

Weird Tales

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The Banshee and
Patrick O'Bannon

BY JOE BISHOP

To grasp the Banshee was like trying to hold an
armful of the evening breeze.

FHEY the people of the village said I was, because it became rumored about that I had seen, talked with, and fought the banshee, and had driven her from Conneman's Bog. There was some truth in the rumors and much exaggeration, so at the desire of Doctor O'Connor I am telling how it came about.

You may not believe me as I have no mortal witness as proof of what I write; but if it is ever given you to meet Boree, the leprechaun, or Willie the Wisp, he of the bog light, they will tell you the tale much as I have set it down here.

IT WAS an evening of deep cloudiness, and a light mist was falling when I arrived at the home of Sean McManus near the edge of Conneman's Bog. Sean was in bed with a raging fever, and I was to wait outside the house for Doctor O'Connor who was caring for the lad. It was while I was waiting that the banshee started her wailing.

The wail started low, and at first I thought it was but the wind rising. But as the mournful sound rose higher, I knew it for

what it was. Up and down it went, moaning low and howling high, as though a thousand devils were bewailing their banishment from Paradise.

I have no strength of heart for such sorrowful sounds, so I made for the house where the presence of others would give me comfort. Doctor O'Connor was seated beside the bed in Sean's room watching his patient, with Annie McManus, Sean's mother, standing behind him.

Sean, a bright, brawny lad, had worn himself out working hard as he was in the government at Dublin, and he had returned to his mother's home for rest and comfort. He had been home but three days when the fever struck him. Now he was rolling and tossing on the bed, his feverish face twisted as though beset by the devils of darkness intent on taking his soul. Annie, though dry-eyed, had the look of a mother fearful of losing her son.

"You know yourself, Doctor," she was saying as I entered the room, "that when the banshee wails it means the death of some mortal. And Sean is near to his end."

"Enough of those old wives' tales," Doctor O'Connor interrupted. "You should know better than to believe such superstitions, Annie McManus. Sean is not near his end. It's the noise from the bog which is disturbing him more than the sickness. Come morning, and we'll move him to a quieter place."

"Be that as it may, Doctor," Annie replied, "but 'tis myself believe the tale." She moved slowly toward the door. "'Tis a bad night out," she went on. "I'll be making a cup of tea."

IT WOULD be a pity should Sean die, for he was Annie's only child and his death would be a frantic loss to her. Besides, Sean and his mother were well liked in the village and the country about, not only by their mortal friends but also by the little people. For Sean was always ready to help others, myself included, and Annie often put out milk for the leprechauns and honey for the fairies.

Doctor O'Connor gave me a sidelong glance as Annie left the room.

"It's a story many believe even in these days, Patrick," he said, "that the banshee lies quiet in her bog-nest until she smells the near-death approaching. Neither the odorous atmosphere of the bog at night, nor the fragrant breezes from the

meadows during the day disturb her. But let the stench of the near-death float through the air, she will arouse from her lethargy to start a keening and wailing which mortal ears can hardly tolerate."

Which was the truth, though few mortals believed it. I had learned of the banshee from Boree, the leprechaun, for I had never met the woman. Boree, a brave, daring little fellow, roamed the bog at will and knew her. But no one could know her well, he admitted, for she was a dour, unpredictable old witch who made friends with none of the other little people.

And though usually silent, the banshee's wail once started could not be stopped. No mortal dared go near her; for all he knew her keening may be the sounding of his own death knell. And seldom would the other little people enter the bog when the banshee was near, for they were a gentle, kindly folk who shy away from all harshness and violence. They know that death follows in the wake of the keening, and death is the one thing they do not fully understand.

ANNIE returned with the tea, and we sat sipping in silence watching Sean. Sean's restless body would not be stilled, and there was naught we could do for him.

Doctor O'Connor finished his cup and rose to his feet. He started pacing the floor, his worried eyes moving from Sean to me and back again toward Sean.

"It's that hellish banshee causing this with her senseless clamor," he finally burst out. "Her wailing has disturbed the latent devils of the fever in Sean, bringing them to a stronger life. Can you do nothing to stop that bedlam-turned-loose, Patrick? It will be the death of Sean, for he cannot be moved safely now."

Sean's mother looked toward me, worried but silent. But what could I do? Big as I was I feared the banshee, and to go searching for her through the bog at night might be the death of me also.

"How can I stop her yowling, Doctor?" I asked. "It is said she cannot be seen by mortals, and though found her wailing cannot be stopped until death crosses the threshold."

