

The Faerie Tax
A Patrick Donegal Fantasy

Mike Phillips

Sitting on a roughly hewn bench outside a small cottage, the last rays of the setting sun illuminating his work, the farmer had no idea that he was being watched. He was busily darning a sock, his brutish fingers pulling thread through the overly worn fabric, the bone needle piercing the flesh of the coarse woolen weave in an effort to close a hole the size of his big toe.

The farmer was a thickly built man, stooped at the shoulders from countless days of planting seeds or pulling weeds or picking vegetables. His face was decidedly unhandsome even in the kind light of dusk, with a ruddy complexion that bespoke a fondness for cheap drink. His hair was unkempt, snarled and knotted, and in his beard the remnants of ancient meals could be found.

At last the farmer tied a double knot and bit the thread, pulling the mended sock back over his foot. Slipping on a boot, he tested his handiwork, seemingly satisfied with what he had accomplished.

Had he known the danger he was in, what the night had in store, the farmer might then have made the long walk into town, some seven miles by the rutted cart path that

wound its way through the surrounding hills. He might even have spent a few of the precious coins he had managed to save over the year to treat himself to a meal.

The farmer was no coward but trouble of the sort that quietly awaited an opportunity was not of the usual kind. Stories abounded concerning the faerie folk and their mischief, and he would have been afraid to find himself at odds with even the least of their tricks. But the farmer was oblivious as he checked the pens and coops of his little homestead, deciding that everything met with his approval.

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“I just don’t know about this, Patrick,” said Danny Gorman in a hushed voice, while the farmer walked back to the house.

“You’re not nervous, are you Danny?” Patrick Donegal asked in return, watching intently as the farmer pulled the door shut behind him.

Danny was a woodcarver by trade, one of the very best, and he never went anywhere without his tool bag slung over a shoulder. More than once a chisel or a small axe had proved invaluable while he and Patrick were on an adventure. But now as he shifted anxiously from one foot to the next the tools rang dully like cowbells, a noise that was beginning to disturb the chickens.

“Hushathee,” Patrick hissed, “you’ll have the whole farm up with that racket.”

“Ah, sorry for that, to be sure.”

Turning to face his tense companion, his eyes shining with starlight, Patrick gave Danny a quizzical look. “I know that tone. Whatever is the matter?”

After a moment’s hesitation, Danny said, “I just don’t think ‘tis right is all.”

“Now, you don’t mean that,” Patrick said with a laugh. “What with us sending in the rain, at the right times and in the right amounts, and that jackdaw keeping it all for himself, not even sending so much as a bushel of potatoes to that old widow woman down the way, and topping it all by taking her best milking cow for the rents? No, Danny, this one’s got it coming. It’s the *tax* for him.”

“Yes, well, to be sure, when you put it like that.”

“He’s a selfish man, Danny, and it’s our business to give him the what for, learn him the error of his ways. Why, that’s what we were put in the world to do. I’d go so far as to say we couldn’t do otherwise, not and keep our honor intact.”

Patrick and Danny were both faerie folk. Neither stood higher than a few inches, and they were magical in a way that few humans ever understand. They had been hiding in the tall grass at the garden’s edge all evening, looking over things, getting a feel for what the night’s business would involve.

“So what do you plan to do, then?”

Taking the chance to give the farm one last look, deciding something, Patrick took a lace handkerchief from the breast pocket of his green suit coat and began methodically polishing the silver head of an elegantly carved walking stick. Patrick Donegal was tall for his kind, lean as a scholar, but he was used to taking the sort of exercise that made him tougher than he looked. In a terrible accident long ago, Patrick had lost his wings, but he had learned to make the best of his other abilities, and so hardly noticed the loss any longer, except maybe in an irrepressible yearning for the sky.

“Smell that?” Patrick said at last, the starlight in his eyes shining brightly with some unknowable intent. “See the smoke coming out of that chimney? I’d say that’s ham

what's set to cure. The old jackdaw had a brace of piglets last time we came this way. Now that the year's getting on I'd bet he's put them up for winter. What do you think?"

