

## How the Foot Came to Be

a *Kindermärchen*

by Terence Kuch

In the old days, before there were meters and centimeters and millimeters, people measured things in feet. When a man said “I just built a hut that’s twelve feet long!” he meant twelve of *his* feet. But when he bragged, “My hut is twelve feet long!” his neighbor would say “Hah! But you have very small feet!”

And so it went for many years. People became more and more confused. Those with small feet, like Sam Papermaker, were in demand as measurers of feet. A man who built a hut would hire Sam and pay him a farthing to measure it. Sam would walk toe to heel, heel to toe, from one end of the hut to the other. Then he would say, “Your hut is twelve feet long!” But when the hut-builder bragged about it, his neighbor would say, “But those are Sam Papermaker’s feet. *Your* feet are great huge clodhoppers of things, and your hut could never be as long as twelve of those!” What with scenes like this there were many fights and confusions, much to the disturbance of the kingdom.

But after a many years of such troubles, Good King John, who ruled the kingdom in that time, said “Enough of this! *My* foot is *the* foot! Throughout all the kingdom, when anyone counts the number of ‘feet’ it will mean my foot! Nobody else’s foot will count for anything, because I am the king, and when I say a thing is, it is.”

And so, all over the kingdom the king’s heralds blew their g-flat trumpets and announced “Hear ye! From this day hence, King John’s foot will be the only official foot; nobody else’s foot will count for anything!”

But wherever the heralds went, people would ask, “Well, then, how long is King John’s foot?”

And the heralds would answer, “Why, it’s one foot long!” which didn’t help at all.

Throughout the kingdom, people would say “My hut is twelve feet long!” but this time they would mean “My hut is as long as twelve of King John’s feet.” And a few simpletons, never having seen the king, nor his feet, believed that Good King John had twelve feet. But, as no one outside the palace had ever seen King John without his socks and boots, no one still knew how long a foot should be.

After more years of confusion and fights, a bright young man named Harry decided, “Enough of this! I will go to the palace and measure the king’s foot. I will take a stick of wood, and make a mark on it where his longest toe begins, and I will make another mark on it where his heel ends. Then I will take this stick from town to town and charge people half a penny for copying down these marks on sticks of their own. Then everyone will know just how long a foot should be.”

And so he went to the king and said, "O great sire, I want to measure your foot so that everyone in the kingdom will know how long a foot is."

And King John said, "Certainly. You may very well do that."

The king took off his right boot and sock, and Harry made two little marks on a stick and went from town to town around the kingdom letting people copy his marks onto their own sticks for half a penny a pop.

But one day, a bright young woman named Janet saw that Harry was becoming very rich on his ha'pennies, and said to herself, "I can do that as well as he can! If I could measure the king's foot, I would make a fortune, too!"

So Janet went to the palace, and went to the king, and said "O great sire, last year you let Harry measure your foot so that all the kingdom would know how long a foot is. But he travels slowly, and there are more people who want to know how long a foot is than he can get to. So if you would let me measure your foot, more of your subjects will know how long a foot is, information they vitally need in pursuit of commerce."

"And besides," said the king with a wink, "you will make a great deal of money."

"Exactly," said Janet.

"Very well," said the king, "you may measure the royal foot." So he took off his boot and he took off his sock, and there was the foot, exactly one foot long. But it had been so long since Harry had visited him that he forgot that he had let Harry measure his right foot, and now he gave Janet his left foot to measure.

(Now it so happened that King John's right foot was much longer than his left foot. While his right foot was a very long foot, his left foot was only a slightly long foot. This fact went undiscovered for some time.)

So Janet made marks on her stick, thanked the king, then traveled from town to town throughout the kingdom charging half a penny to any clients who would copy the marks from her stick, so they would know just exactly how long a foot is.

But one day, Janet came to a town that Harry had visited before, and one of her clients said, "I used Harry's measure, and it said that my hut is twelve feet long. But, using your measure, my hut is eighteen feet long. I think you never saw the king's foot at all. I think you are a cheat, a liar, and a fraud, and I will send to the sheriff of this shire to have you put in jail!"

Janet said, "Have you considered that Harry's marks may be wrong, and mine right?"

The client said "Perhaps that is so. You both claim to have visited the king, to have seen the royal foot, to have made marks on a stick from his toe to his heel. So what shall we do to resolve this trade dispute?"

Then Janet said, "I will find Harry, and we will see who is right!" So she rode off and sought him out.

"Harry," she said when they met, "we must take our sticks and go to the palace. We will go to the king together. Together we will measure his foot, and find out who is right. And, to make it more interesting, shall we put five guineas upon the outcome?"

And Harry looked at Janet, and said, "Why not?"

So they journeyed to the capital together and went to the king. They appeared before him, and together they said, "O great sire, we need to look at your foot, because we have both measured your foot, and we have come up with different measures, and no one in the kingdom knows how long a foot is any more: some people use Harryfeet and some use Janetfeet."

But the king became very angry and said “Enough of this! It ill befits the royal dignity for me to take my boots and socks off three times in two years. Besides, it is winter and the palace is drafty and cold. I don’t think I want my foot measured anymore. You will just have to solve your problems between yourselves. Now, Begone!”

So Harry and Janet went their separate ways. All over the kingdom confusion reigned and fights broke out because there were two different measures called “foot.” The man who said “My hut is twelve feet long” now had to say “in Janetfeet, of course. In Harryfeet, my hut is eighteen feet long.”

Now after a time, the king again became weary of the fights and confusions, and jealous of the money Harry and Janet were making. So one day he called to his courtier, Lord Reggie Toadie, and said “Let us measure the royal foot together, and let us make plaster copies of it, and let us establish a Royal Institute for Standards and Technology to make and sell the plaster copies of my foot for three pence, which is quite a bit more than half a penny. And let us decree that no one can use either Harryfeet or Janetfeet anymore. And let us divide the resulting handsome and well-deserved profit between ourselves, just you and me.”

Lord Reggie Toadie agreed, because if he would not agree with the king, he would not be a courtier very long, nor a lord, either.

So they took off the king’s boots and socks, and they discovered that the king’s right foot was half again as long as his left foot. “Which foot shall we use?” asked Lord Reggie Toadie.

“Let us use the left foot,” said Good King John. “It is smaller, so it will take less plaster to copy, which will reduce our operating expenses; and instead of having to say ‘My palace is only three thousand four hundred twenty feet long,’ that is, Harryfeet, I will be able to say ‘My palace is very grand: it is all of five thousand one hundred and thirty feet long!’ ”

“But what shall we call the plaster copies of your foot, O grand sire?” asked Lord Reggie Toadie, knowing exactly what the king would say.

“Let us,” said the king, “call them ‘rulers,’ for I am the ruler, and my foot shall rule the world of measure forever.”

And so it was.

Harry and Janet went out of the foot business, but they had made so much money they never had to work again. They bought a hut twelve feet long somewhere far away from the king, and lived together happily ever after.

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