

U N K N O W N W O R L D S

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THE REFUGEES

By Frank Belknap Long

● They didn't have passports into the peaceful and bomb-free United States. They didn't need them—and could prove it in a vigorous sort of way—

Illustrated by M. Isip

PROLOGUE

"Michael," the girl called. "Michael Harragan."

A shadow fell on the wet pavement and One-eared Harragan appeared in the doorway of his tavern, his pale blue eyes mother-mournful. The air reeked of beer and sauerkraut.

"And what would you be wanting of me at this hour, Miss Kelly?" he asked.

"Michael, they've come. The house is entirely full of them, whispering together. Refugees, Michael—from the Old Country. And me not knowing what to say or think."

Into One-eared Harragan's eyes came a look of resignation. "Aye, aye, it was to be expected," he muttered.

"Michael, I have need of you. Does the tavern mean more to you than I? Sure, you knew myself when I was a wee bratling, as red as a lobster."

"Aye, that I did, Miss Kelly. But I have my own beautiful business now, and the old ways—"

"Michael!"

"This is America, Miss Kelly. I am not a servant now."

"Michael, you were never a servant. You ought to know that."

"But did you not hear me say I am a busy man?"

"So is the Devil, Mike Harragan. Is a tavern beautiful? Is spreading drunkenness beautiful?"

One-eared Harragan flushed scarlet and glanced back into the tavern. "It is no fault of mine if men abuse the good things, Miss Kelly."

"You knew they were coming Michael. Why didn't you answer my note?"

"Sure, and why should I have done that? Me that has always loved them. Sure, it would be a sin."

"To call them away? Oh, Michael, you must. I'll lose Roger if you don't. He cannot abide the whisperings."

"Miss Kelly, why do you want to wed a man like that? It's stony-hearted he is."

Miss Kelly's eyes misted. "He is not Irish,

Michael. You and I know it was the bombings brought them. They could not abide the horrible, horrible bombings. But sure, in America they could be happy anywhere."

"Not anywhere, Miss Kelly. Only with us of the Old Country with eyes to see and hearts to feel. It's a good Irish home they'll be needing."

"But you can see them, Michael. All the others could only hear them, scurrying around the eaves of the big house. They love you, Michael. You can make them sing and dance."

"Aye, that I can."

"Come home with me, Michael. Call them away. I'll lose Roger if you don't."

When Roger Prindle ascended the stoop of the Kelly mansion smoke was swirling from the bowl of his pipe and his face was darker than a ripe thundercloud.

Helen Kelly was the sweetest girl in the world, but there was a strain of mysticism in her nature which disturbed and frightened him. She just didn't realize that it wasn't normal for a young, sensitive girl to live all alone in a memory-haunted house.

Since the death of her father the house had become a mausoleum. The house had acquired a moldy, sepulchral taint. Massive oak chairs and Victorian sofas and heavy hangings all combined to create an atmosphere of mustiness and decay.

Even worse were the whisperings. Roger Prindle didn't believe in the supernatural, but he had to admit that the whisperings were damned queer. Everywhere in the big house his ears were assailed by mysterious, tiny whisperings.

Up and down the great central stairway, behind the draperies in the halls, in the guest room on the third floor, and even down in the cellar. Whisperings! Following him wherever he went, chilling him to the core of his being.

It was pretty late to be returning to the big



house, but he had reached the end of his tether. Up on Cape Cod he owned a pleasant little cottage, fanned by sea breezes, brightened by copper ware and marine paintings—a paradise for two.

He felt confident that the whisperings would not follow them there. His only problem was to get her to see it his way. The matter would have to be thrashed out between them tonight.

He had very foolishly departed at ten without delivering an ultimatum. She had her heart set on remaining in the big house, and a dread of hurting her had restrained him. At the last moment he had become so panicky that he had left without a word to her about it.

But now he was fortified by three whiskey sodas and a determination which could not be overthrown. He'd take her by the shoulders and speak his mind freely.

"Darling, we're getting married and leaving

Elfland on the eight fifteen. We're putting all these cobwebs behind us, you hear?"

It disturbed him to discover that she had left the door unlatched. Living without servants in the big house was risky enough, neglecting to lock the front door inexcusable.

He had a scalp-tingly feeling as he passed into the darkened entrance hall, as though he were being followed. He always had that feeling in the big house. It was one of the penalties of falling in love with a Killeany colleen.

He wasn't being followed, of course. It was all nonsense. A fellow like him, a certified public accountant, had too firm a grip on reality to believe in anything he couldn't see and touch.

