

## The Magic Shoes/

### King Lubdán and King Fergus

King Lubdán of the Leprechauns was a boastful little man who was very proud of his great wealth and mighty kingdom. In truth, he was a very generous king and liked nothing more than treating his people to lavish banquets in the royal hall. This, you can imagine, made him very popular. And so it was with great excitement that the leprechauns of Lubdán's kingdom received an invitation to their king's Midwinter feast. They dressed in their finest jackets and put on their best pair of dancing shoes, making sure to polish every button and buckle until they twinkled like stars in the moonlit night.

And what a feast awaited them! Roast toad stuffed with wild garlic and chestnut, drizzled with a sticky honeysuckle sauce, and finished with sweet elderberry wine served in acorn cups - a menu fit for a royal wedding! Of course this was no great hardship for Lubdán because, like every leprechaun king, he had a pot that was always full with food. He had a few other treasures of which he was very proud, like an emerald green cloak that never wore out and a pair of shoes that allowed the wearer to walk on water as if it were solid.

Feasting went on late into the night and the leprechauns became rose-cheeked and merry.

King Lubdán stood from his throne and clapped his hands together for attention.

“Is this the greatest feast that you have ever had?” he asked.

“It is!” chimed the crowd.

“Have you ever seen a king as rich, as clever or as brave as me?” he asked.

“Never,” they yelled, raising their acorn cups to the king.

A contented smile spread across King Lubdán's face. He felt adored by his people and he loved it! Just as he was about to settle on his throne once more beside his wife Bébbó, the king's expression changed as if a dark cloud had passed over him. A sniggering laughter had rippled along the feasting hall and fell on the king's ears.

'Who dares laugh at me?' roared Lubdán, his whole body now shaking with anger.

If there was one thing the king could not stand, it was being made to look like a fool in front of his people.

A brash young leprechaun named Eisirt stepped out from the crowd. He was one of the court's poets, and in a clear voice that echoed around the hall he said:

'I know of a kingdom in Éirinn that is richer and has greater guards than yours. King Fergus of Ulster is a giant and could destroy your kingdom in a day. What's more, just one of King Fergus' gold coins would be worth far more than all of your kingdom's gold put together.'

King Lubdán was outraged at Eisirt's disloyalty, but was more concerned with the embarrassment he had caused him.

'Lies!' he shouted at Eisirt. 'You, like all traitors, shall be banished from this kingdom forever!'

Few had ever been sentenced so harshly and there was a sharp gasp in the hall as the people listened to Eisirt's fate.

'Wait!' shouted Eisirt. 'Give me three days to go to King Fergus and bring back proof that I'm telling the truth.'

Now Eisirt was a popular poet in Lubdán's kingdom. His witty verses had entertained the common folk as well as the nobility on many dark, foggy winter nights and King Lubdán knew his value. The mutterings of support for Eisirt helped Lubdán make his decision.

'Very well Eisirt,' he boomed. 'I grant you three days, but if you have lied you will be banished forever!'

And so, Eisirt wrapped his heavy mouse-fur cloak about him, pulled on his pointed red hat, and set out on the path to King Fergus of Ulster. The wee folk watched until the last speck of his red hat had disappeared from the horizon.

Eisirt's journey took him along shadowy paths that were crowded with insects busy about their work. To him, the insects were large animals that were best avoided as he himself was no taller than a blade of grass. Eventually he crossed the border to Ulster and came to King Fergus' palace early the next morning.

The guard at the palace gates had been dozing and nearly jumped out of his skin with shock when he saw Eisirt tugging at his cloak.

“Such a tiny man, no higher than my ankles! Am I still dreaming?” he exclaimed.

“You are not dreaming,” replied Eisirt, doing his best to sound strong in the face of this giant. “I am Eisirt, a poet from the land of leprechauns, and I demand to see King Fergus at once.”

The guard threw back his head with laughter.

“King Fergus will certainly be curious to meet you too,” he said, as he scooped Eisirt up onto the palm of his hand and took him to the inner court.

Fergus was enjoying breakfast with his household when the guard entered.

“A small traveller from the land of leprechauns is here to visit you, my king,” said the guard and dropped Eisirt onto the table in front of Fergus. They stared at each other in disbelief. Never had King Fergus seen such a small, funny looking man, and never in his wildest dreams did Eisirt think he would be confronted by such an enormous king!

“Have a drink”, shouted one of the servants and a giant hand lifted him off his feet and dropped him into a cup of wine. The warriors laughed at the sight while poor Eisirt spluttered and gasped for breath until Aodh, the king's dwarf, took him out.

“Shame on you,” Aodh scolded the servant.

“A thimble of wine for our guest,” ordered Fergus and the humiliated servant obeyed at once. Then he turned to Eisirt.

“Tell us, little man, what brings you to my palace,” urged the king.

“I am Eisirt and Lubdán, King of the Leprechauns, ordered me to bring him proof of your huge size, because I boasted that you were far greater in riches and strength than him,” Eisirt replied, still trying to catch his breath. He was becoming used to the company of these giants and no longer felt scared of them.

Fergus was flattered by this tiny man's words.

