made an emphatic gesture of denial. "Not a thing itself. Their own malice was all the reason. We offered them food. One of them -- a nasty sly piece of business he was -- demanded lobster and we had none to give him. Dish after dainty dish we set before him, and the mean little sneak would have none of them. It was lobster or nothing for him. Finally he said, 'Well, from now on you'll always have a bit of lobster on hand for guests,' and made a funny move with his hand and mumbled something, and they all gave a great whoop of laughter and went up in a puff of smoke and a jangle of music to do their mischief elsewhere. And there was the fair Noreen with her hand like a lobster claw."

"Tell me, did the one who spelled her have a squinty eye and his nose twisted over to one side?"

"That is the one," said Corbal, glowering at the memory.

"I've heard of him and his tricks. 'Twisty Mike' is his name, and it fits his ways as well as it fits his nose."

"I will put another twist into him if I can find him. But the People Outside Us are hard to find, and impossible to see when they're found, and dangerous to deal with when they're seen. I need a charm to assist me, and you're the man to work the charm."

Conhoon's brows rose. "It's no simple feat you ask, boyo. The charm will not work unless I'm at your side when you face Twisty Mike. We could spend the rest of our lives seeking the fairy host and find nothing."

Corbal arose and regarded the wizard with disdain. "You'll not help me, then."

"Did I say so? Calm yourself. Blind Liam once did me a service, and I'm not your man to leave a debt unpaid. It may be that a word in the right place will get the job done."

Corbal's smile of joy and relief was like a ray of sunlight. "It's forever grateful I'll be to you. You will have more gold than you can carry, and the thanks of all my family. We will sing your praise at every feast and name all our sons after you."

Conhoon mumbled, waved Corbal's words off impatiently, and made ready to depart. It required little time. He took down a pair of thick woven belts with iron

buckles worked in an intricate design. Fastening one about his own waist, he handed the other to Corbal.

"Do you take this and wear it, and don't take it off until I tell you to."

"It is too small to go about my waist."

"Then wrap it around your leg. And buckle it well. The Good People don't like the presence of iron. And the belt has a spell on it, too."

"Haven't you a charm to protect us?"

"I do. But when a man deals with the Good People, he takes all the help he can get."

A few bits of food stuck in pockets here and there, a cloak to keep out the rain and mist, and a spell to guard the house in his absence, and all was done.

"I will walk at your side to guard you," said Corbal.

"You will not. I'll not have you casting your spear and hacking away at everyone we meet."

"I must protect you from the perils of the road."

"It's little peril we'll face until we meet with the Good People. And when we do, it's no help you'll be. Behave yourself, and come along," said Conhoon.

Corbal fell in beside the wizard without a further word, and they set out the way he had come, turning left at the crossroads and heading for the mountains. The warrior strode on at a steady pace, his eyes alert for signs of danger. Conhoon shambled along, frowning at every rut and grumbling at every hill. Neither man spoke until midday, when Conhoon declared it time for a rest and a light snack.

"Will we find Twisty Mike and his crew this day?" asked Corbal.

"We might. And we might not see him for thirty years. The Good People are not easy to find."

"Then how will we find them?"

Conhoon tapped the side of his nose and looked very wise. "We will find someone who knows how to find someone who knows where they are. Do you not be impatient."

"Isn't it my own wife sitting home with a lobster claw for a hand, and you telling me not to be impatient?"

"Be impatient if you like, then. Little good it will do you. Now it is time for my nap," said Conhoon.

He settled back on a mossy hummock, and in no time at all he was snoring. Corbal

took up a posture of faithful watchfulness, both hands on his spear, which he held upright. In this heroic stance he stood guard until the wizard stirred

and
roused himself.

"Have you been standing like that all this time? Did you get no rest at all?"
he
asked.

"Heroes do not think of rest and comfort," said Corbal.

"It's a poor trade you've chosen," Conhoon said, shaking his head.