The darkness was very dense in the entrance hall. He had foolishly closed the front door behind him, shutting out the street light. Grop-

ingly he advanced toward the central staircase, feeling his way to keep from bumping into tables, urns and statuary.

He was still advancing when a tiny, tinkling voice whispered close to his ear. "You are taller than you think, Roger Prindle."

There was an instant of silence and then from all sides came a strident hum. "He is taller than he thinks. He is taller than he dreams."

Roger Prindle turned pale. He ceased to advance in the darkness, ceased to breathe. Something bad had grown worse, had become suddenly a menace to his sanity. For the first time the whisperings had coalesced into actual speech. It was as though a gulf had abruptly opened beneath his feet.

He didn't realize how tall he had become until his head bumped against the ceiling. He nearly screamed when he discovered that he was at least thirty feet tall.

He was up above the banisters looking down. At least, his head was. And the long length of himself beneath was indisputably growing. He could see most of himself dimly because it wasn't so dark up where his head was. There was a light halfway down the hall at the top of the staircase.

He could see as far down as his knees, although not very clearly. His feet were still planted firmly on the rug at the base of the stairs.

"It would be a sin if he stopped growing. He isn't nearly tall enough."

"Don't you want to stoop low, Roger Prindle? Don't you want to grow out over the ceiling?"

"He is taller than he thinks. He is taller than he dreams," came a mocking chorus of tiny voices close to his ears.

His shoulders were spreading out over the ceiling now. Bent nearly double, he stared down in consternation at his swollen knees. Obscurely visible beneath his expanding waistline were great, knobby pads of flesh supported by ebon pillars which rose in jerks toward the top of the stairs.

Horror and sick revulsion came into him as he stared. It was all he could do to keep his back from breaking. He had to stoop lower and lower and the lower he stooped the more monstrously deformed his body became.

Then all at once he began to shrink. His shoulders ceased to press upon the ceiling and his legs shortened beneath him.

"You are smaller than you think, Roger Prindle," whispered the tinkling voice.

"He is smaller than he thinks. He is smaller than he dreams," came the chorus from above.

Unbelievably rapid was Prindle's diminishment. He shriveled in spurts, like a child's punctured balloon. Now his head was lower than the staircase, now six inches from the floor.

"How small would you *like* to get, Roger Prindle?" asked the tinkling voice.

"Don't make Roger Prindle *too* small. A mouse will eat him. A mouse will eat poor Roger Prindle up."

"Oh, crunchy crunch, how delightful!"

"You don't mean that, blue spriteling. When you grow up you'll have nothing but compassion for poor, suffering mortals."

"You've pampered and spoiled him, Mother Ululee. He should be turned over and spanked."

The darkness was dissolving now. A faint, spectral radiance was creeping into the house. Roger Prindle stared up at the dimly glowing staircase, and his brain spun.

It wasn't a staircase any longer. It was a vast, glimmering mountain with mile-wide ledges traversing its sloping face.

Prindle clapped his hands to his ears and swayed dizzily. The voices were thunderous now—deafening.

"You don't want to be as small as that, Roger Prindle. You're less than one inch tall!"

"He doesn't want to be as small as that. He's smaller than he thinks. He's smaller than he dreams."

"There's no reason for it. He could be as big and strong as King O'Lochlainn."

"But Roger Prindle is *not* kingly, Anululu. Shining bright were my eyes when O'Lochlainn came through the Norman spears. A man o' men was he, with red hair on his chest."

"You do not think that Roger Prindle could be a fine, strong man?"

"I did not say that, Mother Ululee. He is stronger than he thinks. He is larger than he dreams."

Prindle glanced down and saw the floor descending. It fell away and ran out from under him like a dissolving plain. He grew by leaps and bounds. Now he was two feet tall, now four, and then—

He was a normal-sized man again. He stood trembling at the foot of the staircase, his throat as dry as death. The voices had ceased to reverberate thunderously from caverns measureless to man.

"Did you know, Raspit, that there is evil in Roger Prindle's mind?"

"There is evil in the minds of all mortals, Kinnipigi. Think of the horrible bombings!"

"I did not mean to imply that Roger Prindle was as bad as all that. He is a good, kind gentleman. But his thoughts are very unruly at times."

"I think I know what you mean, Kinnipigi. The call of the flesh. At times Roger Prindle is more of a satyr than he dreams."

"He is more of a satyr than he thinks. He is more of a satyr than he dreams."

