

It was definitely a man, and yet . . . he *looked* like a wolf. His eyes glittered in his head, small and beady. His snout was long and wrinkled up as he sniffed the air. His ears seemed to sit strangely high and pointed on his head, and, every now and again, he licked his lips and displayed a row of sharp yellow teeth.

Tom's relief that it wasn't a wolf lasted approximately half a second.

'The Wild Man of the Woods?' gasped Tom. 'I thought Old Molly was making all those stories up!' But here he was, standing a few feet away from him — even if he didn't have hair on his eyelids. Tom's eyes went wide with terror:

'Look out!' he yelled. 'There's a bear behind you!'

He knew it was an old routine — but it sometimes worked. The Wild Man, however, didn't so much as flick his eyes to one side. He kept them on Tom . . . as if he were memorizing a tasty meal before devouring it.

'But you don't eat children, do you?' Tom found himself talking automatically. It was a habit he'd always meant to cure himself of.

The man's thin lips split into a thin smile — showing his yellow teeth for a brief moment. 'Dangerous,' he hissed. It was almost as if he were searching for the long-hidden memory of a word. 'Dangerous . . . the Wood . . .' He pointed at Tom as if to say: 'For you.' But he said: 'Now.'

'I told Katie you didn't,' replied Tom. 'I said Old Molly just made the whole thing up out of her head — well, obviously she didn't make *you* up out of her head, but the bit about you eating . . . oh . . .' The words died on Tom's lips, for the man had now approached him and was peering into his eyes from a few inches away. Suddenly he stubbed a bony finger into Tom's chest.

'You . . . ?' he hissed, 'with me.'

Then he turned on his heel and plunged back into the undergrowth exactly where the bear hadn't been.

Tom thought for all of a second.

'I could go with him and get eaten alive. Or I could stay here and get eaten alive,' he said to himself. 'On the whole, I think I'd prefer to have the company.' And he made his way after the man as fast as the forest would let him. They ran downhill into a dell through which a brook meandered. The man leapt into the stream and began to run along it as if it were a road.

'At least this'll throw the hounds off the scent,' thought Tom to himself.

'That's why we are,' said the man without looking back.

'Oh . . . right!' said Tom.

Some time later Tom was trying to remember whether he'd spoken aloud about the hounds or merely been thinking about them, when he found he'd arrived at the strange man's even stranger home in the wood.

The first strange thing Tom could see about it was that you couldn't really see it. You could tell it was there because the forest became impossibly thick at that point, but where the upright logs of the cabin began and the tree trunks of the forest stopped was anybody's guess. The second strange thing about the log cabin was that it seemed to be alive. All the logs supported branches that in turn held out green leaves. And the roof was not the usual dark thatch — it appeared to be a thick canopy of leaves — just as if the whole thing were growing out of the forest floor.

But Tom hadn't yet seen the strangest thing of all.

As they approached, the man gave a low whistle and out of the cabin door came one . . . two . . . three . . . four . . . five . . . six . . . seven . . . sleek, grey creatures. The hair on the back of Tom's neck rose. 'If those dogs weren't dogs,' he thought to himself, 'I'd swear they were wolves.'

'Are wolves!' snapped the man, and he fixed his beady eye on Tom — sending Tom's mind spinning back to yet another of Old Molly's stories:

'Once there lived in the forest,' she would say, 'a man who loved wolves. He understood their ways. He knew how to speak with them. And he used to live among them just as if he were a wolf himself. People called him the Wolfman . . .'

'Dogs!' said the Wolfman, with some contempt, and then suddenly barked and snapped like an animal so that Tom jumped out of his skin, and would probably have turned and run away were it not for the fact that when he did turn, he found one of the wolves had been sniffing around the back of his breeches and was only now backing off under the Wolfman's threats.

Tom felt like a mouse who finds himself an honoured guest at a cat's dinner. Each wolf seemed to be eyeing him hungrily, and the Wolfman himself no less. 'Maybe they're waiting for me to make a break for it,' thought Tom. 'They probably enjoy a little chase before supper . . .'

But before he could develop a coherent theory about giving the wolves indigestion by not providing them with adequate exercise before their evening meal, Tom noticed a sword flying through the air towards him. 'Gosh, it's lucky I noticed that sword the Wolfman's just thrown at me, because it means I have a reasonable chance of getting out of its way.' But even as he jumped, the sword twisted in the air and Tom had caught it by the handle as if that's what he'd always intended.

A bit non-plussed, Tom stood there, sword in hand, and watched while the biggest of the wolves rose to its feet.

'I wish someone would tell me what's going . . .'. But Tom never finished the sentence (he was probably going to say 'on') because the great wolf had leapt at him and Tom was now flat on his back with four paws on his chest and the jaws of a wolf six inches from his face.

'This is a bit rum,' thought Tom. 'But the rummest thing is that I'm not scared . . . Come on! Get scared!' he told himself. 'You've got a wolf standing on your chest! I order you to be scared at once!' But he wasn't. He looked into the wolf's eyes, and he knew that no harm would come to him.

'Why don't you use the sword?' The voice of the Wolfman was suddenly hissing in his ear.

'What? Oh! the sword!' exclaimed Tom. 'Isn't that a bit dangerous?'

Before he knew it, the wolf was off his chest and the others were all sitting about him, barking and baying, while the Wolfman growled and snarled back at them. This din went on for some time, until eventually the Wolfman clapped his hands and the others fell silent. He then turned on Tom and smiled:

'My friends say they think you can be trusted,' he said.

Tom was just about to reply that he wasn't sure whether that was the point -- so far as he was concerned the point was could *he* trust seven huge timber wolves -- especially when it came to supper time. But somehow he found himself saying 'Thank you,' and he knew that he had just undergone a test of some sort and passed.

That night, Tom slept surrounded by wolves.

'I wouldn't exactly call this "sleeping",' muttered Tom as he lay listening to the breathing of the animals and smelling the sweetish odour of their bodies. 'I mean how do I know that -- as soon as I've nodded off -- one of these beasts won't just roll over and gobble me up?' But he knew he was now one of their number.