That evening they came to a small tidy cottage at the side of the road. An old woman stood by the gate. At sight of the wayfarers, she called out to them.
Her
words were indistinct, but the tone of her voice was suggestive of
hospitality.

"What is she saying?" Corbal asked.

"That is not easy to tell," said Conhoon. "Old Mother McCrone has only a
single
tooth in her head, and that one wobbles all over the place. But she knows all
that is going on for miles around. In her own good time, she will tell us
where
to find Mulhooley."

"Who's Mulhooley? Why do we want to find him?"

"Don't ask so many questions."

Conhoon called out a loud cheerful greeting to the old woman, who responded
with
a happy cackle and a flood of unintelligible but reassuring sounds.

"She's offering us a bite to eat and a sup to drink, and a place to sleep in
her
barn," Conhoon said.

"Are you sure?"

"As sure as I can be with Mother McCrone. Come on."

Mother McCrone's words were indeed an invitation to dine, and the travelers
sat
down to a plain but hearty meal. The old woman urged them to eat their fill,
but
herself only gobbled at a crust and sipped from a tiny cup of milk. She kept up
a
constant stream of chatter, not a word of which either man could decipher, and
showed every sign of delight at their vague responses and hesitant smiles.

The cryptic conversation continued after supper, as they sat by the fire
exchanging -- as far as they could tell -- pleasantries. When full dark was
come, Mother McCrone took up a light and motioned for them to follow her out
to
the barn, where she indicated a generous heap of clean dry straw and bid them
what they assumed was "Good night."

Conhoon returned her wish and settled himself into the straw at once with a
sigh

of comfort. Before Corbal could frame a question, the wizard was asleep and snoring rhythmically.

Corbal was no stranger to the world of magic. His uncle was a wizard of some repute, and his cousins had interesting powers that they called into use at opportune moments. He himself, when the battle-rage was on him, had the power to swell to twice his size and make fire dart from his eyes, gifts shared by his three brothers and an uncle. The women on his mother's side could weave pig bristles into a silk so fine that the light of a new moon shone through it like the blaze of the noonday sun and yet so strong that Cuchullain himself could not drive a spear through it. His was a talented family.

For all this, he had never seen the like of Conhoon's approach to the profession. It seemed, at the very least, unhurried.

Next morning, after a breakfast of porridge and milk, they made ready to travel

on. So far, Corbal had not understood a word their hostess had spoken. He was nonetheless sure that she had said nothing about the Good People or the mysterious Mulhooley, nor had Conhoon, and this troubled him. He directed several anxious glances at Conhoon, and even nudged him in the ribs, but the wizard seemed oblivious to his presence. As they stood at the gate, Corbal by this time bursting with impatience, Conhoon said with a sigh, "I thank you for your hospitality, Mother. There's little of it to be found these days. Ah, when

I was a boy, every door was open to a wayfarer, and he'd be fed until he could hardly move and put to sleep in a feather bed. But the householders these days "He shook his head sadly, and Mother McCrone acknowledged his words with moist sympathetic sounds.

With a sigh, he went on, "We live in diminished times. The grand old ones are all gone. A shame about Mulhooley, isn't it?"

The old woman made a sound suggesting curiosity.

"I mean him giving up his trade and going off to live by himself in the mountains. A terrible waste, that is."

Mother McCrone threw back her head and exposed her solitary tooth in a wild hoot

of laughter. She said something to Conhoon, pointed down the road, and then laughed again, louder than before.

"Do you tell me so?" said the wizard, marveling at her words. "The big oak tree, you say?"

She nodded vigorously and made a few odd noises, presumably indicative of amusement. The wizard thanked her one final time for her hospitality, and then turned and led the way down the road.

When they were out of earshot of the old woman, Corbal asked, "Why did you not ask her about Mulhooley yesterday? We could have gained a day."

