

Anna Sikorska

The Tourists

It was not good. It was bad, almost tragic.

King Harold, called Venerable for some time now, trotted across the throne room, murmuring curses under his breath. Although he tried to walk in a dignified manner, but as he was already old, it always ended up with tripping.

Something occurred to him. He stopped and stared at the messenger.

"Did you check in the caves? Maybe the tide surprised them?" he asked hopefully.

"Yes, Your Majesty, we checked. In the caves, on the mountain, in the ravines, we scour the forests, we watch the sea," the soldier replied.

He seemed tired of the ruler's questions. The ruler, whom everyone valued and loved for his gentleness and for keeping taxes low, but who was also a slightly grumpy old man. Some said he should abdicate to his son, but the prince had left long ago to gain knowledge and experience in the world and dreamed not to return to the small shabby kingdom of Ellan. Maybe his children would want to take over after the death of their grandfather? The natives hoped it would happen. They did not want the reign of any foreign king, and no foreign king was interested in an island without resources inhabited by spoiled subjects who did not like paying taxes. As a last resort, the locals would go without a king, or choose a new one, but it seemed to them somehow indecent.

The kingdom of Ellan was small, very small, about fifteen by thirty miles, with several hills and one mountain, many glens and a breathtaking coastline. People worked on farms and in crafts, and many also caught fish, oysters and shrimps. Life was simple and boring. For ages it had not bother anyone, but the world began to change, more and more news from outside reached the island and

the more courageous people were going abroad to experience the miracles described in the papers. Often they did not come back, and if they did, they would praise what they saw there. In order for the island not to be left behind, the king began to import goods that he could not produce on the spot, or resources he did not have. However, it soon turned out that the kingdom really has nothing to pay with for these luxuries. King's advisers gathered and deliberated for many days. It was not easy. The island had no surplus of resources. A bit of stone, forests, tasty lamb, or seafood was not enough to pay for carriages, gas for lamps, expensive marbles, watches, agricultural machines or small beautiful silver and gold eggs.

On the fourth day of the meeting, a messenger from the neighboring kingdom came to the island to remind about the payment for the last delivery of machine parts. The day was extremely sunny and the sea calm. The man got out of the boat and stood speechless.

"It's so beautiful!" he exclaimed. "People would pay to live here!"

That immediately aroused suspicion about the state of his mind, because a large part of the population would pay for the opportunity to get out of here if only they could afford it, and they could not understand how someone could want to live on this piece of rock with winds and flooding rains over half a year.

However, there were those among royal advisers who were sufficiently anticipating or desperate to consider this idea. More representative places were cleared up. The villagers were encouraged to cram cows and sheep, and in this way they found buildings for accommodation for the newcomers. More paths were trampled in the glens and hills, even one around the island. The local fairies and other magical beings were asked to leave the strangers alone. Painters were paid to capture the beauty of the kingdom on canvas, and bards to make ballads. Eventually, daily ferry crossings were organized and the deputies sent to the world to announce to everyone that the island is open to tourists. Needless to say, the economy barely lived after all these preparations, the royal treasury was empty, even the treasury of the dragon was significantly robbed.

Dragon. Well, dragon. The dragon did not fit well into the idyllic nature of the product. It seemed old and lazy, but it could have his humors. Then it became unpredictable. It was not dangerous, it was never dangerous, but it could seem dangerous to the strangers and ruin the business. So it was swept under the rug, that is, the entrance and all traces leading to his cave were masked, and the beast was pretended not to exist. It was even given sheep so it would not have to go hunting.

The idea was catching slowly. It started with a few daredevils who crossed the sea to spend a few days on a boring but beautiful island. The natives presented themselves from the best angle – kind, helpful, desperate to improve their situation. The magical creatures remained in their nooks and watched what would come of it. The dragon was snoring in the cave, occasionally waking up and gnawing the sheep, which was carefully tied up by the shepherds at the entrance.

Tourists came, then went, and then there was silence. And then the invasion began. The whole summer and fall people were resting on a boring island, admiring the landscape, wandering along the coast, climbing up the mountain, bribing fishermen to take them to the sea, from which they could admire high cliffs, dolphins, seals and whales, praising the crisp rural air, causing disbelief, but also the satisfaction of the locals. Everything went well until now.

Four tourists, parents with teenage sons, went missing. They went on a horseback ride in the morning and did not return to the quarters before dark. The next day, their host began to worry and sent a message to the king. Search began. No trace of the family or their horses was found. The island was not big, but the guard did not have enough officers to conduct a proper search. The king sent a message to every major estate, so that the inhabitants of the kingdom would help in this task secretly, and so suddenly the number of walkers and equestrians increased significantly.

The ruler was losing his senses. What if they fell off the cliff and

drowned? He said so many times that the barriers were needed, but there were never enough people to mount them. There was always something more important to do. If it goes on like this, he will have to hire foreigners. No, wait, if it will go on like this and the tourists will not get found, or worse, they will be found dead, this whole business will go to hell and the island will return to the squeamish agricultural reality. If it happened in a year, or two, when they already made a name for themselves... but no! It must have happened now that they were still on the verge of bankruptcy.

