**A Plague of Leprechaun**

Tuesday morning, the *North Twicking Times* of North Twicking, New Hampshire,  ran a story on a leprechaun recently sighted by James Fairsidle on his way down to  his south field. North Twicking was a town of Irish descent and Fairsidle was a  man who’d always longed to see a leprechaun, certain that he could bully the little beggar into releasing his treasure. Now he had seen one, and he had the broken wrist to prove it, having fallen over a stone in his hurry to catch hold of the little green man. As a result, he’d be hiring Patrick Whelan to do his spring plowing for  him. He came into Mrs. Malleaster’s tavern very grumpy about the whole business  and claimed that the leprechaun had magicked the stone under his feet.

“This  time tomorrow we’ll be overrun,”  muttered Mag, wiping down the bar.

“I thought you’d like the business, Mag.”

“I would if they would come one after another like decent tourists. I’ve only got  six rooms in the inn, haven’t I? Mark my words, they’ll all be here together, and just  as we’ve ordered in enough beer to keep ’em, they’ll all be gone and leave nothing  behind but the undrunk Guinness I have to pay for.

By the next afternoon there were  more leprechaun hunters than you could shake a stick at. They came from near and  from far. Mag’s inn was filled. The only empty room she had was one that had been reserved  several weeks earlier, and she’d been offered a great deal of money by a number of  people if she would just cancel that reservation and let them have the room. Each  time she’d said no, but it made her hot under the collar to turn down money, and  as the day passed, she got more and more snappish. The regulars in the tavern  looked carefully into their beers and only spoke when ordering a new round.

“But, madam,” one of the visitors pointed out, “leprechauns are good luck.”

“No,” said Mag, “you don’t get good luck without bad,  and I’ll tell you which kind those little men like to hand out.”

Right she was. By the end of the week, all the milk in the county was running  sour. Saturday afternoon the  water main in town burst, and folks had to carry their water from the town well.  Sunday the Holbins’ barn caught fire, and they were lucky to get the animals safely  out before it burned to the ground. The  Boswells’ pigs were running loose as well, Marjorie Sities turned her ankle, Caleb Bates’s car got flats in all its tires one right after the  other, and Jamie Walsh woke up Monday morning to find that his prize black Angus were scattered all over the Twicking Hills.

Monday afternoon, a young man with a knapsack and a black briefcase walked  into the tavern and asked if Mrs. Malleaster was the proprietress of the hotel.

“Uh, my name is Roger Otterly, and I think I have a room here.”

“Oh, good heavens!” Mag put the mug down on the bar half full. “What must  you think of us? Yes, of course I have your room.” She called over her one waitress  and said, “Jen, keep an eye on the bar. I’m going to take this young man up to his  room. It’s right this way, sir.”

As she preceded him up the narrow stairs to the second floor, she explained  that it was the only room left in the hotel since the leprechaun sighting had  brought so many people to town. “That little man  has brought us more difficulties than blessings, and that’s the truth,” she said.

“I’m sorry, did you say that there were a lot of people visiting because of this, um, leprechaun person?”

“Yes. You might say they were thicker than currants in pudding. Is that a problem?”

“I’m an artist, you see. Anyway, I’ve just gotten out of art  school, and I’m sure I’m at the beginning of a long and famous career. I’ve got no money, but I do have a commission to  paint six pictures of some charming countryside for a dentist’s office. They have to  be finished by Friday, and North Twicking was supposed to be the charming countryside.”

“And you think it won’t be so charming with hordes of picnickers hiking to and  fro?”

“I’m afraid that’s what the dentist will think. But we’ll just have to hope for the  best.”

The next morning, Roger took his briefcase with his paints and canvases and an  easel fitted cleverly inside and hiked up a hill. He settled down to work and found  everything even worse than he expected. Roger’s problem was the treasure hunters, who insisted on  stopping to look over his shoulder and distract him from his work with comments  like “Gosh that’s good, are you an artist?” or worse, “I’m a bit of an artist myself,  and I think you’ve got the wrong color on that barn there.” He tried moving to more and more isolated places, but there was nowhere isolated enough with a leprechaun hunt going on. Finally he packed up his paints and went back to the Jaunty  Fox for his lunch. He spent the rest of the afternoon in the tavern.