"Do heroes know nothing at all?" said Conhoon. "Ask someone a question, and you give them the pleasure of refusing to answer. But let them think they're

making
you look silly, and they'll jabber on for half the day and tell you
everything."

Corbal pondered the wisdom of that observation as they walked on. It seemed to
him that the wizard's words succinctly described the conduct of nearly
everyone
he knew. This realization effectively prevented him from inquiring further
about
the mysterious Mulhooley. He saw no point in giving Conhoon the pleasure of
refusing him an answer.

Everything became plain the next day, when Conhoon halted at the foot of a
hill
and pointed to a magnificent centuries-old oak tree at its crest. "Mulhooley,"
he said in a hushed voice.

"Is your Mulhooley a tree, now?" Corbal said. "How will a tree help us to get
back the hand of my wife?"

"Am I an idiot, to go asking questions of a tree?" Conhoon demanded
indignantly.
"Mulhooley is no tree, he's a leprechaun."

"That is no leprechaun in front of us. That is a tree."

"Whisht, whisht, you great ox, or you'll frighten the little creature off with
your bellowing!" said Conhoon. "He's sitting under the tree."

"I see nobody under the tree, and it's the eyes of an eagle that I have in my
head."

"It takes more than the eyes of an eagle to see a leprechaun, and if you don't
quiet down, there'll be none to see. Leave the talk to me," said Conhoon,
starting ahead.

As they neared the oak tree, the wizard began to whistle loudly and clearly.
The
tune was unfamiliar to Corbal, odd and discordant, strange in its rhythms. The
melody was so sad and beautiful that he thought he would never forget it, but
each note vanished from his memory as soon as it struck his ear. When they
were
about five paces from the tree, a little man in bright green poked his head
around the trunk and cried, "Conhoon, my hard man!"

"Ah, Mulhooley, it's grand you look entirely. Is all well with you?"

"Never better."

"Glad I am to hear it," said the wizard.

"Who's the big fellow with you?" asked the leprechaun with a wary glance at
Corbal.

"That's Blind Liam's nephew. Corbal the Bold is his name. You can trust him."
Conhoon gave a dry laugh and added, "You can trust him more than you can trust
the Good People."

The little man's expression grew grim, and he shook a tiny fist at the mention
of the Sidhe. "I wouldn't trust the best of them with a burnt stick, not that

lot! And the worst of them is Twisty Mike. I'd love to raise a lump on his head
would have him wearing two hats to cover it."

"And here's a man who'd be glad to help you," said Conhoon, reaching up to clap
a hand on Corbal's great shoulder.

"I would indeed," said Corbal, his voice deep and slow and filled with quiet menace.

Mulhooley displayed great interest in this biographical revelation, and at the wizard's bidding, the three seated themselves in the shade of the oak while Corbal unfolded his story to the little man, who heard it with sympathy and a display of indignation.

"That's Twisty Mike for you," Mulhooley said. "Do you know what he done to me? I
made him the loveliest pair of boots you ever saw, and he tried to stiff me with
a purse of fairy gold."

Conhoon made a bitter snarling sound of disgust and outrage. Corbal looked at the wizard and the little man in confusion. "What's wrong with that?" he asked.

"A purse of gold is a fine price for a pair of boots."

"Did your uncle teach you nothing, boyo?" Conhoon snapped. "Fairy gold turns to
dry leaves when the sun goes down."

"Lovely boots, they was," said Mulhooley wistfully. "I was three years getting the price of them out of Twisty Mike, and by then he was claiming that they was
used boots and not worth two pennies. And didn't all the fairy host take his side? Lucky I was to get anything at all. I wish I was quit of the lot of them."

"Why do you still make boots for them, then?"

"Ah, well, now, you see, they're me best customers. With their hopping and lepping and dancing and rushing about hither and thither they wear out the boots
at a terrible rate, and even though they cheat me every chance they get, I have
me own tricks. I make a decent living out of them -- though I'd not want you spreading that around."

