

## The Leprechaun

Contributed by Brian P. Hegarty Jr.

Leprechauns take the form of aged, diminutive men who usually function as fairy shoemakers. Indeed, the name leprechaun may have been derived from the Irish *leith bhrogan* (shoemaker), although it has been suggested that its origins may lie in *luacharman* (Irish for pigmy). Leprechauns are usually described as small, untidy men, about three feet in height, dressed in a red square-cut coat, richly laced with gold, cocked hat, shoes and buckles. This would be the traditional Irish version. But when people left Ireland and brought their stories with them the more Americanized version would be: Leprechaun's are dressed in green coats, with red breeches buckled at the knee, woolen stockings and wide-brimmed hats slightly askew at one side. This version eventually led to Leprechauns having red hair and having all green wear. However, in any case, they constantly smoke foul smelling pipes, called dudeens and tend to have a surly and sour disposition.

Not surprisingly, the leprechaun is a solitary creature and is to be found inhabiting gully's or lurking behind bushes or under hedges. Tapping on a shoe that he is making, the sound of his labour is the only signal that he is there.

They are frequently to be found in an intoxicated state, caused by the consumption of poteen which they brew themselves. However, they never become so drunk that the hand which holds the hammer becomes unsteady and their work affected. If anything, too much drink makes them even more sullen and argumentative.

Female leprechauns do not appear to exist and there is much speculation as to how these fairies actually reproduce. Leprechauns themselves are extremely secretive about their origins but it is believed that they may be the offspring of unions between mortals and fairies who have been cast out of their respective worlds.

Leprechauns carry two leather pouches. In one there is a silver shilling, a magical coin that returns to the purse each time it is paid out so that the leprechaun appears to be paying out money without ever actually losing any. In the other he carries a gold coin which he uses to try and bribe his way out of difficult situations. The coin usually turns to leaves or ashes once the leprechaun has parted with it.

From this, it may be deduced that the leprechaun can be temperamental and unpredictable. He has to be because in addition to his trade as a cobbler, he is the banker of the fairy world. Leprechauns know where large caches of ancient wealth are hidden and have become self-appointed guardians of this wealth. Other fairies must go to the leprechaun when they want gold for their fairy largesse. He will generously bestow money or gifts upon other fairies. The leprechaun's sullen disposition would shame even the most insensitive bank-manager. Leprechauns have collected much of the ancient treasure left by the Danes when they marauded through Ireland and have buried it in crocks or pots. The leprechaun has a phenomenal memory and knows the exact location of each crock and can easily recover it, if he wishes. However, most leprechauns are natural misers and will not easily part with their money.

Leprechauns tend to avoid contact with humans. They do this because they regard them as foolish, flighty creatures and because they fear that humans may steal the treasures which they so carefully guard. Moreover, despite their squat and stocky build, the leprechaun is incredibly sprightly and can move quicker than the human eye can see. Most humans only catch a fleeting glimpse as he skips out of their line of vision behind a tree or under a bush. If caught by a mortal, he will promise great wealth if allowed to go free. However, you must never take your eye off him, for he can vanish in an instant, leaving the watcher astonished at his haste.

His sour disposition and natural aversion to humans does not prevent the leprechaun from rewarding those whom he believes have done him a good turn. He has a strong sense of honour and will always return one good deed for another. Unfortunately, such rewards tend to take the form of strong liquor which invariably leaves the recipient very much the worse for wear.