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### **The Last Footsies**

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# The Last Footsies

by

Wallace E. Briggs

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## CHAPTER 1

Do you believe in fairies? Well! I don't! There are no fairies at the bottom of my garden.

Beyond the closely cut, alternately striped lawn, almost sixty metres away from the house I live in, there is row of five pine trees about ten metres high. Beyond that the ground shelves steeply, down through tangled brambles and undergrowth, down to the crystal clear brook. Just a short distance upstream, looking to the right, the brook tumbles over a series of large

rocks creating miniature rapids. Then the stream widens to about two and half metres as it flows quite rapidly past my garden before it plunges over the next ledge, thirty metres downstream. The sound of falling, bubbling water creates a special kind of music, ever changing throughout the seasons.

Often I sit on the bank side, under the shade of the trees with my back against the rough bark of a pine tree trunk, watching and listening. Sticklebacks and minnows dart in and out of the brook's dappled shadows; croaking frogs and noisy jays make discordant harmonies; arrogant black and white magpies contrast with shy long tailed tits; cheeky finches, some common greens and the

occasional red chested bull finch. They flit from branch to branch through the undergrowth.

A family of kingfishers, who live in a hole in the willow tree that grows on the opposite bank, perch on a favourite bough that overhangs the brook. On the other side of the stream is where the red squirrels live, high in the beech trees. Then, when the light grows dim, come the hedgehogs and foxes, swooping bats and very occasionally, if I keep very, very still and quiet, the badgers may visit the brook for a drink.

There is nothing but grassy fields and the stand of beech trees on the far side of the brook. Meadows stretch to the base of the hills that rise on the horizon and the sun sets

behind them in the evenings.

The bottom of my garden was always my most favourite place in the world, but last summer it became even more precious. It was turned into a treasured retreat. A refuge for a group of threatened creatures.

It was dusk. The hedgehog family had just crept passed my feet, snuffling for worms, when I thought I heard a cry for help. At first I could not tell where the voice had come from. As there was nothing in the garden behind me it had to have come from the brook. I scrambled down the bankside and the cries became louder. They were nearer now and growing more frantic.

“Grab her!” shouted someone.

“Save her!” screamed another.

“Jan, grab a hold!” pleaded a third.

“We can’t reach you! We’re out of control.”

A tiny, bobbing head was swept into view on the current, followed by a small wooden raft riding the rapids. It was made out of tree branches tied together with twine and it was loaded to the gunnels with terrified faces. Cartons and boxes tumbled off the raft and floated by.

I immediately pulled off shoes and socks and splashed into the cold, knee deep water. With cupped hands, I scooped the bobbing head safely onto the bank side. Gently I stopped the raft from careering further down stream and pushed it onto the grassy bank.

Ten tiny faces jumped off the raft and surrounded the spluttering figure I had rescued. It was now coughing up, what seemed like, gallons of brook water.

While they were busy fussing I retrieved their belongings from the stream and then sat down and watched the remarkable scene unfold.

At last the rescued figure appeared to be fully recovered. It had stopped coughing, and the creatures turned their attention to me.

“It saw us,” cried one small, frightened voice.

“We’re done for now,” quaked another.

“It’s all Jan’s fault,” piped a third.

The fourth voice was female and calm.

“What do we do now, Jon?”

“I don’t think it’s going to hurt us,” Jon ventured, “not after it saved Jan.”

I sat perfectly still, entranced, staring over my knees at the strangest creatures I had ever seen. They were less than twenty centimetres high; they had round moonlike faces; they had pale pink skin and were as bald as coots; their ears were pointed like pixies, not that I believe in pixies either; and their large, oval, grey coloured eyes looked so sad; but strangest of all was the fact that they had no bodies, no arms or legs; just two large feet. The most striking impression I had was of eyes and feet. In my own mind I had already christened them, “Footsies”. They manipulated their wet belongings with unbelievably dextrous feet.

They were able to balance on one foot while picking up articles with the other. In order to use both feet together they had to sit on the ground.

“It can’t decide whether to have us boiled or roast,” quailed the smallest Footsie.

I laughed softly. “Don’t be afraid, I’m not going to eat you or harm you in any way. I’d like to help you, if I can.”

Jon, obviously the most senior Footsie, turned to the soft voiced Jen. “Did you hear that? A human offered to help us, after years and years of hounding us to the very edge of extinction.”

The female Footsie, Jen, turned to me her large eyes brimming with tears. “I’m Jen and

this is Jon. This our family and we are the very last surviving clan of J’s. There seems to be no safe place left for us to live out our lives in peace. Everywhere we try to settle humans and their dogs chase us and large metal machines come and dig up our homes.”

“You can stay here,” I offered. “For as long as you like. There are no dogs living here and there are no tractors or excavators anywhere near this garden. I know you won’t be disturbed. But it’ll be getting dark very soon so we had better first think about providing you some shelter for the night.”

Jon corrected me. “You don’t have to worry about that. We only need shelter during the day time. During daylight hours we hole up in

burrows, which we can dig very quickly. Then we line them out with fresh grass or straw to make comfortable beds. We're nocturnal creatures, you see."

That explained their large, owl like eyes; to help them see better in the dark.

Just then I heard mother's call. "Anthoneee!" The Footsies looked worried.