"Not a word will pass my lips," said Corbal.

"Nor mine," said the wizard. "Are you at work on anything now?"

Mulhooley sighed. "Trusting soul that I am, I'm making a pair of top boots for Twisty Mike. I got hold of a fine piece of leather, and I'll make such a darling
pair of boots that even Twisty Mike will pay real gold for them, on the spot, and be glad of his good fortune."

"It's a forgiving man you are, Mulhooley."

Scowling, the leprechaun said, "I forgive them nothing. But business is business."

"Might I see this grand piece of leather?" said Conhoon.

The leprechaun rummaged in the bole of the oak and drew out a little chest from which he took a beautiful piece of Spanish leather the color of a walnut shell.

It was as soft and supple as linen. He handed it to the wizard, who ran his hands over every inch of it, caressing it lovingly, murmuring indistinguishable words under his breath all the while.

"I'll be making a pair of dancing slippers for the king of the fairy host out of this same piece. And maybe a wee purse for the queen."

"Better and better. It's eager they must be to get them."

"They'll be here to collect them the very minute I finish my work, and they'll have the gold with them. Real gold, that won't change into anything when they're gone. Twisty Mike gave me his word on it."

"With those tiny tools, and the care you need take, the making of a pair of boots must be the work of years," Corbal said.

"'Tis no effort at all for a leprechaun." Mulhooley studied Corbal's soft low shoes and shook his head. "Them shoes of yours is an insult to your feet, my fine man. Now, I could make a lovely pair of boots fit for a hero like yourself, and have them ready in no time at all."

"A grand idea entirely," said Conhoon, beaming. "You'll have to finish up the boots and slippers for the Good People first, but we can make camp here while you work."

Corbal looked at the wizard in alarm and confusion. He had no wish to sit under a tree awaiting the completion of a pair of boots, however fine they might be; he wanted to be about his quest. But Conhoon ignored him and favored the leprechaun with his unaccustomed smile. Mulhooley seemed uneasy. He was faced with a dilemma. Conhoon was forcing him to choose between the leprechaun's natural secretiveness and his desire for the contents of the hero's bulging purse. He hesitated for a time, then he said, "Well, you know, I don't like people watching me work."

"We'll not interfere with your working, Mulhooley. We'll sit on the far side of the tree. Corbal will tell of bold deeds and adventures, and the famous heroes he's fought with and the great feats they've all done, and the great beauties they've rescued. I'll tell him about my visit to the seafolk and the amazing things I saw in their kingdom, and all the wonders of the Castle Under the Waters, and the queen with the sea-green hair, and the rest of it. The day will pass before we know it. Do you go on with your work. We'll keep our voices down, and you'll never hear a word we say."

Mulhooley looked no happier at this reassurance. He thought for a time before saying, "A good story is a grand thing when a man's working."

"You can listen, if you like. You may catch a word or two, here and there."

Another thoughtful pause, and the leprechaun said, "Ah, now, why don't you just sit here by me, and talk away? It's glad I'll be for the company of two fine men like yourselves and an earful of good talk."

By this time Corbal's expression was quite agitated. He tried several times to whisper to the wizard, but Conhoon persisted in laying his finger on his lips, enjoining silence, and the hero could only fidget impatiently until Conhoon, with a bland smile, observed, "The boots and dancing shoes and purse will be finished this very day, surely."

"Oh, easily, with time to spare. No trouble at all," said Mulhooley.

"Isn't that grand? We can pay our respects to Twisty Mike and the fairy host. Pleasant it will be to see them all."

Corbal sighed with comprehension and relief. Mulhooley seemed less pleased. "Oh, now, I'm not so sure that's a good idea. The Good People don't like to be seen," he said.

"They're always happy to meet a hero and a wizard," Conhoon assured him. "It's delighted they'll be to see us."

