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# Opening extract from **Little Grey Men**

Written by  
**B.B (Denys Watkins-Pitchford)**

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# The Little Grey Men

Other books by 'BB'

Down the Bright Stream

# The Little Grey Men

by  
'BB'

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## Introduction

This is a story about the last gnomes in Britain. They are honest-to-goodness gnomes, none of your baby, fairy-book tinsel stuff, and they live by hunting and fishing, like the animals and birds, which is only proper and right.

This story concerns their exploration of the Folly brook, on whose banks they dwell, and of their search for Cloudberry, their long-lost brother, who years ago went up the Folly and never returned. You may not believe in the Little People, but that is because most fairy books portray miniature men and women with ridiculous tinsel wings, doing all sorts of impossible things with flowers and cobwebs. That sort of make-believe is all right for some people, but it won't do for you and me.

If you don't believe in the Little People, I would ask you to make yourself as small as possible (which is horribly difficult) and keep very quiet (which is more difficult still) and watch and wait by the streams and in the woods, as I have done. And suddenly you will understand that the birds and wild animals *are* the Little People! Such a simple fact, and yet we never realized it!

There are water sprites, such as wagtails and kingfishers, reed warblers, buntings, water-voles, and water-shrews. And there are goblins! Watch the wood mice among the leaves, the hedgehog hunting at twilight, the squirrels swinging among the trees. There are goblins with wings, goblins of the night, such as nightjars and owls, which are rather frightening. And in the larger, wilder woods are trolls, the lumbering cautious badgers, who walk by night and are seen by few mortals.

And, alas! there are giants. But you must read this book to find out to what order giants belong.

My gnomes are but a very short step (for the normal imagination) from the wild woodland people. They live with birds and beasts, and can never be far from water. That is the reason why children instinctively love water, and why Ireland is the last stronghold of the Little People; it is wild and wet, and there is no locality a gnome likes so much as a place which is 'wild and wet'.

In telling this story I must ask the reader's indulgence for one flight of fancy. I have found it necessary to allow my gnomes and animals the power of speech. As this is a book for young people no doubt they will forgive me, for it makes the story easier to follow. In other respects it does not often go beyond the realms of possibility. Warwickshire is one of the last English counties where one might meet with a fairy; surely William Shakespeare knew this when he wrote *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

1942

THE AUTHOR



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*The wonder of the world, the beauty and the power, the shapes of  
things, their colours, lights and shades; these I saw.  
Look ye also while life lasts.*

## CHAPTER ONE

*Sneezewort, Baldmoney, Dodder, & Co.*

**I**t was one of those days at the tail end of the winter when spring, in some subtle way, announced its presence. The hedges were still purple and bristly, the fields bleached and bitten, full of quarrelling starling flocks; but there was no doubt about it, the winter was virtually over and done with for another seven months. The great tide was on the turn, to creep so slowly at first and then to rise ever higher to culminate in the glorious flood, the top of the tide, at midsummer.

Think of it! All that power, all those millions of leaves, those extra inches to be added to bushes, trees, and flowers. It was all there under the earth, though you would never have guessed it.

After a soft grey morning, the sun had slowly broken through the clouds, and every blackbird and thrush in Lucking's Meadow began to warble and tune up; the first opening bars of a great symphony in praise of Life.

The willow bush by the Folly brook showed silver buttons up every slender wand and on the rough grey bark of the leaning oak tree on the other side of the pool three sleepy flies were sidling about, enjoying the warm rays.

At this spot, for some reason known only to itself, the Folly brook turned at a right angle.

Beneath the oak the water had washed away the sandy bank, and many winter floods had laid bare some of the massive hawser roots which projected in a twisted tangle

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from the soil of the bank. The sun, shining full on the steep bluff, threw shadows from the overhanging roots, so that underneath all was darkness.

Close to the margin of the glittering water, there was a miniature beach of coloured shingle and white sand; and from the glare on the stream, wavering bars of reflected light played to and fro on the bulging trunk of the oak. These light bars moved up and down in ripples, fading away when the sun was dimmed for an instant by a passing cloud.

It had been a dry winter and the Folly brook was running fresh and clear, higher than in summer, of course, but quite undimmed by floodcloud. It was so clear that near the beach every stone and pebble on the bottom could be seen, though where the water was deeper, all was tawny obscurity, the colour of ripe old ale.

