

Rob Chilson
AS IF HE WERE OF FAERIE

Randy Harper knew better than to go hunting fairies with a butterfly net. He didn't, in fact, intend to try to catch them at all. He doubted if he was going to find anything anyway, but if he had hoped to find them, he knew better than to try to catch them.

"The trouble is," he said to his little sister Marcia, "to find fairies, you have to look where they are. You have to be in England or some place like that, with old castles and enchanted forests full of mushroom rings, and things like that. The land of Faerie. Whoever saw a fairy in America?"

Marcia was unhappy with that – she was eight – but nodded slowly.

"Right!" said Randy, approving of her a lot. Marcia might only be eight, but she had been around, and knew what was what. He himself was eleven. "Nobody here sees fairies except those dotty men and loopy women who write books for kids about the kind of fairy you could catch in a butterfly net, only you wouldn't want to. A real butterfly would be more wonderful."

"Yes," said Marcia sadly. "If you want to find fairies, you have to look someplace else."

On the other hand, the place where they were was west-central Missouri, smack dab in the middle of the U.S., in the middle of America. If Randy was to find fairies, it was here he'd have to look.

"Anyway, just 'cause I can't find fairies here, doesn't mean there aren't some in England and places like that," he said consolingly.

Marcia nodded sadly: England might as well be Faerie as far as they were concerned.

"But," he added, "if there are fairies here, I'll know for sure before I come back."

He let the screen door close gently behind him and stepped off the porch. The door faced west, and he gasped in the heat, screwing up his eyes against the blaze of light.

"Randy? Where are you going?" his mother called.

"Just for a walk in the woods," he called back, sounding as casual as possible.

"You be back by dinner time, Randy Harper!" she called reflexively, dismissing him.

Randy waved in acknowledgment, strode sturdily west. He passed the hay barn on the edge of the yard, where his father was at work. Already the first crop of hay was cut. Through the Indian gate, into the weedy yard where old broken-down cars and a couple of old but still workable tractors sat quietly rusting. Past that, opening a gate and carefully closing it again, and he was in the woods.

The outpost of the woods was a huge, sprawling old oak tree in which Randy's father had built a tree house as a boy, long ago. Three planks of the decking and several hand-rails from limb to limb still remained. Randy looked up at it, but he had more serious business on hand now. Marcia was waiting for his discoveries.

It was not the first time he had gone hunting Faerie, or at least fairies. Before, he had gone with Marcia, but they had gotten playing, and picking blackberries, and had found nothing, as was to be expected. This time there would be no distractions.

Turning to the right after passing the tree – the woods road here forked – Randy strode north and west around the north side of the hill that reared up west of the house. The north was the coolest side, as it was a stand of white oaks, straight and tall. Even here, though, it was hot.

Presently Randy paused and wiped sweat off his face. He had never pictured fairies sweating, and looked about uncertainly. He wondered if it might be too late in the year for fairies. He had always thought of them as creatures of the Spring. There was that description quoted at the head of one of his fairy books:

*...His hair all combed and on it set
A wreath with a chapelet,
Or else one of green leaves,
New come from out of the greves,
As if he were of Faerie...*

Of course that wasn't a fey, an elf, or other dweller in Faerie – what were commonly called fairies. It was just a young man, making himself as attractive as possible in the spring. Randy looked around. There were no flowers here except a thistle – quite attractive in a big, coarse way, but not something for putting in your hair. And the leaves around him did not seem fresh. They were August leaves, old, hard, tough, and looked rather dry. It had not rained in two weeks.

Faerie wasn't to be found here, he thought gloomily, cool shade of noble white oaks or not. He bent and scraped at the beggar's lice on his pants legs: flat weed seeds covered with barbed fuzz, that clung tightly to the fabric. Piercing the fabric here and there were the heads of the kind of grass everybody called, simply, sticker-grass. He pulled those out, emptied one shoe of still more seeds, and went grimly on.

Farther around the hill he had an encounter: a squirrel ran out on a limb low above the road and scolded him for trespassing on its property. Randy grinned at it. It was bright red, a fox squirrel, and young. It jerked its tail and barked one word at him over and over: "Scrow-row-row-row! Scwow-wow-wow-wow!"