"You are afraid, Patrick," the doctor replied. "Had I but half your influence with the little people, I would go myself. It's a God-given gift you have, laddie, that you can see and talk with the fairies and elves, the leprechauns and others to whom the eyes of ordinary mortals are blind. With your gift, you could surely see the banshee and persuade her to silence her lamentations."

This was the first time Doctor

O'Connor had ever spoken of my ability to see and talk with the little people. But that being as it may, I had no courage to face the banshee on her own boggy ground.

"Or are you really afraid to try, Patrick?" the doctor went on.

Yes, I was afraid. With the keening of the bog spirit ringing in my ears, I was afraid. For though it was said that the wailing of the banshee was only for those who were ill and near death, others had heard the wailing who were stricken down while in the prime of health.

"I don't blame you for not going if you are afraid, Patrick," the doctor said, "but there is no other to send."

I went outside without answering. I could not stomach the doctor's harsh words, nor stand up to the appeal in the eyes of Sean's mother. I was a coward, for I feared the banshee, though I knew I could find and see her even in the darkness of the bog.

The light from Sean's bedroom lighted my way as I wandered toward the bog. Around me I could sense the closeness of the little people, and I was wondering what brought them out in the darkness of the night when I met Boreé.

The leprechaun was seated on a slender limb which crossed my path, and I might have passed him unknowing—for my eyes

were blurred to the sight of the little people with the thought of my fearfulness—had he not put out a hand to stop me.

"And what might be pothering you now, Patrick?" he asked. "Is it that the wailing has addled your brain so ye cannot see your friends? Tell me, Patrick, why do you pass us by?"

The fog cleared from my eyes then, and I saw the fairies and elves and leprechauns gathered as though for a conference. And off to one side, his light covered, stood Willie the Wisp.

"Tell me, Patrick, what might be troubling ye?" Boree went on.

I spared not myself, but told Boree of my cowardice. Boree shook his head when I had finished.

"Ye might find the banshee," he stated. "All ye need is to follow your ears to yon racket. But ye cannot stop her clamor while the scent of the near-death is in the air. For that ye must get rid of her."

"Get rid of her?" I asked. "How can one like me get rid of her who cannot be killed? Answer me that, Boree, and I'll find the courage to face her though it be the death of me."

"'Tis true ye cannot kill her," Boree replied, his round, elfin face now grave sober, "for she is not mortal. But there is a way to stop her yowling, and we are here to see what might be done

about it. And we need you, Patrick. Will ye help us? Will ye agree to do what we ask without reason or *question*?"

It was a difficult problem he was facing me with. If I agreed to help them, I would have to do as Boree said willy-nilly be it for good or bad. But I had much faith in Boree. He was a tricky little old man, always up to troublesome mischief; but he forever knew what he was doing, and never suffered unpleasantness for his pranks.

"'Twill help Sean if we succeed," Boree went on. "There'll be some discomfort for yourself, Patrick. Ye may never look the same after ye've met the banshee. But ye will have experienced somewhat no mortal has suffered before and may never again."

"It might even be the death of ye, Patrick," Willie the Wisp put in.

The death of me? I was dying on my feet, torn between the fear of what Boree might want me to do and the displeasure of the little people should I refuse.

It was the keening of the bog spirit, a moaning lamentation of sorrow and woe, and the appearance of Doctor O'Connor in the door of the house which decided me.

"Do you be going home now, Patrick," the doctor called, though I doubt he could see me in the darkness. "There is naught

we can do for Sean this night. I'll stay here."

I did not reply, but turned to Boree.

"What is it you wish me to do?" I asked.

"Good lad," Boree answered. "Ye will go into the bog till ye find the banshee. Draw her attention to yourself. Ye may have trouble, for she is a disagreeable wench, and will not take pleasure at your coming. Talk with her. Make mortal love to her if need be. Fight with her if ye must. But make her move around all ye can, for while she is active she cannot wail. 'Twill give us time to set a plan in motion which should silence her."

"What are you going to do?" I asked. "If I should stop her wailing, for how long must it be?"

"Who knows?" Boree replied, "for your time means naught to us. Just keep her on the go as long as ye are able. I cannot tell ye what we have in mind, Patrick, but if it turns out as we hope, all will be well."

"Coming, Patrick?" Doctor O'Connor called.

"Do ye not mind him," Boree broke in before I could answer. "Ye must be leaving with no regrets. Willie the Wisp will light your way through the bog."