Near the bank, the tangled reeds were as white as bleached bone, though if you had looked more closely, sharp green sword points could have been seen just beginning to pierce the dead vegetation. Later these reeds formed a deep green thicket, the strong juicy blades growing so close together that only a water vole could slip between. The bank on the side opposite to the oak shelved gradually to the water's edge, and here Farmer Lucking's cattle came to drink. They had poached and punched the soil at the 'marge' until it was in an awful mess and the grass for some way up the bank was quite worn away. But in the stream itself there was little mud, for the bottom was hard sand and shingle. Most of the mud which the heavy stolid beasts had collected to their knees was soon washed off by the current if they stood long enough in the stream.

Something moved in the shadow under the root. At first you might have thought it was a water-rat or a mouse; then, if you had waited long enough, keeping very still (for the Little People usually know when any mortal is about) you might have been lucky enough to see Baldmoney. He came out from under the root very slowly, peeping first one way and then another, listening.

Up among the silver willow studs swung a tit, a beautiful little sprite splashed with a blue as azure as the patch of spring sky above.

‘Tit tee, tit tee, tit tee!’

It was the ‘all clear’ for Baldmoney. The little man ran, like a mouse, out on to the coloured shingle.

You must remember that Baldmoney and his brothers were (as far as I know) the last gnomes left in England. Rather surprisingly, he was extraordinarily like the pictures of gnomes in fairy books, even to the pointed skin hat and long beard. He wore a short coat and waistcoat of mouse-skin with a strip of snake-skin round his middle; moleskin breeches tied in below the knee, but no shoes or stockings. He had no need of these, for gnomes are hairy little folk; in summer time they sometimes dispense with clothes altogether. Their bodies are not naked like ours, but clothed in long hair, and as to their feet, if you had not worn boots or shoes since you were born, you would have no need of them either. He carried a hunting knife in his belt, made of hammered iron, part of an old hinge which he had found in the stream.

Bluebutton, the blue tit, flipped down, leaflike, to the lowest wand of the willow which projected a little way over the pool and watched the gnome with his beady eye.

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‘Well, Bluebutton, it’s good to see you again; what sort of winter have you had?’

‘Not too bad, Baldmoney,’ replied the tit, hopping about among the soft willow buds.

Before I proceed I must tell you that of course the wild things did not talk to the gnomes in our language. They had one of their own which the gnomes understood. Naturally in this book I have made them talk in our language, otherwise you would not make head or tail of what they were saying.

‘And your wife, Bluebutton, how is she?’

Here the bluetit looked very sorrowful. He sat still and said nothing.

‘Oh, I’m sorry, Bluebutton, so sorry,’ said Baldmoney sympathetically. ‘I know, it has been a terrible winter, one of the worst since we’ve been on the stream . . . poor, poor Bluebutton. Never mind,’ he added lightly, ‘spring is here again, think what that means, plenty of food, no more frost and . . . and . . . you must find another wife. After all, you’ve still got your children.’

But Bluebutton would not be comforted and indeed was so overcome with grief that he could stay no longer, but flew up the Folly brook.

Baldmoney sat down in the sun. It was warm on the shingle, and he found his mouse-skin waistcoat irksome, so he took it off and hung it on an old withered stalk of beaked hedge-parsley that grew out of the bank nearby.

His little red face, the colour of an old hip berry, was puckered and creased like the palm of a monkey’s hand. His whiskers were whitish grey, the beard hanging down almost to his middle. The tiny hands with their grubby nails were like moles’ hands, though smaller. Gnomes have

large hands for their size, larger in comparison than those of a mortal. His ears were long, sharply pointed, and covered with silky hair. After sitting a minute or two on the smooth stones he half turned round, looking towards the root. 'Come on, you two, it's lovely out here in the sun . . . wake up, spring is here again.'

Two more gnomes immediately emerged; one, Sneezewort, rubbing his eyes, the other, Dodder, blinking in the strong sun. Sneezewort, the youngest, was a little shorter than Baldmoney and was also clad in a mouse-skin coat and moleskin breeches, though, strange to say, he was without whiskers, which is unusual for a gnome. For some reason nobody could ever understand (by 'nobody' I do not mean people like you and me, but the animals, birds, and the Stream People generally) Sneezewort had never grown whiskers. It was not because he shaved, for no gnome would think of doing such a thing. Beards keep you warm in the winter. As I say, nobody knew why he had never grown whiskers, not even Sneezewort himself. But his round little face was just as red and puckered as Baldmoney's, and in some ways he looked older for he had lost most of his teeth and gnomes don't know how to make false teeth.