There was something wrong with Roger Prindle's hands. They felt queer, scratchy. He had

been rubbing them together unconsciously, as was his wont when anxiety beset him. Now he suddenly stopped doing that. His teeth came together with a little click.

His hands—his hands felt very queer. They seemed to be all bristly and damp. He was afraid to raise them and look at them. Prindle wasn't a physical coward, but there were some things—

"Mama Ululee, Roger Prindle looks just like a goat," shrilled the tiniest of voicelings. "Mama Ululee, does he eat tin cans, and *everything*?"

"Roger Prindle, look at yourself now. You are a satyr, and you should be ashamed."

Prindle stared down at himself. Coarse, red hair covered him from his waist to his shining—*hoofs*. His ankles were shaggy and his toenails had coalesced into horny black sheaths which clattered on the floor as he bounded backward in sick revulsion.

"Roger Prindle, you should be ashamed. You're nothing but a coarse, shaggy satyr. You're not deceiving anybody, Roger Prindle. Why don't you be honest with yourself? What do you dream about most? How many times have you crouched in the bracken, and watched the white nymphs bathing?"

"You mean, in his dreams, Kinnipigi?"

"Of course."

"You are being unfair to Roger Prindle. He is not responsible for his dreams. Did you ever know a poor, weak mortal who did not hearken to the call of the flesh in his dreams?"

"I have, Kinnipigi. In 1037 there was an idiot who—"

"There, you see."

"But Roger Prindle is not dreaming now. There never was a mortal so awake and shameless. Just look at his eyes!"

Prindle's eyes were glistening. He couldn't help it. Coming down the central staircase was the whitest, most beautiful nymph he had ever seen. Her expression was so lascivious that it sickened him, and yet he couldn't tear his gaze from her face.

"What strong, hairy hands you have, Roger Prindle. King O'Lochlainn was scarcely more of a man."

"He is more tuppish than he thinks. He is more tuppish than he dreams."

In all his life Roger Prindle had never felt so primitive, so masterful. The nymph had flashed him a challenging glance and was racing back up the staircase, her raven-dark tresses streaming out behind her like a wind-wafted cloak.

There was nothing modest about her; quite the contrary. She was the exact opposite of everything he would have wanted in a wife. She was as brazen as a harridan, and yet—

Up the stairs Roger Prindle clattered in furious pursuit, his hairy arms outthrust.

"Do you think Roger Prindle will catch her, Mama Ululee?"

"You may be sure he'll not be forever trying, blue spriteling. Just look at him go."

"He'll not be forever trying. He's more fleet-footed than he dreams."

"Oh, look, Mama Ululee. He's caught her. He's caught her, oh."

"By her long, black hair! Roger Prindle, you're a lucky man. We congratulate you, and wish you every happiness."

"No, no, no, he mustn't do that! He's dragging her downstairs by the hair. Doesn't he realize how disgraceful that looks?"

Roger Prindle didn't realize. His senses were reeling now. He had only the vaguest conception of what he was doing. He was grasping the nymph's long, dark tresses, and tugging and she seemed to be floating on her back in the air.

He was halfway down the stairs when a ghastly thing happened. The nymph's beautiful, pale face shriveled and darkened and rotted away before his very eyes. The horror impinged on all his senses simultaneously.

While an odor of putrefaction assailed his nostrils her hair hissed like a nest of snakes, and dried out between his fingers. He was no longer grasping silken tresses but a stringy mass of cobwebs. He was no longer staring at a beautiful white nymph with curvate limbs, but a gleaming skeleton with maggoty eye sockets which writhed and twisted gruesomely in the dim light.

He recoiled shrieking. His hoofs flew out from under him and he went hurtling backward, his hairy arms outflung.

"Mother Ululee, he'll break his neck! He'll fracture his spine!"

"Raspit, Raspit, throw a spell. Quickly, or he'll be hurt."

A dull concussion shook the staircase as Roger Prindle crashed to the floor on his spine, and rolled over groaning.

"Oh, I'm sorry, Mother Ululee. I was a second too late."

"You always are, Raspit."

"He isn't hurt badly, Mother Ululee. See, he's trying to get up."

"Why, so he is, so he is. He's a good, kind gentleman again. His natural self!"

Bruised and shaken, Roger Prindle got swaying to his feet. His head seemed to be bursting. He couldn't stand any more of this. He was going mad. His head was bursting, and—

"I'm sorry you fell, Roger Prindle," shrilled the tinkling voice. "If I wasn't so small, I'd bend over and let you kick me upstairs. It's just that—well, nobody has paid any attention to us, and we've

become very morbid. We were miserable on the big ship, and lonely since we've been here."