"But only till we near the lady," Willie the Wisp stated. "I

have not the stomach to talk with nor even look at the old hag."

"Then be off with ye. And don't forget the part ye are to play, Willie-Wisp, or I'll knock the daylights out of ye."

I HEARD no more from Doctor O'Connor. Likely he thought I had returned home. Willie the Wisp danced ahead of me, his flickering light guiding my feet through the muck of the bog. The lamentations of the banshee grew louder as we advanced, and soon Willie the Wisp halted.

"I go no farther," he stated positively. "Follow your ears to the noise, Patrick. You'll find her. Keep her busy as long as you can, for I have far to go and much to do to carry out my part of the program."

With that his light went out, and I was left alone in the darkness.

I almost turned back. The blackness all about me and the lamentations of the banshee addled my brain, until I knew naught of what I should do. Then the wailing ceased, and the fretful voice of the banshee came from the darkness ahead.

"Who is this come to disturb my lamentations?" she asked. "Be ye mortal, turn back lest my cries be for you. Be ye of the little people, go away."

"It is I, Patrick O'Bannon, a

mortal soul," I replied. "I would have a word with you."

"Patrick O'Bannon, what do ye here?" the banshee asked. "I have heard of ye, and I know there is no harm in ye. Step forward and say your say quickly, for I have much to do this night."

I took a few steps forward through the muck, and my eyes were opened to the sight of the banshee.

She was seated on a tuft of moss, a little old woman no bigger than Bowgene's pig, black with the muck of the bog on her, her features grim and haggard as though she was carrying the weight of all the sins of the world.

"It is about Sean McManus," I said. "Sean is ill and near death. Your lamentations keep him from sleeping, and without sleep he cannot get well."

"And what do ye wish me to do about that?" she asked.

"Cease your wailings so Sean can sleep," I replied. My courage was increasing as we talked, for I could see no harm in this little old woman.

SHE started combing her long hair with her thin fingers. Her drear eyes looked up at me, eyes seemingly weary of her place in the existence of the little people.

"Cease my lamentations?" she

asked. "Cease what is the nature within me? Can the sun stop shining? Can a pig refrain from eating? Can ye mortals cease feasting and loving when the mood is upon ye? Since the days of the Tuatha-De-Danann, the gods of the ancient Firbolg, I have mourned when the death of mortals is near. No, Patrick, I cannot cease my lamentations, for it is the nature of me to mourn when the scent of the near-death comes to my nostrils."

"Then can't you go away," I asked, "to some place where you cannot get the scent of the near-death?"

"That I cannot," she replied. "My nature will not allow me to leave."

"Then my errand here was for nothing?" I asked. "You wouldn't—"

"It was, and I won't," she interrupted. "Be ye gone now, Patrick. 'Tis been nice meeting ye, and if ye come again some other time, I shall be pleased to visit and talk with ye. 'Tis few mortals who have the gift. But now I must be about my duties."

A thin wail floated out into the bog. A mewling plaint which rose higher until it sounded like the despairing cry of a soul lost in the black void between Heaven and Hell. Sean would be badly disturbed by that cry, and there seemed no way of stopping it.

Unless I could use mortal force

on the banshee. Which could be the worse for me if the force would not affect her. But I could only try. Scooping up a gob of mud, I threw it square into her mouth.

The wail stopped as though blocked by choking fingers. The banshee spat out the mud, and I feared of what might happen to myself. But I had to go on now that I had started. I leaped toward the banshee, hoping I might get my arms about her small body and hold her.

She sprang nimbly up and to one side as I leaped, giving me a slight push as I passed her. Though she barely touched me, I staggered and fell headlong into the bog.

I lay still for the moment, smeared with muck and soaked by water. Then I lumped to my feet and faced her, for I knew naught of what she might do and I feared her anger. She stood, a frightful, worrisome figure, but a few feet away.

"Cease, Patrick, ye spalpeen," she cried. "Cease while ye are still able to keep to your feet. This is no place for mortal man to die."

But I could not cease, though it be the death of me. I had given my word to Boree that I would do all I could to silence the banshee, and that word drove me on.

"I will not cease," I shouted,

"until I've stopped your yowling."

"Then on your own head be it."

I MOVED toward her, stooping low with my arms wide to grasp her. But it was like trying to catch and hold an armful of the evening breeze. Around and around in the muck we went, with myself slipping and sliding like a pig on ice in my efforts to reach her, she capering around light as a feather and keeping away from my reaching arms. How long this lasted I know not, but her wailings had ceased and there was no noise except for my muddlings in the muck and water. Finally I stopped, for I had no more breath left in me.

