



Leprechauns

Leprechauns are a prominent fixture in the St. Patrick's Day celebrations of today. The stories and even the look of this folkloric creature have changed a lot throughout history. Most Leprechaun legends can be traced back to the eighth century tales of water spirits, known as "luchorpan", which means small body. There is a magical race known in Ireland called the "Tuatha De Danann". This mythical group lived in Ireland long before humans inhabited the island. Some claim that Leprechauns were descendants of the sun god "Lugh" who was very short. He became the ruler of Ireland and was a great warrior. As Christian churches moved in, the idea of him as a god diminished. He moved to the "sidhe" to live with the other fairies, and he was too tall there and had to stoop in the underground mounds. So they called him "Lugh-chromain" which means "stooping Lugh". In his history of medieval folklore, he got turned into a short fairy-goblin called "Leprechaun".

They first appeared in Irish literature in the eighth century. Fairies are known for being water creatures. Leprechauns are known to hide from humans by living in tiny underground caves or hollow tree trunks. Fairies are also known for living in large groups and the Leprechaun prefers to be alone.

Some attribute Leprechaun mythology to the "lupracanaig", which were terrible monsters in twelfth century writings. While they were most known for their wrinkled skin and practical jokes, sometimes they were lethal and so they were considered evil. Still others say that the Leprechaun originates from the "cluracan", which is a male spirit from European folklore. They are said to haunt cellars to scare away servants who might steal the wine in them. He dresses in fine red clothing, carries a purse full of silver coins, is small in size and loves to smoke and drink. It is said that the idea that they guard treasure is borrowed from the stories of the "mouros" from Celtic Galicia.

The most popular belief about Leprechauns is that they were spirits that merged with a household fairy and that their name comes from the Irish term “leath brogan” which means shoemaker. Some claim that making shoes is how they earn their pots of gold, and others argue that a cobbler does not earn that much for their profession. Others claim that their treasure comes from the crocks buried in war time or by pirates. They find these coins and keep them for themselves.

While they may have merged with the fairy, there are no female Leprechauns, they are only old men. They are old, wrinkled, and very ugly, but very agile or nimble. Because of famous commercials for a certain cereal, we often think of Leprechauns as cheerful, but the original creatures were known for being gloomy, sour-tempered, and foul-mouthed. This unpleasant image lead to the tales that they are possibly deformed children of the fairies.

They were originally said to be old men dressed in red clothing. What their exact outfit was, varied by region of Ireland. What he seemed to always have is a coat and hat of some sort. Today’s Leprechaun is dressed in green, with buckled shoes, a hat, and is usually smoking a pipe. Ireland is known as the “Emerald Isle” because of its green hills. So as the legends of this Irish fairy spread across the world, it was natural to find him in green clothing.

There are many different traditions and beliefs surrounding Leprechauns. They are, perhaps, most famous for their hoarded pot of gold. They are said to hide this treasure at the end of a rainbow. Because it is impossible to find the end of a rainbow, one must catch a Leprechaun to get his treasure. If you catch one, you must always keep him within sight, or he will not tell you where the pot of gold is. Because they are so mischievous, they are very difficult to trap. Some say that he will promise you three wishes if you let him go. It is hard to tell if this is just one of his tricks.

In addition to the possible three wishes or pot of gold, it is also supposed to be good luck to catch a Leprechaun. Perhaps this is where the saying “the luck of the Irish” comes from.

It is funny to think of a Leprechaun as having a pot of gold. What would they spend it on? Some say that they only hoard their gold as a way to trick humans. Some say that their trickery is to teach humans not to be so greedy. This seems unlikely given that Leprechauns are so famous for their trickery and deceit. Other lessons we may learn from the Leprechaun’s trickery is that we should not be too invested in “get rich quick” schemes, or that we should not look to take what is not ours.

Leprechauns are now a very famous and beloved creature. While they are still attributed to Irish folklore, they are well-known all over the world. You will find stories about Leprechauns in many books and stories, as well as movies and stage shows. There are thriller movies about the scary image of the Leprechaun and fun movies about the happy-go-lucky Leprechauns. In the United States we most-often associate Leprechauns with St. Patrick's Day, March 17, and we find him surrounded by the color green and plenty of shamrocks.