Dodder, the eldest and wisest of the three, was the shortest in stature, but that was because he had a wooden leg. It was a very cleverly designed leg made out of an acorn cup into which the leg stump fitted neatly, with a stout thorn twig morticed firmly into the outside end. The trouble was that this leg was always wearing out and in the summer-time poor Dodder had to make a new one every month. His beard was a beauty, it hung below his belt, almost to his knees, and would have been snow

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white if he had not dyed it with walnut juice, for white beards would be too conspicuous, and that would never do. Secrecy was of utmost importance, especially in these modern days when discovery would mean the end of everything. Why these little creatures had survived for so long is puzzling, because, though they lived in this rural countryside, it was by no means 'wild' in the sense that some parts of Devon and Cornwall are wild, and there are, to my knowledge, no gnomes left now in either of these last two localities, though I understand they are still to be found in some parts of Ireland.

Perhaps the reason is that nobody in their senses (and only a few out of them) would dream of looking for a gnome in Warwickshire, a county intersected in all directions by roads and railways, with modern villas and towns everywhere.

Unlike the others, Dodder wore a coat and breeches of batskin, with the ears left on. He drew this almost over his head in cold weather, so that he looked like a very curious elongated bat without wings. He always maintained that batskins were more supple than those of mice, and allowed greater freedom of movement.

As soon as he joined Sneezewort and Baldmoney he sat down and took off his wooden leg, laying it on the shingle beside him.

'I shall have to make another leg, Baldmoney,' he said in a sorrowful voice, 'this peg is wearing out and I shall want another one now the spring is coming. I do wish I could find something that would wear better.'

Baldmoney took up the leg and examined the end, rubbing his beard and puckering his already wrinkled forehead until his eyes seemed to disappear.

‘I believe we could find something better. I’ll ask the King of Fishers.’

Just at that moment, as if in answer to a prayer, a streak of flashing blue darted round the bend of the stream and a kingfisher came to rest just above their heads on a branch of the oak tree, close to five little round oak-apples.

The gorgeous bird glanced below him with side-cocked head, and every now and then bobbed up and down, gulping something.

‘Our respects, your Majesty,’ said Baldmoney humbly (he always seemed to be the spokesman of the party); ‘you’re just the one we wanted to see. Brother Dodder here requires a new leg of more durable stuff than thorn. What can you suggest, humbly begging your pardon?’

But for a moment or two the Kingfisher could not reply for the very good reason he had just swallowed six sticklebacks and his gullet was crammed.

The gnome waited politely for him to digest his meal, and at last he spoke. ‘Wood is no good, it’s bone you want. What I don’t know about bone isn’t worth knowing, seeing that we build our nests of them.’

The gnomes remained silent for they knew Kingfishers’ nests of old; did not they have to hold their noses every time they passed them? Kingfishers are filthy birds in their nesting habits, and it was always a source of utmost amazement that such gorgeous and kingly beings could be so dirty. Why Kingfishers possess such lovely plumage, the most lovely of any British bird, is another story.

‘That’s an idea,’ said Dodder; ‘I never thought of bone.’

‘Fishbone isn’t tough enough,’ said the Kingfisher; ‘I’ll keep a look out and bring you something stronger.’

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Lulled by the music of the babbling stream, all sat silent for a space. Just above the bend it ran over the shillets, creased and full of broken sky reflections. It was so shallow there that the gnomes could wade across, but it soon deepened and ran smooth and polished into the sherry-brown deeps under the oak root.

‘Well, your Majesty, and how goes the fishing?’ asked one of the gnomes.

‘Rotten, never had worse, though it’s better up above Moss Mill. But the miller’s brats catch a lot—they’re at it all day long. One of them tried to hit me with a stone from his catapult yesterday. You’ll be starting fishing soon, I suppose? Excuse me . . . ’ (and here the Kingfisher made rather a rude noise in his throat, for his meal was not yet quite digested). ‘Yes,’ said Dodder, politely pretending not to notice, ‘I shall be starting soon, but we’ve fished the stream out about here, and that’s the truth. The minnows and sticklebacks don’t seem to run up as far as they used to. I don’t know what we shall do now that the tar is coming in off the new road. Beastly stuff, it kills the fish. It was bad enough when they used to dip the sheep up above Moss Mill. The poison killed off several gnomes when they began it, that was many Cuckoo summers ago, before your Majesty was born. Do you remember that, Sneezewort?’ But the little gnome did not reply, he was gazing wistfully upstream. ‘He’s thinking of poor Cloudberry, our lost brother, you know,’ said Baldmoney in an undertone to the Kingfisher. ‘Cloudberry went up the stream to find the Folly Source and never came back. That’s months ago now,’ Baldmoney sighed, and they all sighed. For a space there was nothing but the undertone of the brook, and the wind in the trees.