They settled down by the oak tree, the leprechaun to his cobbler's bench, the wizard and the hero to their telling of tales, and the day passed quickly and pleasantly. Conhoon, gruff though he was, could nevertheless spin a fine yarn. He had seen strange and wonderful things in his long lifetime, and once begun, he found it pleasing to recall and recount them. When the wizard took time to rest, Corbal employed his knowledge of the lore and legend of his land and its ancient heroes to tell of great deeds and feats of courage and daring, battles and single combats and the clashes of mighty hosts, and in as sweet and pure a tenor voice as was ever heard he sang songs of beauty and love and heartbreak and death and loss that brought tears to the little man's eyes and caused even Conhoon, least sentimental of men, to look thoughtful. Mulhooley, not to be outdone, twice laid his tools aside to add a story of his own. Thus they passed

the day, and by the time the sun was at the treetops, Mulhooley had completed a splendid pair of top boots for Twisty Mike, an elegant pair of silver-buckled dancing shoes for the king of the fairy host, and a delicate purse with a fine gold clasp for the queen. And no sooner had he put the final touch on his handiwork, brushed the last speck of dust from the gleaming leather and set his work out carefully on a flat stone at his side, than the fairy host arrived. They came in an instant, all out of nowhere. A swoosh and rush of cool air, a shower of light and a rain of sweet music that filled the air, and suddenly they were everywhere in sight, dancing and twirling, gleaming and glowing, beautiful and sinister and otherworldly.

Ignoring the wizard, the hero, and the leprechaun, two men and a woman of the

host pounced at once on the boots, slippers, and purse and snatched them up with cries of delight. One of the men, a stout imposing fellow with dark hair and quick black eyes and his nose twisted off to one side in a peculiar manner, sat on the flat stone, kicked off his shoes, and began to tug on the top boots, while the other, tall and stately, with a mane of white hair, removed his buckled shoes and inserted his feet into the dancing slippers. The woman, a green-eyed flame-haired beauty as slim as a reed, clutched the purse, opened and closed it several times, laughing in childlike delight, and held it aloft for all to see, crying out, "Will you look at the grand purse the little man has made for me!"

"Happy I am to see the pleasure you take in it," said Mulhooley, with a low bow; which, since he reached only to her knee, momentarily removed him from sight.

"Grand slippers these are," said the king, placing his arm about the queen's waist and doing a graceful turn. "They make my weary feet feel like two soaring birds."

Twisty Mike stepped forth, placing his feet delicately and precisely, displaying the neatly fitting, brightly gleaming toes of his new boots. He twirled on his heel, gave a little hop, and declared, "The finest boots ever seen, that's what they are. You're the master of them all, Mulhooley, and you'll be long remembered for your generosity to the fairy host."

"Generosity, do you call it? I call it business," said the little man. "Or will you be giving me another handful of fairy gold?"

A great gust of laughter arose from Twisty Mike, the king and queen, and all the host around. "Generosity I said, and generosity I mean, my hard Mulhooley. Isn't it gifts you're giving us to make up for your past greed?"

The leprechaun turned a bright crimson and spluttered incoherently. Unable to contain his anger, Corbal strode forward, loomed over Twisty Mike, folded his mighty arms across his broad chest, and glaring down on him, said, "And what gift can I give you to make up for the trick you played on my wife?"

"Trick? Trick? What's this about a trick? If it's a trick you want, my fine lad, I'll oblige you." Mike made a peculiar gesture with his hand and stepped back, smiling expectantly. Nothing happened. He gestured again, more vigorously, and with no more visible result than before. His smile disappeared. Noticing Conhoon, who was looking on grim and silent as the recording angel, he said, "What are you doing in this? What's your game?"

"My game is protecting my friends, though it's little need anyone has for protection against the likes of your tricks. If that's the best you can do, you're a disgrace to the fairy host."

"And what do you know about it?" Mike demanded.

"I know that you tried to turn this strapping lad into a shoehorn for your own use and convenience, and when that failed, you thought you'd turn him into a berry bush. But I put a stop to that."