The banshee seemed to float in the air before me. My sight was so sullied I could but see her form.

"'Tis enough now, Patrick, she cried. "Ye have no one but yourself to blame for what will befall ye."

With that she sprang toward me, and gave me a clout on the side of the head which knocked me down.

"Ye have given me quite a time," she went on as I lay there. "Now go ye home and leave me be to my wailings."

Tired, dizzy, and flat in the muck I watched her. She glanced

around, and an air of puzzlement came to her face. Then she smiled grimly and gave a cackling laugh.

"Ye had me distracted for the moment, Patrick," she said, "but I have it now. It pains me to leave ye, laddie, for I would know more of a fine boy like you." A moan as of sadness and sorrow came from her lips as she moved away through the bog. A haunting moan, the sound of which I will never forget.

I clambered to my feet. My knees were weak. I was covered with slime and mire. I didn't know where I was, and I didn't care. My mind was set on but one thing; I had to follow the banshee; must stop her wailing. Of Boree and the other little people I gave but scant thought. I may have failed so far, but I had done the best I could and would carry on.

The banshee was moving toward a glimmer of light which seemed far away in the darkness. That would be the light from the window in Sean's bedroom, for there was no other house could be seen from the bog.

In the black darkness I could see nothing but the light and the small form of the banshee bobbing ahead of me; could feel nothing but my wetness and weariness, and the yearning to be home and in bed; could hear nothing but the slight moaning of the banshee as she moved

ahead, straight toward the light.

The light seemed far away; seemed to move farther away as we advanced. I knew that this was not so, but was the blurring of the sight in my bewildered brain.

The banshee soon became strangely silent, and I wondered if the scent of the near-death had left the air; if Sean had died while we were scrabbling in the bog.

After what seemed hours to my fuddled brain, the light ahead drew nearer. We should soon be at the house.

OF THE unnatural silence of the banshee, I gave but little thought. She would halt near the edge of the bog, as near to the window as she could get, and I would again try to silence her if she started her wailing.

Then, with an unexpected suddenness, the light went out.

The banshee stopped. But only for a moment. With a mewling cry she ran ahead for a few yards and stopped again. I caught up with her, keeping far to one side. The end of the bog was in sight, and she stood staring wildly toward a broad, open meadow with no sign of house or light on any side. She turned toward me, a furious light in her eyes.

"Ye omadhaun," she shrieked. "This is some trick of yours,

Patrick O'Bannon. Some mortal trick ye have played on me, to toll me away to some place I know not. 'Tis another clout I'll be giving ye for that."

She leaped toward me, but in her fury she missed as I dodged to one side. I waited not for her rage was evident, but ran up into the meadow where she dare not follow. But her screaming voice blared in my ears.

"'Tis a smart lad ye think ye are," she shouted. "Ye have the best of me now, Patrick O'Bannon, but it will be a pleasure to me when I have the good fortune to wail at your own near-death."

I ignored her ranting and went on. Beyond the meadow lay a field of flax, and I knew where I was. And there I found Boree and Willie the Wisp waiting.

"Are ye all right, Patrick?" Willie the Wisp asked. "That old harridan didn't hurt you?"

"I'm all right," I replied, "but I'm fair tired."

"Ye should be," Boree said. "'Twas a good job ye done, Patrick, and I'm proud of ye. Ye bothered the old witch long enough to get her flustered, and when Willie showed his light at the far end of the bog, she took it for the light from Sean's bedroom and followed it. Which I

thought she might. But I was sore afraid the old woman would do ye harm."

"She tried to, I answered as we moved toward Annie McManus' home, "but I'm still alive. But tell me, Boree. How did you put out the light in Sean's window so the banshee could not see it? There was but one light to be seen from the bog."

"We didn't put it out," Boree replied. "We just gathered the little people in front of the window and blocked off the light, while Willie tolled the old witch to the far end of the bog and up the wet swale to the bog above Killaty. She won't find her way back here till Sean is well, I'll see to that."

THE light was shining from Sean's bedroom window and all the little people had disappeared, when we reached Annie McManus' home. I went to the door and called Doctor O'Connor. He gave me but one glance.

"Sean is now sleeping, and I believe he will get well," the doctor said. "I'll not ask you how you done it, Patrick, but we are thankful that you have returned safely. Get you home now, bathe and take some rest. We can talk later."