Randy watched it for a while, barked back at it a couple of times (that made it really angry), and finally went on,

bored with it. The squirrel made him more alert to the life about him, however, and he looked around when the woods opened into an old glade.

The only moving thing he saw was a bird, perched high up in a tree top against the sky. It looked vaguely gray and black, and was medium-sized; bigger than a robin but not so big as a crow. More he couldn't tell about it. It looked at him, absently giving its three-toned cry.

Randy whistled at it.

The bird cocked its head, gave its cry again, looked at him. Randy whistled three clear notes back at it – not the same notes as its cry. It looked at him apparently nonplused, so he whistled at it again. Just as he turned away, he heard an odd liquid gurgle from the tree and realized the bird was trying to imitate his "song."

Again Randy gave his three notes, as clearly and sharply as he could. The bird could not copy him. Again and again they tried, and the bird could only gurgle feebly. Randy wanted to laugh but didn't dare. He had never realized how specialized a singer a bird is, except mocking birds: it only knew one song! Even when he gave it a different and easier song to follow, it couldn't.

Becoming curious, he tried to imitate the bird's own three notes, as best he could remember them. Instantly the bird perked up and corrected his rendition. Randy accepted the correction and tried again, not doing too well. The bird triumphantly corrected him again. Again Randy tried, and again: and though he came closer to the bird's song than the bird had to either of his, he still failed.

He left it triumphantly crowing out its song, and went on along the woods road, rueful.

Farther to the west the hill began to decline and the woods road branched and branched into the woodlot. Heavily trampled ground this; no place for elves, he thought. Randy abandoned the road and began to climb as silently as possible through the leaves and weeds and fallen dead limbs south toward the top of the hill.

The top of the hill had been cleared in a field they called the saddleback, though it wasn't shaped like a saddle. Randy stretched barbed wire and stepped through the fence into this field. It was in hay this year and had been cut once. Soon it would be time to cut it again. His pants were quite covered with weed seeds. He had sprayed them well with insect repellent, or he'd have been covered with ticks and chiggers.

As he was dumping seeds and trash out of his shoes and scraping them off his socks, he looked up and saw the deer.

It was a doe and two fawns, standing on the edge of the field. Deer liked mowed fields, even lawns if there were no dogs in the family, because there was no dead grass among the new. She had caught his motion and was peering now to see what he might be. She was not alarmed enough to call to her fawns, however, and they continued to skip and frisk about, though it was late in the day for them to be so active. They were as lively as acrobats, and Randy kept expecting to see them break their pencil-like legs.

Presently the doe put her head down and tore off bluegrass, raised it to watch him as she chewed and swallowed, occasionally turning her head or stamping her foot to dislodge a biting fly from her sleek sides. The fawns leaped and cavorted – Randy could have sworn he saw one turn a right angle in the air – and drifted closer to him.

Of course the doe would panic and stampede them away long before they got near.

But to Randy's amazement, they were near enough to notice him, sitting motionless on his rock, and to start leaning toward him and sniffing, before she called them away. And even then she did not panic and lead them in a rush back to the safety of the woods, but simply called to them and walked away, like any mother with many things to do that day.

Randy listened to the diminishing crashing sounds of their passage through the leaves for some little time before he stood up.

He was hot, tired, and thirsty, and the nearest water was either back to the north, whence he'd come, in the stream at the foot of the hill, or on to the south, somewhat farther and much less likely to be there. The south creek was a wet-weather stream only. Still, one or two of its springs might still be alive.

Randy crossed the saddleback, starting up a covey of quail that made him jump, paused to climb the favorite climbing tree on the south side but inside the fence. It was actually two oak trees close together. A limb of each had been joined, naturally or artificially, with that of the other, making a bridge between them. Descending, he continued to the fence, stretched wire and slipped through.

This was the south side of the hill, where whippoorwills were most active. The trees were smaller and scrubbier here, and few of them were purebreds like the white oaks on the north side. These were "post" oaks or "scrub" oaks for the most part – mules crossed from dissimilar parents, bearing no acorns.