"It's as like as not," Danny replied. "You meaning we should take some of them hams to the old woman?"

"No," Patrick said with disdain, "the wretch would find her out and before she had a chance to eat her fill, he'd have her shut up in the stocks or have her hands cut off or whatever the big folk are doing for thievery these days."

"What then?"

"Oh, I don't know," Patrick said in a way that suggested the opposite. "We might take them down to Missus Malone and see what she can make of them."

"Now that's the best thing you've said all night, to be sure."

Missus Malone was the head cook and proprietor of the Corn Flower Inn, by rights the best food in the entire county. She made a wonderful lamb stew whenever the faerie tax could provide, and her tarts were legendary even amongst the pixies, gnomes, and sprites of the forest. And since Missus Malone was herself one of the faerie folk, it was quite likely that all her cooking was, in fact, magical.

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It wasn't long before the welcome sound of snoring within the cottage greeted their ears. Patrick gave Danny a questioning look, shrugging his shoulders and asking noncommittally, "So, what's it to be, then?"

"Ah, well, I'll have a go. You're right as usual, Patrick," Danny said as he kicked a dirt clod. "Besides, what could possibly go wrong?"

Down the path to the farmhouse they went, Danny fluttering a few inches above the ground and Patrick strolling. At last they reached the front door. Patrick made a slight gesture with his hand. The latch lifted and with a gentle push, he opened the door just enough to permit entry for himself and Danny.

But for the farmer's snoring, the sound of which cut through the air like a swiftly running stream over stones, all was quiet. The cottage was only one room, with a dirt floor and a low ceiling. There was an overlarge stone fireplace, built for the smoking of meats in addition to the usual duties. A small fire burned yet on the hearth, kept constant by the farmer's art until the meat had cured.

But for the fire, there was hardly any light to see by. The windows were few and covered with rags, for the nights had already been troubled by frost. As the faerie's eyes grew accustomed to the darkness, the details of the room came into view. There was a table and two chairs. A ladder led up to what was presumably a loft. An ornately carved and painted cabinet, out of place in the squalor, stood in the corner. Upon the cabinet were stacked a few earthenware cups and plates, a half dozen glass jars that were nearly empty of their contents.

The farmer was sleeping in a bed near the fireplace, still fully clothed except for his boots, a ratty blanket pulled up to his chin. He was sleeping peaceably, rolled over onto his side, and snoring.

In Patrick and Danny crept, the dirt floor muffling what minute sounds the passing of the faerie folk would make, not so much on a stone floor as to wake the most attentive of mice when a hungry cat is on the prowl. Straight to the fireplace they went,

dimming the natural glow of their enchantment so as not to wake the farmer, but not troubling to employ their faerie craft to make themselves invisible.

All was as they expected. Hams and roasts, cuts of bacon and chops, hung from all manner of hooks and ropes, bent nails and old wires, anything the farmer had at hand seemed to have been used for this unaccustomed bounty. Patrick pointed above, and Danny took him by the shoulders, flying them up the chimney to have a closer look.

“How about this bacon?” asked Danny, “I dearly love good bacon and I can’t say as I’ve see the like to that in ages.”

“Aye, that’s it, all right,” Patrick replied. “But set me down on that big ham first. We won’t be able to carry it all.”

“We’ll be able to take a bit more than you’d think,” Danny protested. “One man shouldn’t have all this to himself. It’s a crime, a travesty. Now, Patrick, I saw a basket down there. We can use that, equal things out a bit with the neighbors.”

Patrick laughed, “We don’t want to put the wretch in the poorhouse.”

“Oh, there’s more than enough here, to be sure. You’ll see. Get that ham free and I’ll be right back.”

Still laughing, Patrick began working the knots of the rope that held the giant ham suspended. He had only been at the job a moment when there was a muffled cry and the sudden clank of glass. A terrible, loud voice arose from the silence. It was the farmer, shouting words of triumph for himself amidst curses for his victim. Patrick was aghast. Danny had been caught.

