

The Leprechaun

by
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“A WEE tag of a man no higher than the top of my boot,” Wilton announced across the breakfast table. “He peeped at me round the chair, and, seeing my legs, no doubt, skeedaddled back into the passage, ma’am.”

Mrs. Lanigan, proprietress of “The Friend in Need” boarding-house, stared open-mouthed at Wilton, her fingers twining and relaxing in the folds of her apron.

“Sure, I’m not in a humor for your jokes this mornin’, sorr. A week ago I might have blamed the little black monkey that belongs to the organ man over the way. But both are away at Coney Island this month. ’Tis the effects of last night that’s troublin’ ye, maybe?”

Wilton sat tight in his chair, the morning paper thrust to the far end of the table as though its contents dismayed and irritated him. A late riser, he had come down to breakfast long after the other boarders had left the house. A stout, clean-shaven man of medium height, his jokes

and stories of the night before had kept the big sitting-room in a constant smother of laughter. But of all Mrs. Lanigan’s boarders he was the one who preferred the lemonade to the whisky.

“The thing that puzzles me, Mrs. Lanigan,” he went on, “was the creature’s make-up. He wore a cocked hat of black silk with a pink cloak and white ruffles, and the tiniest silver-buckled shoes in the world!” Wilton exclaimed, leaning across the table in his landlady’s direction. “You have no marionette people or midget theatricals in the house?” he inquired earnestly.

“None at all, sorr. There’s only the bunch ye saw last night, includin’ Mr. Lynch, of number three.”

Wilton sipped his coffee abstractedly with occasional down glances in the direction of his chair-legs and the fireplace opposite. A vendor of trinkets and cheap jewelry, his appearance at Lanigan’s was generally welcomed by the little cosmopolitan crowd of bread-winners who patronized the East Side

boarding-house.

Mrs. Lanigan reached for the discarded newspaper with a sigh.

"Did ye read the account of the poor lady who was murdered yesterday in Fifty-Fourth an' Madison, sorr?" she ventured, as though anxious to avoid further reference to his uncanny little visitor, for in her heart lay a suspicion that Wilton was anxious to begin the day with a bit of innocent fun at her expense. Yet her Celtic imagination was fired by his unusual gravity and preoccupation of manner.

"Murders do not interest me," he told her after a pause. "Judged by some American papers, every tenth citizen is a gunman or a crook!"

" 'Tis the fault of the police, sorr, for how comes it that a lady like Mrs. Chennerly should be shot in broad daylight and robbed widout a trace of the murderer anywhere? When these gunmen can waylay people in places like Fifty-Fourth an' escape, 'tis time the cops gave themselves a dacent funeral!"

Wilton was silent; his eyes traversed the floor space to the window and back to the breakfast-room door. Mrs. Lanigan moved nervously with her tray as she followed his roving glance.

"The leprechaun is worryin' ye, sorr!" She laughed uneasily, while the milk-jug and sugar-basin rattled on the tray in her hands.

"Oh! You have a name for it!" Wilton flung out, his eyes brightening at the points. "Now, what in creation is a leprechaun, Mrs. Lanigan?"

" 'Tis the little man who comes to help poor wives at times, Mr. Wilton. But sure it's jokin' ye are this mornin'. In Ireland we have them, but not in this country at all. Mother of mercy! What ails ye?"

Wilton had risen from the chair

and was staring wide-eyed at the half-open door immediately behind the now trembling landlady. "Look!" he cried hoarsely. "Over there!"

The tray almost fell from Mrs. Lanigan's nerveless fingers as she side-stepped with a suppressed cry behind his chair. Wilton's face was a study in suppressed excitement and curiosity.

"Didn't you see it?" he demanded under his breath. "Surely, surely you are not blind!"

"No, sorr," was the almost hysterical rejoinder. "Go aisy, please, 'tis carryin' the joke too far ye are this mornin'!"

"I'm not joking," Wilton snapped. "My eyes are clear enough to read that infernal newspaper type, my head is not fuddled with whisky fumes either, Mrs. Lanigan. Look, look!"

Pointing with his finger he seemed to crouch across the room to the passage outside. Here his glance flashed up the narrow stairs while his steady forefinger indicated bedroom number three. "Gone in there!" he declared huskily. "You saw it!"

Mrs. Lanigan reeled into the passage, sweat moistening her brow. Wilton's strong fingers closed on her arm and steadied her shaking limbs.

"You saw it slip into number three!" he insisted hoarsely. "Are you afraid of these leprechauns, Mrs. Lanigan?"

Mrs. Lanigan fanned her red-hot face with the morning paper. "I'm not sure that I didn't see the light of a silver shoe-buckle on the stairs, Mr. Wilton. The saints protect us!" she added in an under-breath.

"But you are not afraid of the leprechaun? They come for a good purpose, you say?"

"Where did he hide, sorr?"

"In number three. Shall we go up?"

“ ’Tis Mr. Lynch’s room! The door will be locked. There never was such a man for locking his door!”

“There was never a landlady who couldn’t open a locked door in her own house!” Wilton laughed. “And if we don’t get a second view of the leprechaun I’ll never forgive myself, or you either.”

Mrs. Lanigan fled for a key and soon returned palpitating with suppressed emotion. Wilton shot the key in the door and flung it wide. The room was a small one, with a window overlooking the river and an array of squalid tenements and Chinese shops. Wilton took in the cheap, foreign-made dressing-table at a glance. A pair of large, mud-soiled boots displayed something of number three’s walking habits. In a far corner a small black bag showed against the yellow skirting board.

A skeleton-key appeared incidentally in Wilton’s fingers.

“If the leprechaun is not under the bed, Mrs. Lanigan, it may be in here!” he predicted with a smile.

In the turn of his wrist the contents of the bag were emptied on the floor. From a litter of miscellaneous articles he drew out a small lady’s watch with the monogram “H. C.” inset with pearls and diamonds. A bank-book bearing the written name “Hannah Chennerly,” inside, almost fell into his hands.

Wilton turned to the astounded landlady, his face grown suddenly tense and hard. “I must ask you to keep silent!” he commanded. “One word to your

people, and—”

The sound of an automobile was heard outside the house. A moment later the front door was opened, admitting a lank, stooping-shouldered man with large feet and a slightly hanging jaw. With a furtive glance along the boarding-house passage the stooping figure mounted the stairs hurriedly.

“My God! ’Tis Lynch!” the landlady moaned. “What shall I say?”

Wilton thrust her behind the door as the long, gaunt shadow of number three seemed to leap across the narrow-corridor. A revolver slanted from Wilton’s hand as the door was thrust back.

“Hands up! There’s a bunch of plain-clothes men around this house, Lynch, alias Nolan the Knife. You’re wanted for the Chennerly affair. Keep your hands where they are!”

Wilton’s revolver almost touched the snarling face of the trapped woman-slayer. “Walk right out into the street!” he ordered, “or my bullet may get you where your food goes in.”

Three plain-clothes men appeared suddenly in the passage. Wilton followed Lynch’s skulking shape down-stairs, pausing once to look back at the speechless landlady above.

“That door-lock of number three almost beat my keys,” he explained cheerfully. Then in a consoling whisper: “But my little leprechaun has helped me through tougher doors than Lynch’s, Mrs. Lanigan. Good-by!”