"Did you now?" said the king, stepping to Mike's side. His manner was ominous.

"I did."

"Well, we don't like that."

"Don't you? And do you like your dancing slippers? Sure, they look more like hiking boots to me. Why don't you take a nice long walk and break them in?" said Conhoon.

No sooner had he spoken than the king began to walk briskly backward, an astonished expression on his face. "What's this? What's this?" he exclaimed.

"It's just the beginning," said Conhoon, turning his attention to Twisty Mike.

The outcries of the king as he bumped into trees and crashed through thorny thickets faded with distance. Mike looked about uneasily for a moment and then turned his most disarming smile upon the wizard.

"You'll not be angry with me for following me natural instincts, will you, now? The big fellow here was behaving in a very threatening manner, and I only did what I thought right to protect meself."

"And why shouldn't he threaten after what you did to his wife, and her doing all in her power to be a fine hostess to the lot of you, ingrates that you are?"

Twisty Mike's smile turned to flint. "It's hard words you throw at the fairy host, mister. You'd be wise to seek our favor, not our anger."

"Your favor isn't worth a handful of fairy gold and your anger is something that matters little to me. All I want from you, Twisty Mike, is the undoing of your nasty magic on Noreen of the Silver Wood." He felt a sharp tug on his cloak, and looked down to see Mulhooley. "And fair payment for the boots and slippers and purse."

Twisty Mike frowned, shook his head in a display of bewilderment, and said, "Who's Noreen of the Silver Wood?"

"She's my wife, you twisty-nosed blackguard!" Corbal cried in a voice like a trumpet. "You turned her hand into a lobster claw!"

"Did I, now?" said Mike, looking bemused by this news. "Ah, that one, that one. So I did. Well, wasn't I after paying an old debt? It was one of her ancestors, old Turga of the Three Nostrils, who flung out his feet water in the face of our king."

"It's a lie you're telling!" Corbal thundered. "It is known throughout the land

that for all his long life Turga of the Three Nostrils never washed his feet!"

Twisty Mike shrugged. "Then I must have been playing a prank on the lady. Have you no sense of humor, either of you? A fine prank it was, and no cause for anger or threats."

"You've had your prank. What are you going to do about it?" said Conhoon.

"Nothing at all," said Mike with a grin. "And that's more than you can do. I'll overlook your rudeness and effrontery, but the king of the fairy host is not as forgiving as I am. I'd advise you to be off now, before he comes back and plays a few tricks of his own on you." He turned to the queen, who was looking on with folded arms. "Isn't that so, my lady?"

She looked thoughtful, but said nothing, merely looked from Mike to the wizard with a faint expectant smile on her lips. Mike's grin faded.

"He'll come back when I send for him. And as for you...." Conhoon made a small gesture with his left hand. Mike's left foot began to tap. He gestured with his right, and Mike's right foot stepped out and back, out and back. The wizard moved both hands, and Mike broke into a simple tinker shuffle. "It's your king wears the dancing slippers, but you're the one who'll do the dancing. I hope you like to dance. It's a lot of it you'll be doing," said Conhoon.

"Wait a minute. Wait a minute, now," Mike said.

"Ah, you can do better than that. Give us a dance with a little life in it, that's the boy," said Conhoon, waving both hands vigorously.

Twisty Mike's hands went stiffly to his sides, and his feet began to move in an energetic fashion. His knees pumped up and down. He kicked to the front and he kicked to the back and to both sides. He leapt, and he skipped, and he stamped on the ground, and danced a ring around the oak tree while his companions looked on, laughing and cheering, clapping their hands, and altogether having a grand time observing the spectacle.

"It's graceful you are," said Conhoon. "And with the practice you'll be getting, you'll soon be winning prizes."

When Mike had made a dozen energetic circuits of the oak, Conhoon withdrew a short distance. Mike followed as if he were on a leash. When they were out of the others' hearing, Conhoon said, "Have you had enough?"