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“I’ll thank you to release my friend,” Patrick demanded from mantel. In the farmer’s excitement, Patrick had jumped down from the ham and climbed to this new vantage without notice.

“Who’s that?” the farmer said in a gruff voice, looking round. He turned toward the fireplace, keeping a protective hold on a rather large glass jar as he did. Inside the jar there was a faint red glow.

Faeries are powerless against being caught in such a way, and are hardly able to free themselves from so simple a prison as a lantern, even under the most desperate of circumstances. Glass jars and mirrored boxes are quite impossible for them to manage. Danny was in a fix indeed.

Calmly brushing the soot from his clothes, Patrick said, “My name is Patrick, but more importantly, you have in your possession a compatriot of mine.”

”What?” the man said stupidly, his eyes growing wide as he spied the mantel and saw his strange visitor.

“The faerie,” Patrick said irritably. “Release the faerie.”

Looking down at the jar as if he half expected that Danny had already escaped, the farmer got a shrewd look on his face. “Why don’t you try and take it?”

“Believe me, I’d like nothing more, but I am a reasonable man and I thought that I might give you the opportunity to display your better qualities first.”

With this the farmer grinned. “I get wishes then? Is that what you’re meaning? I let him go and you give me three wishes. That’s how it works, isn’t it?”

“Oh, I suppose,” Patrick said casually, hiding a smile, outwardly showing more interest in the state of his clothes. “You seem to have an understanding of the business. If you’re willing to let my friend go, I could perform a trick or two.”

“No tricks,” the farmer snapped. “None of them tricks now, I heard the stories. I won’t be fooled so easy as the others you’ve done in the past, I reckon.”

“So it would seem that I’ve been put on notice. Why don’t you have a seat and wish away.”

Doing as he was bid, the farmer sat in one of the chairs, keeping the glass jar and Danny safely in his lap all the while.

“By the way, are you all right, Danny?” Patrick asked, but he needn’t have bothered. Danny was in a fine state.

The jar the farmer used to capture him held cookies. Resigned to his fate and then making the discovery, Danny tasted the cookies and found much to his surprise that they were uncommonly good. There was more than enough to keep him busy while Patrick and the farmer sorted things out, so he sat down and having produced a flagon of lemonade, began happily munching away.

“Now for the first wish,” the farmer said with a lascivious grin. “I wants that Betty from over the hill to fall hopelessly in love with me.”

Patrick guessed the farmer’s intentions were anything but noble, and love was a thing he valued and respected above all, but he had made his bargain and meant to stick by it. From his jacket, Patrick withdrew a violin. A wave of his hand tore away the curtain rag from the window and cast open a rude shutter. Then he began to play, a long,

low sonorous tune that filled the room. The song grew in depth and complexity and then carried out the window and into the world.

When the music came to an end, there was a noise in the dooryard. The farmer rose eagerly, and taking the jar with him, went to claim his prize. But as he opened the door, he saw not the pretty young girl of his darkest imaginings, but an old nanny goat coming fast toward him, bleating and licking her lips, a crazed look in her eye.

“Wait!” the farmer shouted, rushing back into the cottage and slamming the door shut, still not comprehending what was going on. Patrick was laughing.

“What’s this?” the farmer said angrily.

“Betty from across the way, just as you said,” Patrick replied smugly. “She’s a fine milker from what I understand. You can now add goat milk to your list of ill gotten gains. How clever of you.” He shook his head sadly, “Still, that O’Neil is a bad man from what I understand. It might go better for you if you return the goat by morning.”

“You tricked me,” the farmer said bitterly, raising the jar, threatening to smash it against the hearth.

“None of that. I’m willing enough to deal to avoid trouble,” Patrick said tartly, “but you’ll find that I’m no pushover. Mind your manners or you’ll find yourself in a most unattractive shade of toad.”

Sufficiently chastened by the threat, the farmer went quiet. “Good,” said Patrick, satisfied. “Now for the next wish.”

“Yeah, I can play that way too,” said the farmer slowly. “All I got to do is say it in a way that leaves no room for your silly games.”