‘Did you ever go to look for him, Baldmoney?’ the Kingfisher asked, glancing down at the three sorrowful little gnomes sitting below him on the shingle. ‘Yes,’ whispered Baldmoney, ‘we went upstream below Moss Mill and Joppa but we could find no trace. The water voles said they saw him up above the mill, but nobody saw him after that. Your Majesty’s father saw him too, walking through the Dock forest by Lucking’s water meadows, but nobody else could help us. Your Majesty’s father went all the way to the wood of Giant Grum, but could not find him.’ ‘Perhaps Giant Grum saw him, though,’ said the Kingfisher darkly; ‘there’s been a Giant Grum in Crow Wood for years. He tried to shoot me once, but missed, and I give the place a wide berth now, though the fishing’s the best in the stream.’ ‘Have you ever been right up, beyond the wood?’ asked Baldmoney in an awed voice.

‘No, not right up. Beyond Crow Wood is the Big sea and an Island, and then the Folly gets very narrow, and the fishing’s poor; it goes on for miles and miles. Perhaps I will go one day, though.’

Baldmoney sighed again. ‘I wish I had wings like your Majesty, then I could go right up to the Birth of the Folly. Our people have always wanted to go, but it’s such a long weary way, and our legs are so small.’

The sun had gone in and the wind began to rise, ruffling the water. Baldmoney reached for his waistcoat and put it on and Dodder strapped on his wooden leg again.

‘Well,’ said the Kingfisher, shaking himself, ‘I must be off; my wife is downstream somewhere. I won’t forget your leg, Dodder,’ and with a flick he left the branch and

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arrowed away like a blue bolt across the angle of the meadow.

The three gnomes, left alone, began to collect some dead twigs from under the bank. It would be cold when the sun went down. Baldmoney went up the shingle to search for flints, and the others crept back into the shadow of the root, carrying their fuel with them.

Lucking's cows came trooping across the meadow in a long line on their way to the ford. They waded in, the water dribbling from their mouths, their pale-lashed eyes gazing stupidly at the current as they sucked in long draughts.

Baldmoney came back along the shingle carrying a dead branch. The cows saw him but paid no heed. They went on sucking in long draughts of cold water and the mudsmoke rolled away from their huge hairy legs, dimming the clear stream. They had seen the gnomes many times and took no more notice of them than if they had been water voles. Why should they? For all wild creatures were the same to them. After all, the little wild people *are* fairies and gnomes; birds and beasts alike.

As each one finished drinking it stood for a moment or two with dribbling mouth and then wheeled round, hoisting itself up the bank and wandering off into the pasture, where it began noisily to crop the grass.

When Baldmoney entered the hollow under the oak root he pulled the branch in after him. Though it was only sixteen inches long it was all he could manage.

There was quite a large space of trampled sand under the root (in the high floods of winter the water sometimes came right up to the door of their house). This door was



*Baldmoney carries firewood into Oak Tree House*

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not more than eight inches high but excessively thick. It was part of an old Sunlight soap box that had been washed down the stream years before and it had taken the gnomes many weeks to cut through with the blade of a pocket knife which belonged to Cloudberry. He had found the knife in the Willow Meadow below Moss Mill, and when he went away he had taken it with him. The hinges of the door were made of wire, filched from a fencing post. Holes had been bored in the door and the wire passed through and the whole contraption was hinged to the living root of the oak.

Baldmoney broke up the stick as well as he could and, shouldering the bundle, opened the door and passed inside, shutting it behind him. Before him the earth sloped upwards between two cheeks of oak root through which he had to squeeze, and beyond he found himself in the actual living space. This was cosy enough and gave them ample room, for under the root there was a great chamber, fully three feet across. The floor was lined with dried rush, gathered from the stream, and the smoke from the gnomes' fire went right up inside the tree, coming out through a knothole in the top.

When their fire was burning there was only a filmy thread of smoke, but they took the wise precaution of never lighting it save on a windy night when the smoke would not be noticed, or during bad weather when people would be indoors. On calm nights when there was no breeze, even the tiniest wisp might have been observed by any mortal outside.

As it was a windy evening the gnomes had a good blaze burning and the ruddy light of the flames lit up the interior of the tree, throwing dark shadows everywhere.

Looking upwards, a tiny point of dim light was seen where the tree was open to the sky.

Sneeze wort was seated cross-legged, making fish-hooks out of a mouse's bone. Dodder was slitting the stomach of a fat minnow. He had seven other little fish in a pile beside him. When all were cleaned he hung them in a row in the smoke from the fire to kipper them. Baldmoney flung down the faggots and stacked them neatly at the side of the cave.

They all worked without speaking, each at his own job. Dodder, owing to his wooden leg, was the chief fisherman of the three, and he was also the cook, and no mean cook either, as he often said. Certainly his kippered minnow and beechnut girdle cakes were *very* good indeed.