There was no sign that the leprechaun frenzy was abating, so it came as something of a shock to Roger the next morning when he came downstairs and found  the inn empty of all but Mag and her regulars.

“It’s that leprechaun,” Mag explained when she met him in the breakfast room.  “There’s an article in the *Peskaworthy Times* that says it’s been sighted there. They  say two little girls on the way to school stopped and talked with it but didn’t think  to ask about any treasure.”

“And where is Peskaworthy?”

“Oh, it’s a good fifty miles around the Twicking Hills and down the next valley,”  said Mag, and she smiled as she put out a plate of scones and jam for him.

It was a beautiful day, and Roger  was able to see for several miles once he reached the upper slopes of a suitable  hill. He laid out his paints and set up his easel and worked all morning. In the early  afternoon, when it was time for a little lunch, rather than pack up and carry all his supplies down the hill, he decided to leave  them where they were. Now that the leprechaun seekers were gone, the fields were  empty and the supplies should be safe enough.

It was three o’clock before Roger hiked back up the hill. He’d left the easel and  briefcase just above a rock outcropping, and as he approached the rock, he saw  something he hadn’t noticed earlier. Just as he feared, his easel and his paints were in disastrous disarray.  The canvases were scattered across the hillside. The one nearest him was lying  faceup, and he could see that it was ruined. Someone had splashed paint across it  and added a cartoon of a spaceship landing on top of one of the picturesque hills.

More angry than he could remember being in his life, Roger collected up the  canvases and as many of the squashed paint tubes as he could find. He swept  everything into his briefcase, slammed it shut. He brushed angry tears out of his  eyes. Not only was his morning’s work wasted, the supplies were gone. Without  money to replace them, he couldn’t complete his commission.

Roger stopped with one foot raised in the air. Then he very slowly  lowered that foot to the ground. His anger receded in the face of an artistic challenge. Standing on the rock outcropping below him, looking very pleased with himself, was the most extraordinary little man. His skin was a sort of green,  Roger thought, the clothes were  definitely green. And  was that a snipe feather or a grouse feather in the hatband? Roger stared. The little  man said something, but Roger couldn’t be bothered to answer. He was  carefully noting the contrasting color of his boots and his belt. The little man gestured to something hidden behind the rocks. Finally, with a look of grim disgust the little man pulled a bag from the  air behind him and threw it at Roger’s feet. He then disappeared, but Roger was  happy. He’d had plenty of time to get all the details right. He looked down with a  pleased smile on his face and saw the bag on the grass in the front of him. He  picked it up and looked inside. All the way back to the inn he daydreamed about  the paints he was going to buy.

Roger had paid in advance for his room at the Jaunty Fox, so he slipped away in the  morning before anyone was awake. Mag found a small change purse left in his  room with a note for her pinned to its side. She twisted open the note. “To cover the cost of a long-distance phone  call,” she read aloud. She snapped open the purse cover and shook out not quarters and nickels and dimes but a single shining gold piece larger than a silver  dollar and twice as heavy.

“That’s a little steep for a  phone call, isn’t it, Mag?” one of the regulars asked.

“It is,” she said. “Especially when it was me that made the only long-distance  call this weekend.”

“And was that call by any chance to the newspaper over in Peskaworthy, Mag,  dear?”

“Never you mind where the call went. The Boswells have their pigs, Jamie Walsh has his cows home, and you can just be glad we’re not going to see that  blasted leprechaun again.” She slipped the coin back into her apron and patted the  pocket.

She was right as usual. Leprechauns never stay where they’ve had to forfeit their  treasure. That particular leprechaun has never been seen again except in a series of  paintings exhibited later that year by an up-and-coming young artist named Roger  Otterly.