

Picklewitch and Jack



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FABER & FABER

For the Cheeky Sparrows

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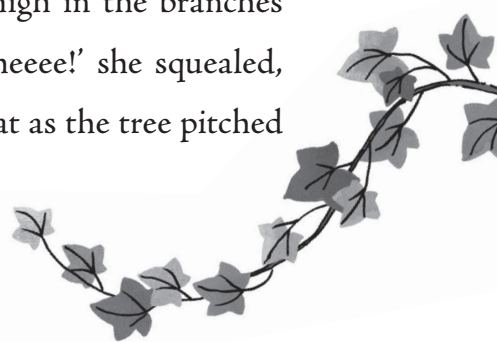


Prologue:

The Dreadful Strangers

A fierce gale had been slashing at the shrubbery since lunchtime, pouncing on the weathervane and snorting wetly through the keyholes. CRASH and SMASH went the plant pots. CREAK and CLANG went the rusty gates. It was a five-star hullabaloo that shook the old place to its roots.

‘What lovely weather we’re having!’ cried the strange little girl, perched high in the branches of the old walnut tree. ‘Wheeee!’ she squealed, holding on to her pointed hat as the tree pitched



back and forth like a fairground ride. Her dungarees were jewelled in birds and her hair was as red as a robin's breast. 'FASTER!' she laughed. 'MORE!'

On command a blizzard of copper leaves rose up from the ground, swirling and merging into one giant, beastly shadow that loomed over the tree. It reared up on to its back legs and let out a blood-curdling howl that rattled the roof tiles for miles around.

'A storm wolf!' gasped the girl, gazing upwards in admiration. 'Oh whizz-cracking!' she applauded 'Bravo!'

The beast bowed graciously, dived back down to the ground and kicked the bins over with a BANG. He was about to show off a bit more, when his ears pricked up at the growl of an engine and the crunch of tyres on gravel. The storm

wolf instantly dropped to a shy breeze and slunk behind the potting shed.

The girl swung around. She sniffed sharply at the cool air and a blast of birds exploded into the sky, filling the air with harsh cries. 'Who goes there?' she muttered, fumbling for her binoculars. 'Who be you, so rudely interrupting? Friend or foe?'

A piano, beds and chairs poured like a trail of ants out of the big yellow removal lorry, straight into the house. 'Boxies ahoy,' she scowled, shrugging a starling off her shoulder. 'Fudgenuts and bats' bums.'

Down on the ground, a boy slipped out of the passenger seat of the lorry. Intrigued, the girl polished her lenses and zoomed in for a closer look.

The boy seemed to be about the same age as her



and around the same height, but any similarity ended there. She studied his clean shoes and buttoned-up cardigan, noting with interest the shiny smoothness of his hair. She touched her own hair: it was very different, full of fluff and twigs. Sometimes the cheeky sparrows got in and she had to bang her head with a stick to make them leave.

‘What a peculiar person,’ she said in prim tones. ‘Most curious and odd. And such bad manners too, arriving without an invitation.’ Her tummy let out a long rumble and she straightened her hat. ‘I hope he’s brought cake.’