“That would be wise, I must admit.”

“Ah, yes, see, I can do that. What I want is a fine house, built of brick and stone, fit for a king, with twenty rooms and a fine hall and paintings and carvings and such.”

“Done!” Patrick said, scattering some of his dust.

The magic dust sparkled like stars on a winter night as it crossed the room, swirling and gathering as it blew to where the farmer sat. All the light seemed to go out of the room as the dust began to settle, a rough form coalescing upon the table. There appeared the most excellent house in all the land, with twenty rooms and a great meeting hall. It was made of brick and stone, the finest craftsmanship evident in every detail. The doors were carved and windows were of stained glass. There were paintings and tapestries the like of which was beyond the wildest imaginings of avarice. But for all its magnificence, the house was not a foot tall, and was not even fit to house a person the size of the faerie folk.

“Now that’s not fair!” the farmer bellowed, and for a moment, Patrick thought he would break the jar in his bare hands for his rage. “You cheated me.”

“I most certainly did not. I did exactly as you asked. No finer work in all the world. Of course, there is the size problem. Tell you what; I’ll make you small enough to live there free of charge, how’s that?”

“No, you’re a cheat and I’m going to keep this little fella here and make a fortune showing him in a traveling circus. That’s what I’ll do. I’d don’t want your wishes.”

Patrick replied innocently, “But you said that you knew about faerie tricks. You should have been more specific. Fair’s fair. Now sit yourself down and let’s hear that last wish, and let’s hope you make a better job of it than you have done thus far.”

The temptation of one last wish could not be denied. The farmer calmed himself, sat down rapping his fingers on the glass—which annoyed Danny beyond his cookies—and thought for a long while. “Got to be gold,” he finally said. “I want a bag of gold as big as my head. And none of that spun straw or turning to dust in sevens days either. I want the real thing, gold sovereigns, every one as true as the day they was struck.”

“A bag of gold sovereigns as big as your head, now there’s a wish, most wise my good man, most wise indeed.” Again Patrick sent out some of his magic dust, which glittered like gold as it traveled across the room, spinning in a great ball above the farmer’s head.

Looking up in wonder and beginning to positively shake with excitement, the farmer exclaimed, “It’s beautiful. Give it to me.”

“I’ll give it to you all right,” Patrick replied as the bag of gold took form.

Only too late did the farmer see this last trick. With Danny and the jar still tightly clutched in his grip, he didn’t have time to protect himself. The bag of gold came crashing down, landing smartly on the farmer’s head.

Kingly crowned, the farmer slumped to the floor, unconscious. The jar rolled free from his hand and broke against the stone hearth. Danny picked himself up, still holding a cookie as big as he was, completely unhurt as faerie luck would have it.

“Well, that’s done,” Patrick said, jumping down from the mantel to see if Danny was all right.

“But Patrick,” protested Danny as he regained his wits, “You’re not going to let him have all that gold, are you? Think of the trouble a man like that will cause. Unless, of course, it’s not real.”

“No, it’s real enough,” Patrick said, the starlight in his eyes shining fiercely. “But I think after tonight’s fun, the old jackdaw’s learned a bit of charity. In fact, why don’t we just take all that gold right down to the church for him? We could make sure every last coin ends up in the poor box where it belongs.”

“You mean protect him from robbers?” said Danny.

“The world is a dangerous place,” Patrick agreed.

“Such a fine gesture would be greatly appreciated, to be sure.”

“The folk will have a fine winter, indeed.”

They both stood silently for a few moments, beatific smiles on their faces, looking upon all they had accomplished that night with immense satisfaction. The silence became strained. Finally Patrick gave in, saying, “Now then, how about some of that bacon?”

The End

Bio: Mike Phillips is the author of **Reign of the Nightmare Prince** available in bookstores, online booksellers, Kindle and Nook. He has published several short stories both in print and online, including ParABnormal Digest, Sinister Tales, Dark Horizons and many others. He is best known for his Crow Witch and Patrick Donegal series.