"We're lonelier than he thinks. We're lonelier than he dreams."

"We had to let off steam, Prindle. We were all pent up inside. We are the Kelly's own little people. Their very, very own. We stood it as long as we could before we trooped into the big ship, and hid ourselves away. We knew that Miss Kelly would give us a home. She was six when she sailed away, and big for her age, and sad we were to see her go. But we knew she would always be loving us, and when the bombings began we thought of her."

Roger Prindle's face was twitching. "I can't see you," he gasped. "Where are you?"

"I'm standing right here in your left ear, Roger Prindle. And very hot and tired I am, too. Your ear is all choked with dust right back to the wall at the end of it."

Prindle turned pale. He could feel it now. Unmistakably something was moving about just inside his left ear, tickling him. Terrified, he crooked his finger and jabbed at the auricle, cold sweat breaking out all over him.

"Take care, Roger Prindle," the voice shrilled. "You'll crush me if you probe. Just raise your palm, if you want to see me."

Tremulously Prindle obeyed. The instant he did so, something ticklish and flylike alighted on his palm and ran swiftly across it.

"Careful now, Prindle," it shrilled. "Don't jar me. Lower your palm slowly and keep it raised. There, that's it. Easy does it."

An instant later Prindle's handsome, mobile face, with its melancholy eyes and expressive mouth stiffened to a rigidly staring mask.

The troll was sitting cross-legged in the center of his palm staring up at him. A tiny, mottled troll the color of an October salamander, its webbed hands locked on its knees.

"Now don't be alarmed, Prindle," it said. "You wouldn't be seeing me if I didn't like you. It's part Irish you are, or I wouldn't be sitting here talking to you."

"My great grandmother on my mother's side was Irish," stammered Prindle. "So *that's* why—"

"Of course that's why," said the troll, as though aware of his thoughts. "We knew you could not be angry with us, Roger Prindle. There never was an Irishman who did not love the trolls. We will all die when one such Irishman is born."

"So that's why you played all those pranks on me?"

"Roger Prindle, don't let her send us away. We came to this big, new country to be with the last of our Kellys. The bombings were horrible, but more horrible would be leaving her to go to that

tavern. It's not that we don't love Michael Harragan. A fine man he is, but he is not a Kelly."

Prindle wiped sweat from his forehead. "You gave me the worst half hour I ever experienced," he muttered. "Making me a giant and a midget, and bringing out all the dark, hidden thoughts in the depths of my mind."

"We ensorcelled you because we liked you, Roger Prindle. It does a mortal no harm to get a good scare now and then. And you ought to walk in the daylight with your hidden self more often."

Roger Prindle stood up. He closed his palm slowly.

"I'm holding you captive until she gets back here," he said. "I'm not taking any more chances with you. I've a suspicion you're the ringleader, and I've heard that a troll can't play around with magic when he's locked up in the dark."

He smiled wryly, ignoring a furious squirming inside his hand.

"Listen, all of you," he said. "I'm taking her away with me tomorrow. We're leaving this big, gloomy house. We're going to live by the sea, and there won't be any dark corners for trolls to hide in on a wind-swept bluff in Massachusetts. Nothing but sun and wind and water—and plenty of headaches for any troll who thinks he can buck an environment like that."

Instantly there was a despairing murmur all about him. "He's taking her away. Roger Prindle is crueller than he thinks. He is crueller than he dreams."

"A fine bunch of hoodlums! Listen, all of you. If I take you all along, will you promise to behave and lay off the spell-casting monkey business? Will you help me trim the sails of my sloop, and keep the brass polished, and collect sandworms for me so that I can go fishing now and then?"

"Oh, yes, yes, yes, yes. Roger Prindle, you are more of an Irishman than you think. You are more of an Irishman than you dream."

Roger Prindle sighed and fumbled in his pocket for his pipe. It was true, of course. No man on Earth could escape from his heritage or evade the obligations of his birth.

Smoke was swirling from the bowl of Roger Prindle's pipe again when Helen Kelly opened the front door and stood as though entranced, a breeze from the street ruffling her bobbed, auburn hair. Beside her stood Michael Harragan, wonder and gratification in his gaze.

"Bless my soul, Miss Kelly, just look at that. It's entirely visible they are to him, or he wouldn't be standing there so calm and contentedlike. Not with them perched all over him and whispering like a swarm of Connemara bees.