Still dancing, Mike, who was slightly overweight and not in the best of condition, panted, "You'll...be sorry. The Sidhe...will make you...suffer...for this."

"Will they, now?"

"They'll not let their own...be made a joke of."

"Have you never heard the old saying, 'Nothing gladdens the heart of the Sidhe more than the misfortune of a friend'?"

Twisty Mike looked over his shoulder at the smiling faces of his queen and the rest of the fairy host, and heard the rhythmic clapping of their hands and the music of their merry laughter. Several of the host pointed to him and slapped their thighs in glee. Their actions suggested not anger and a desire for vengeance, but rather delight and amusement and cheerful approbation for the wizard's spell. When voices began to call out requests for favorite dances, like

"Weasel in the Woodshed," and "Mooney's Empty Keg," Twisty Mike's face fell.

"Sure, it's true. And didn't we learn it...from the likes of you," he said, his feet still moving briskly. Conhoon did not respond. At length, Mike blurted in desperation and fury, "All right, all right! What...do you want?"

"First of all, Noreen's hand restored."

"Done."

"And Mulhooley paid in full, including all you cheated the little man out of."

"Cheated? Mulhooley, cheated? That little thief...!" Conhoon crooked a finger and Mike's feet moved faster, and faster still, until they were no more than an indistinct blur of motion. "But he'll be paid...in full...with arrears !"

"That's what I wanted to hear," said Conhoon, and with a broad gesture he released Twisty Mike, who collapsed on the turf like an empty stocking. Extending a hand to haul the gasping fairy dancer to his feet, he said, "You'll keep your promise, too. I trust you like I'd trust an angel."

"You do?" said Mike, with a sly look in his eye.

"I do. Hasn't the magic worked its way out of the leather and into your feet by now, the way you can feel it tingling all the way up to your knees? If you're ever tempted to go back on your promise, it's a long dance you'll do. Now I suppose I'd better bring back your king."

"Take your time with it. The exercise will do him good," said Twisty Mike, grinning broadly. "But there's no need to tell him I said so."

They rejoined the rest of the fairy host, who seemed to have lost interest in their activities once Mike was out of difficulty, and drifted away to seek some new diversion. The queen came to Conhoon's side and said, "And have you settled your differences now?"

Conhoon and Twisty Mike nodded and said, "We have."

"Then I suppose you'll be bringing himself back to join us."

"He's on his way now," said the wizard.

"There was no need for a hurry," she said. "He puts on too many airs

altogether.

It does him good to be put in his place every now and then."

"You're a grand crowd, the lot of you," said the wizard.

When the king rejoined them, red-faced and out of breath and in a white rage, the queen and Twisty Mike intercepted him before he could speak and explained the situation. He calmed himself with a visible effort that Conhoon was pleased

to observe, and then said to the wizard, "Glad I am that we were able to work this out in such a friendly fashion. You understand surely that no harm was intended to this poor creature Noreen."

"None at all, I'm sure," said the wizard.

"Only a prank," said Twisty Mike.

The queen, with a radiant smile, said, "Sure, any woman would be pleased and honored by such attention from the likes of us."

Conhoon withheld his instinctive comment, though it took an effort. Instead he said, "And I know you'll show your greatness by showering good things on the woman and her husband. Strong sons and beautiful daughters, fruitful fields and healthy cattle and long lives for all. They'll be known far and wide as the darlings of the Sidhe."

"Well, now, that's a little more than I think is fair," said the king.

"I trust you to do it. Mike, do you tell the king why I'm so trusting."

Twisty Mike drew the king aside and whispered a few words in his ear. The king's eyebrows went up, then drew down in a frown. He directed a long hard glance at his new slippers. But when he returned to where Conhoon awaited, he said with a thin, forced smile, "It's a grand idea. They're a charming couple."