“You're a brave wee man,” he said. “Indeed there is no greater kingdom than that of Ulster and I'll help you prove it to your King Lubdán. Aodh is the smallest man in this kingdom and he will travel home with you as proof of what giants the rest of us are!”

And so, the next day, the two companions set out for the land of the leprechauns, Eisirt enjoying a birds-eye view from Aodh's shoulder and giving directions as he went.

Eventually Eisirt and Aodh came to the edge of the land of leprechauns and there they were greeted by a golden chariot.

“This is King Lubdán's fairy chariot,” Eisirt explained to Aodh. “It will take us to the royal hall much quicker than if we walked.”

They stepped onto the small chariot and arrived at the royal hall only minutes later. A huge crowd had gathered for Eisirt's return home, but as soon as the leprechauns saw Aodh they screamed and ran away. The terrified King Lubdán and Queen Bébó bravely stayed on the throne.

“This is Aodh,” Eisirt said. “He is a dwarf, the smallest man in Fergus' kingdom. He is proof that I did not lie to you. Now, I challenge you to go to Ulster and taste the porridge that has been made for King Fergus.”

Lubdán knew that he could not refuse this challenge as it would make him look like a coward. He ordered his fairy chariot prepared and, with his wife Bébó, set out for Ulster. They arrived after a long night's journey, terrified at what lay before them. How huge everything was!

They found the kitchen without any trouble, using their noses as guides. A large pot of steaming porridge stood on the table. With Bébó's help, Lubdán scrambled up the side of the table, took hold of the handle and hauled himself onto the side of the pot. He reached out to take hold of the spoon, but lost his balance and fell head first into the thick, lumpy porridge.

“Are you all right?” called Bébó anxiously.

Just then, the kitchen door swung open and a burly looking servant walked straight to the porridge pot.

“A tiny man in the porridge!” the servant exclaimed in surprise. “What on earth are you doing in there? Let's get you cleaned up and take you and your friend to the king.”

King Fergus was delighted to meet King Lubdán and Queen Bébó.

“You are very welcome to my court,” he said. “You shall stay here and be my guests. People will come from all across Éirinn to see the little people at my court.”

And so, Lubdán and Bébó remained at King Fergus' court and they soon saw that Eisirt had told the truth. Fergus treated them well but he would not let them go and poor Lubdán and Bébó grew very homesick.

Meanwhile, the leprechauns of Lubdán's kingdom began to worry about their king. They missed him as much as he missed them. They organised an emergency meeting.

“We have to go to Ulster and bring King Iubdán and Queen Bébó home,” Eisirt said.

The wee folk all shouted in agreement. At dawn the next day, a large group of volunteers had gathered and they followed Eisirt to Ulster. They set up camp outside Fergus' palace and waited while Eisirt spoke to the guard at the main gate.

“I demand to speak to King Fergus,” said Eisirt boldly. “Tell him to come out here to our camp at once!”

With that, he turned on his heel and went back to the camp. The guard was speechless and did as Eisirt had commanded. There was much commotion within the court, and soon King Fergus appeared at the gate. The leprechauns asked for their king and queen to be set free.

“No!” said Fergus. “The wee king and queen have made my court the most famous in all of Éirinn. I treat them as my guests but I will never let them go.”

“If you do not set them free, we will cut down all of your corn,” they shouted.

“I will not let them go!”

“And we will poison all of your water.”

“I will not let them go!”

“And we will make everybody in your kingdom bald.”

“If you do that,” Fergus threatened, “I shall kill Lubdán and Bébó.”

King Lubdán and Queen Bébó overheard this shouting match. Lubdán went to Fergus and asked to speak to his people.

“Do not do any of this evil you threatened,” he asked them. “If you do not return home peacefully, Bébó and I will both die.”

There was much grumbling amongst the crowd, but they knew their king was right. They loved their king and queen and would not let them die. They packed their camp and, with heavy hearts, began the long journey home.

Lubdán turned to Fergus.

“Look,” he said, “I have sent my people home. Please, let Bébó and I go with them. You may have my most treasured possession if you just set us free.”

“What is it?” Fergus asked.

“A pair of magic shoes,” explained Lubdán, pointing to his feet.

“These shoes will allow the wearer to walk anywhere he likes, above or below water as if he were on solid ground.”

“How extraordinary,” remarked Fergus.

Fergus agreed to let Lubdán and Bébó go home in exchange for the shoes. He stuck one toe into a shoe, pulled hard and was amazed to see that they stretched over his enormous foot.

At once, he went to the nearby lake where a great monster lived. This monster had terrified the people of Ulster for centuries and nobody dared get too close for fear of being eaten alive. Fergus drew his sword and without getting wet, walked straight to the centre of the lake where the monster lay sleeping. With one mighty slash of the sword, Fergus cut off its head. He walked out of the lake to great cheers and shouts of joy from the people of Ulster.

Fergus was so delighted with his new pair of magic shoes that he sent King Lubdán and Queen Bébó home with many fine gifts of gold and silver. They lived to hold many more great feasts at their royal hall in the land of leprechauns, but they never once served porridge to their guests!