There was nothing like this place in any of the books about elves or fairies. They mostly lived in noble forests of oaks without any brush between them, like Robin Hood. In Missouri you practically had to carry a corn knife and hack your way. Randy supposed fairies never got ticks, either. Here, where the brush was so high, the repellent on his pants would be of no help.

Sweating heavily, Randy smashed through the tangle, crossed the woods road in its southern branch, and continued down hill. Presently light appeared in the forest gloom to his left ahead: the field south of the house. He would skirt its western end. The brush grew worse where the light reached the ground. Blackberry briars appeared.

Bearing right, Randy stayed in the forest where there was less brush, continuing downhill. Finally he found himself at the low banks of the south creek, which, as he had expected, was dry.

He was hot and tired and exasperated, more than a little ready to cry at the difference between the dream and the reality. No elves would frequent such a place! But he was thirsty, and there was a spring near.

After a moment's thought, looking about to divine his location, he turned upstream, again west, deeper into the forest. Farther up, there was a clearing coming down to the south bank. And there in the stream was one of the best springs.

This little pool, perhaps two buckets of water, say five gallons, looked dark and murky from the drowned dead leaves on its bottom. The water on top was both cool and pleasantly flavored, with maybe a tang of wood. Randy didn't mind.

When he had drunk his fill he brushed sand off his hands and sat looking into the little clearing south of the creek.

It was too little and too rough to plant, and they rarely made hay on it. His father simply mowed it a time or two each year, to improve the soil, kill the weeds, and generally encourage the grass. The cattle frequented it, but were not there now.

As he watched, a fox appeared from the shadows of the weeds at its edge, trotted deliberately out into the clearing, and sat down, looking directly at him.

Randy held his breath.

He had seen foxes before, of course, but not so commonly as deer. This was a gray fox, and she moved like a cat, like a puff of smoke. He had seen one disappear on a flat lawn once, in the dusk; vanished into a shadow. Her ears were pricked, her mouth open in a rather nervous smile, and she kept looking quickly over her shoulder.

Checking to make sure her escape route was open, Randy thought.

At length he was unable to resist making a cheeping noise. Instantly she half rose, her ears flicking nervously, her mouth closing. Then she paused, looked at him, grinned ingratiatingly, and sat down.

Randy slowly stood up, and she wheeled and vanished.

Oh well. He stepped up on the bank into the clearing and started to walk east, downstream. It was getting late, time to get in, and this was the easiest walking, for a short distance. Naturally he looked wistfully at the place where the vixen had disappeared, and was looking when she reappeared.

She pounced out as if upon a mouse, sat grinning nervously at him and glancing over her shoulder. Delighted, Randy paused, pretended to be looking at a tree, dug at a weed in the ground, then he sat down and took off his shoes to dump them again. Fascinated, she approached a little, peering. Randy produced his dull pocket knife and began to scrape weed seeds off his pantlegs.

This time she disappeared less precipitately, but no less to his disappointment. Thus he was even more surprised when she reappeared with her cubs: four of them, as cute as kittens and about as playful. They also watched him for a while, but his scraping was boring. They were very young and all the world was new and wonderful; one human boy had little to offer. They took to tumbling and playing while their mother watched them and him.

Randy was late to dinner.

His father quirked an eyebrow at him as he sat silently eating, seeing in his mind's eye the fawns, the fox cubs, hearing the triumphant bird that had defeated him. "You okay, son?"

"Oh, sure, Dad. Fine."

Marcia waited with suppressed excitement till the meal was over. Almost bursting, she dragged him away from pie and demanded, under the stairs: "Well? Did you find any?"

Randy shook his head in puzzlement. "I don't know. I don't know what to think." He told her briefly of the animals he had seen, and who had seen him.

"Deer and birds and foxes!" Marcia said. "We see them every day, almost. What's magical about them?"

"Not them, ape face," Randy said gently, looking past her. "Not them. But don't you think there must have been something special about me, for them to treat me like that? At least for a little while?"

"Oh," said Marcia, eyes big. She reached and tentatively touched her brother's arm. "Oh."

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First published in TOMORROW SF, 1997

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