And as he spoke the last word they were gone, no one could say where, for the fairy host is here and there, hither and yon and somewhere else, in the twinkling of an eye.

Conhoon felt a tug at his cloak, and looked down to see Mulhooley holding aloft a fat purse. "It's gold, Conhoon, real gold, the stuff that lasts. Well done!"

Corbal laid a hand on the wizard's shoulder in a comradely gesture and said, "I will arise and go now, and go to the fair Noreen, whose soft white hands are both once again in her possession. A joy will it be to me to hold them."

"And glad will she be to see you, but first there's a matter of more gold than I can carry."

Corbal took the purse from his belt and placed it in the wizard's hand. "Here is all I have. Take it, and I will send the rest."

"Ah, that's a fine lad, a fine lad."

"And I will return this fine belt and iron buckle," said Corbal, reaching down to undo it.

Conhoon stayed his hand. "Did I tell you to remove it? Hang it by the door of your house. It'll do you no harm."

"What about the boots? Do you not wish to stay until I make you a pair of boots fit for a hero?" cried Mulhooley.

"It's eager I'd be to wear such boots, but more eager am I to behold the beauty of the fair Noreen, and hold her soft white hands, and clasp her in my arms after my long absence. And then I must be about my business," said Corbal.

"And what is your business?" Mulhooley asked.

"Bold deeds, heroic battles, the inflicting and suffering of terrible wounds, feats of strength and courage, and the unending quest for glory: the work of heroes," Corbal said with a farewell wave. He set out with a firm stride to return to the realm of legend, where he and his kind belong. We will hear no more of him in this tale of trickery and mischief.

Shaking his head, Mulhooley muttered, "They're daft. All of them heroes is daft.

But I suppose someone's got to do it, or we'd have no tales to tell."

"Give my regards to Blind Liam," the wizard called after the departing hero. To the leprechaun, he said, "Well, now, that was a fine day's work, wasn't it?"

"Fine for you, maybe, but I've lost an order for a pair of boots," the little man said.

"I might be wanting a pair for myself. But only at a fair price."

"Would I try to cheat a wizard?" Mulhooley asked, his tiny face the picture of injured innocence. "Would I try to fleece the man who's just outsmarted the fairy host, and played their king and his trickiest henchman for fools, and gotten back for me my rightful wages?"

"Would you not?"

Mulhooley paused for a moment to reflect on the question, and then confessed, "In the ordinary way of things I would, but you made Tricky Mike suffer, and that gladdened me heart so that it would fill me with joy to give you the boots as a gift. But of course I can't do that now."

"And why not?"

"Haven't I lost the gold that hero would have paid me, and lost me best customers in the bargain? It's ruined I am." He looked up at Conhoon, wringing his wee hands, appearing smaller than ever, bent and ragged and pitiful. It is a trick that leprechauns have perfected over the centuries.

As he spoke, a light filled the air around them, and a ripple of sweet music coursed through the treetops. Three of the fairy host appeared before them,

garments gleaming, long fair hair floating in the mild breeze of their passage from elsewhere. They looked around furtively and one of them said, "We haven't a minute to spare, Mulhooley. Can you make us each a pair of boots like the ones you made for Twisty Mike? I never saw him dance so well in all my life as he did in those boots of yours."

"I'll have mine in black calfskin," said one of the others, and the third said, "Calfskin for me, too."

Mulhooley held out for payment in advance, and submitted the coins to Conhoon for his scrutiny. When the wizard declared the gold to be genuine, the leprechaun quickly made his measurements. No sooner had he set a delivery time than the three vanished. The music of their departure faded slowly in the twilight wood.

"Oh, it's grand to have me customers back, and paying good coin in advance. It's a busy leprechaun I'll be all day tomorrow," said Mulhooley, rubbing his palms together briskly, "with three pairs of boots to finish and the money in me hand."

"Four pairs," Conhoon corrected him, seating himself and extending his large foot to be measured. "And I'll have mine in brown."