After a meal, taken in silence round the fire, the gnomes lay down, each snuggling into his moleskin sleeping bag. They lay gazing at the embers which now smouldered redly. The wind was rising outside and they heard Ben the owl leave the tree and go a-hunting. It was Ben who provided them with skins, as many as they wanted, for gnomes do not kill warm-blooded things save in self-defence; all birds and animals with the exception of stoats and foxes (wood dogs, as the gnomes called the latter) were their friends.

For a while nobody said a word; they lay stretched out under their moleskins, their tiny eyes glowing like moths' eyes in the red glow of the dying fire. At last Baldmoney spoke.

'I've been thinking over what the King of Fishers was saying about going up the stream and looking for Cloudberry. Well, why shouldn't we? We've got the

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whole summer for the trip and can get back here before the fall of the leaf. I don't see why we shouldn't try it.' Nobody replied, indeed the other two were so silent that Baldmoney thought they must be asleep. But on looking at his companions he saw their eyes as brilliant points in the dusky interior of the cave.

Diamonds flashed from Sneezewort's eyes for he was weeping silently. Of the three gnomes he was the most easily moved and Cloudberry had been his favourite brother. At last Dodder burst out, rather irritably.

'You know, Baldmoney, you're as bad as Cloudberry, always restless, always wanting to leave the Folly and find a better place, always talking, like poor Cloudberry, of the Folly Source. We should never find him or meet any other gnomes up the stream who could help us. The fishing is poor here I know, but we still get enough to eat and the oak has been a good friend to us. Besides, what about my leg? I can't go with you. Still,' he added in an injured tone, 'leave me behind, I don't care. I shall be all right, but if you never came back, like poor Cloudberry, I should be all alone, but . . . I suppose I could manage very well by myself,' and he sniffed in an aggrieved way.

'Oh, we shouldn't leave you, Dodder, you'd have to come with us, wouldn't he, Sneezewort?'

'I'll go, Baldmoney, if Dodder comes. I've always wanted to go up the stream to find Cloudberry, always . . .'

There was a short silence again; the wind piped in the shadowy cavern above and sang a song in the twisted branches of the old tree.

Dodder growled. 'Absurd, it's sheer stupidity, and we will never come home again. How can we go all that way? Why, it takes us hours to reach Moss Mill!'

‘Ah, but I’ve been thinking,’ said Baldmoney, ‘thinking a lot just lately. Why shouldn’t we build a boat, not a fishing boat (they used coracles made of frogs’ skins stretched over a withy frame, Indian-wise), but a proper boat with paddles. I’ve got it all planned out in my mind.’

Dodder snorted angrily.

‘And do you suppose, my dear Baldmoney, that we could ever paddle against the current of the Folly? Why, it’s all we can do now to manage our fishing boats!’

‘Well, I think we could in *my* boat,’ observed Baldmoney. ‘I’ve got it all planned out. At any rate we could manage in the smooth reaches and we might carry it over the rapids, like the Dartmoor gnomes used to do in the old days, in the country of Running Waters.’

‘I’ve got a better idea than that,’ broke in Sneezewort. ‘Let’s get Watervole to tow us up the rough water, or if he won’t, Otter would.’

‘What a splendid notion, Otter and Watervole! They’ll help us; why, they might take us right up to the Folly Source if we wanted to go. Why ever didn’t we think of that before?’ Sneezewort and Baldmoney were warming to their subject.

Dodder snorted again. ‘Well, you can go, the pair of you, and I’ll stay behind and live a few years more. What about Giant Grum and Crow Wood? You’re fools, the pair of ye, and I’ll have nothing to do with the madcap scheme. You can go, *I* won’t come with you. It’s all very well for you, with two good legs, but I’ve only one, and that won’t help me run away from any Giants, or swim if I fall in the Folly.’

But the other two gnomes argued on until the last

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sparks of the fire winked out and they were left in the intense darkness with the wind 'bluntering' round outside. Soon even Baldmoney was tired out and a silence fell in the dark cave under the old oak.

Out in the cold meadow the cows had lain down one by one, and from beyond Hallfields spinney a wood dog (fox) was barking. Half veiled by the scudding clouds, the stars glimmered through ragged gaps, and under the root, which smelt of oak smoke and kippered minnow, three tiny snores rose up like elfin horns. The sun was on the other side of the big round world, the soft tide of darkness cloaked every living thing. Only the night hunters, like the red wood dogs, and Bub'ms (as the gnomes called the rabbits) were out, and as for Ben, why, he was away beyond Collinson Church, hunting the new plough!