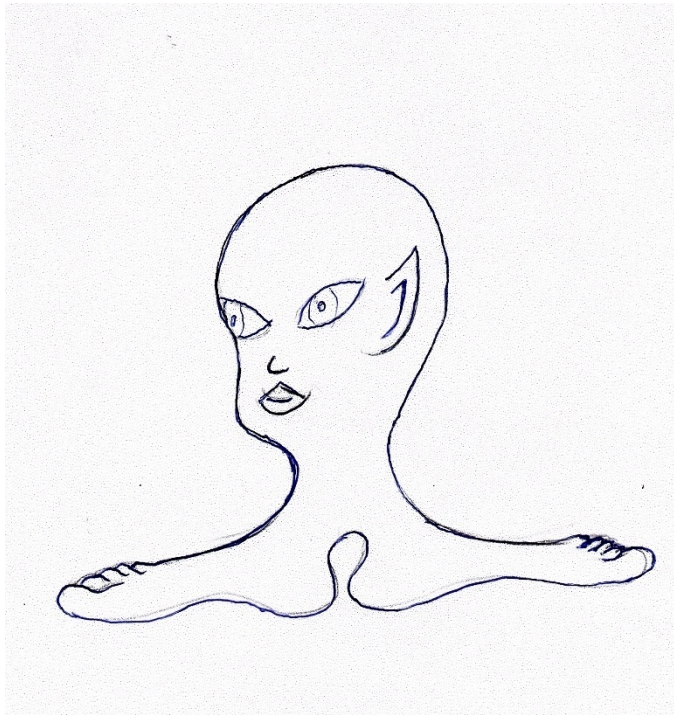
"Don't be scared. Please stay here," I pleaded. "It's just that it's almost my bed time, but I'm sure that if I ask mum nicely she'll let me stay up a while longer."

Jen nodded and I ran up the garden, through the open back door and into the brightly lit kitchen, quite out of breath.

Eventually, mum gave in to my pleading.

"All right! You can have one more hour but only if you put on a jumper to keep you warm. And take your torch. It's starting to get dark."

I ran down the garden path and stopped at the edge of the bank. My torch shone through the undergrowth, but I could see ... nothing. There was not sight nor sound of J's anywhere.



## CHAPTER 2

Disappointed that the Footsies had disappeared I sank to the grass and thumped the ground with my torch. "I only wanted to help," I cried. "Why didn't they wait for me?"

The grass rustled just in front of me and Jon climbed out of a well hidden burrow, almost right under my nose. "We know you won't hurt us Anthony. All the animals around here have told us they know you as their friend.



Without the food you provide during the winter many would die of starvation. The hedgehogs said to thank for the cat food you put out for them. Now! Please switch off your torch. It hurts our eyes and spoils our night vision.”

I quickly obliged, switched off the torch and stretched out on the grass covered bank so that I could talk, face to face, with the J's. They came out of their burrows and gathered around me in a semicircle.

“Where have you come from?” I asked. “I've never even heard of a J, let alone seen one before.”

Jan began to explain. “Many years ago there were many tribes of J's. Our ancestors used to live on the moorlands, near a huge

forest, not far from the sea, many miles south of here.”

Jon continued. “In the olden days J's rarely caught sight of people from one year to the next. Then, as the years passed by, very occasionally, one or two humans would ride by our burrows on horses. Fortunately our ancestors were usually sleeping underground during the day so no one ever saw them.

“Then things began to change. The riders started to carry weapons and came with their dogs. It was the dogs that were the main problem. If they caught sight or smell of a J they chased them relentlessly until they cornered them in their burrows. Not many escaped once the dogs were onto them. But

the riders never saw them because the battles were all underground.”

Jan went on. “It got to the point that there were so many people around it just wasn’t safe to come out, even at night. So the surviving clans got together and decided they had to move to a more remote location. They headed north and eventually spent many happy years undisturbed in, what I think you call, the Pennine Hills. It may be a lot cooler than the southern moorlands but for many hundreds of years there were certainly fewer people around and rarely was there a dog to be seen.”

The J children looked so sad as Jon took over telling the story. “But I suppose it was too good to be true. It couldn’t last forever. Nothing

ever does. Eventually more and more walkers started to use the hill top tracks and they made them into well trodden footpaths and as soon as the paths were established even more people, with their dogs, came to disturb the J’s little paradise.

“So, the J’s had little option but to keep on moving, ever more northward, to find a more remote territory. Now we few that remain have become nomads, wandering the countryside, searching for a fresh homeland where we can stay awhile before the dogs find us again, or the heavy machines come to tear up the ground.”

“You must stay here,” I pleaded. “You’ll be safe in my garden. There won’t be any diggers

to disturb you and there are no dogs around. And I won't tell a living soul that I have seen you."

The smiles on their moon faces spread wide and they did a little Footsie dance, quite like a jig. They danced around me singing a Footsie song, of which I understood not a single word.

When the merriment subsided I offered my chocolate bar around. But they did not much like it. I soon discovered that their diet consisted mainly of seeds, roots, berries, nuts and any fruit they could find on the ground. They couldn't climb trees, you see. They had no hands or arms.

"Dad has a large vegetable garden, on the

other side of the house," I said. Jon shook his head and Jen explained. "J's never take anything that is not ours, not from anyone. We don't need to steal. There's plenty to eat all around us and during the autumn we gather and store enough food to last us through the winter."

"Just like squirrels," I laughed.

"Except that we don't hibernate," added the now happy Jan.

I could not understand how anyone would wish to hurt a Footsie, yet for over thousands of years they have been in hiding, in mortal fear of humans.

They need not be afraid again. Not while they live in my garden. I won't tell you where

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my garden is. I want to be sure that my new friends survive, undisturbed, until they find somewhere even more secure, as far away from humans and their dogs as possible. They are very probably the last clan of Footsies in the world

In the meanwhile, I may not believe in fairies, but then, there are Footsies at the bottom of *my* garden..

The Last Footsies

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support

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