

THE STRANGER AND THE FAIRIES

By Emmett O'Connell

A low grey mist crept up on fuzzy feet from the warm muddy marsh into the chilled autumn air of the glen. It paused for a moment on the edge of the damp grass. Then with the next breeze moved across a flat slab of dark rock and engulfed the nimble youths that danced there. The fiddler's bow played on the strings of joy in the heart of many a young girl, whose laming eyes were lighted on her love. Fairies lightly leaped along an amber path of moonbeams across the barren boglands into a nearby field, then paused a while to watch and listen. It looked far more beautiful to them than it could to any mortal man, for they were the spirits of the Tartha De Dannans, the great warriors who chose immortality in their homeland, rather than heaven, as their reward after death. They alone could see through the body to the beauty of the soul. The wind whispered as it passed over rock fences; it gave to fallen leaves a moment more of new life. Small fields of barley bowed to greet it while a chirping cricket played a fairies tune. All nature sang and danced together.

Then one day a foreigner came from over the sea, from a land of tall chimneys and black smoke. He was bred of bullets and barbed wire and spoke a different language. Soon he ruled over the country side for soft hearts are no match for steel swords. Now the villagers dance no more. The young men have gone over the great sea, to the west; or have gone to the hills with violence. Ill fares the land where fields of barley and wheat have been plowed under, cattle stolen and fairy forts offended. The stranger eats his full as famine knocks on the half door. Its leering face scorns a baby's plaintive cry while a sallow faced mother listens with helpless eyes that swell from salty tears of bitterness and sorrow. The fairies gather together, alone in the lonely dusk. They can feel emptiness instead. The bowls of milk, once fondly waited for, are no longer on the cottage doorsteps when evening comes. Now rifles bark of death and prowl the ravage land like savage beasts. The spirits of the

Tartha De Dannans fear for their homeland. Thige, their chief, has decided peace must be fought for with honor, not bought with disgrace; that they must join the young men who are in the hills with violence.

The stranger might have defeated the fairies if he had believed in them, for there are many ways to render the little people helpless. But the stranger was from a land where monster machines made slaves of women and children, feeding on their labor while their men went abroad to civilize the savage world. He was building an empire and had no time for spirits. So the fairies, who were ignorant of his great plans, soured the stranger's milk and spoiled his meat while bad fortune fell upon him in the field. They lifted provisions from his long narrow barracks and left them on the doorsteps of the needy. The stranger's leader deplored this treachery calling it the work of fanatics. Some villagers also preached against violence, saying it was better to pray for the invader's soul than he might mend his evil ways. Still, the young men and the fairies fought on, for prayer