The king sighed. If only the vanished were mere merchants, and not a family of a wealthy margrave from a mighty country... Harold sat down on the throne, dropped his head and took a nap.

He was awakened by the movement at the door. Two fairies tried to get into the throne room, and the guards tried to stop them. The king laughed against his will. Small bastards were practically impossible to catch, even though the soldiers tried as best they could. Finally, one of the fairies slipped between the guard's legs and rode on the polished floor to the throne itself. There he bowed and announced:

"We found them!"

All the present – advisers as well as the guards at the door – froze. The second fairy walked quietly, with dignity, to the king and nodded.

"Good morning, king," she began, pushing the smaller individual away. "I am Vorana, and this is my son Aldyn. We act on behalf of the Little People. We have news for you. Valuable news."

"Good morning," replied the ruler, who knew that it was better to be polite to small people. "What kind of news?"

"Of value to you."

He understood at once that he would learn nothing more, unless he paid.

"How much value do you think? And what do they concern?"

The fairy drew her lips. She thought about it.

"I can tell you so much for free, king, that they concern your tourists," she

said graciously.

"Ah, yes," he remarked. "Your son has already told us that you found them. Will you tell me where they are? And are they still alive?"

Not a pleasant thought dawned in the head of the ruler. What if the fairies had an ill-placed interest in kidnapping tourists? Something will have to be done for the future.

"They lived when we last saw them. And dare I add that they are safe and even have fun."

The whole hall breathed a sigh of relief. Some of the counselors began to whisper among themselves. The king silenced them with a gesture. He focused his attention on the fairy.

"Would you like to show me where they are?" he nodded toward the large map hung on the wall.

The little woman came up to the big picture and watched it for a moment, then shook her head and her black curls swirled.

"No. I do not know what it is, but it is flat. And they are not on flat."

Well, the fairies did not know the concept of a two-dimensional map. Maybe if a more realistic model was created?

Later, later, the next thing to do in the future, if we ever have to cooperate with the Little People, the King thought.

"In that case, would you like to take us there?" he asked.

Vorana pretended to think again.

"All in all we could," she said hesitantly, "but nothing for free."

She looked hard at the king. He sighed.

"What do you want?"

"We want to have our share in this tourist madness. And we want them to leave our bridge alone. Children can not even have fun."

Harold refrained from commenting on the fairy children's fun activities, such as shooting arrows at people, fortunately with not entirely material shots, and consequently causing only bruises. He thought for a moment. Maybe it was

a good idea. Maybe something could be won. He nodded to the advisers who immediately gathered around him. They whispered among themselves.

"Dear Vorana," began the minister responsible for the roads. "Tourists have already learned about your bridge. Even if we forbid them to visit it, some of them will ignore the restriction, and this will also affect your image badly."

"I understand. Find a way."

More whispers. Finally, the counselors withdrew from the king, and he turned to the fairy.

"We have a few ideas. We can move the bridge. Or surround it with a fence. Or," he smiled deceitfully, "we can build a new one right on the new road and pretend it's the original one."

Vorana thought for a moment, then quickly nodded.

"A new bridge! I like it! Provided that all that tourists leave there will be ours."

"Well," the king agreed. "What about the tourist business, what share do you see in it for yourselves?"

"We, together with other magical beings, have a plan to present our folklore and sell products we create."

The ruler looked at her for a long time.

"You can not stop us anyway," she added with something like a malicious grimace. "In this way you will save us from hiding and yourselves from searching. But do not count on taxes, we have our own costs."

The King sighed heavily. He knew that he must agree to this arrangement, and quickly, because it was not known what would happen to the lost tourists.

"That's right," he murmured. "But you must obey the law and not hurt tourists."

The fairy smiled broadly, showing small sharp teeth.

"Of course, king!"

Vorana stayed in the palace, working with the king and his advisers to word out a treaty that included magical beings in the tourist offer of the Ellan

kingdom, and a small squad with a guard commander headed towards the whereabouts of the missing aristocrats.

"Are you sure it's here?" a soldier asked Aldyn as they stopped at the entrance to the dragon's cavern. The tied sheep looked at them with resigned eyes.

"Of course," said the fairy.

The guard commander sighed and nodded to his men to follow him into a fairly wide tunnel. After a few turns, the sounds of stamping and shouts reached them. They broke into gear. After the next two corners, they suddenly stopped.

At the bottom of the cavern a lady sat on the blanket. There was an open picnic basket standing next to her. The food disappeared alternately in the mouth of the lady and mouth of the dragon, who gently took the bite from the woman's hand with its tongue. At the far end of the cave, two twelve-year-old boys looking like twins were chasing three little dragon cubs, yelling and laughing at the same time. The dragons purred and gurgled cheerfully.

The guards stood speechless, peering at the lady, at her children. The woman turned her head and nodded gratefully.

"Welcome, gentlemen. Unfortunately we do not have more victuals, but the delivery should reach us in the evening, along with my husband. He went to the king to legalize the purchase of land around this cavern. You had to miss him on the road," she was babbling. "I still can not believe you were hiding such a treasure! You probably wanted to save Mirelka from meddlesome people while she was taking care of the eggs. Praise, praise! But now you do not have to, and we are lucky, we discovered her first, we negotiated the contract, bought the land and are going to build a great amusement park here!"

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