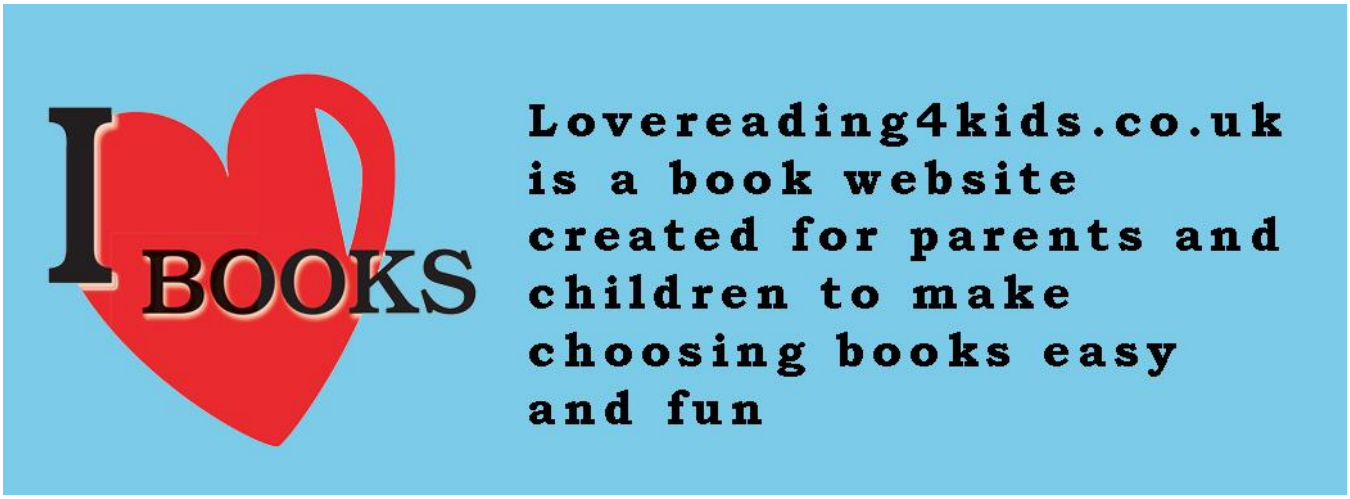

Opening extract from

A Hat Full of Sky

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Published by

Corgi Children's an imprint of Random House Children's Publishers UK

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INTRODUCTION

From 'Fairies and How to Avoid Them' by Miss Perspicacia Tick:

The Nac Mac Feegle
(also called Pictsies, the Wee Free Men, the Little Men and 'Person or Persons Unknown, Believed to Be Armed')

The Nac Mac Feegle are the most dangerous of the fairy races, particularly when drunk. They love drinking, fighting and stealing, and will in fact steal anything that is not nailed down. If it *is* nailed down, they will steal the nails as well.

Nevertheless, those who have managed to get to know them, and survive, say that they are also amazingly loyal, strong, dogged, brave and, in their own way, quite moral. (For example, they won't steal from people who don't have anything.)

The average Feegle man (Feegle women are rare – *see later*) is about six inches high, red-haired, his skin turned blue with tattoos and the dye called woad and, since you're this close, he's probably about to hit you.

He'll wear a kilt made of any old material, because amongst the Feegles the clan allegiance is shown by the tattoos. He may wear a rabbit-skull helmet, and Feegles often decorate their beards and hair with feathers, beads and anything else that takes their fancy. He will almost certainly carry a sword, although it is mainly for show, the Feegles' preferred method of fighting being with the boot and the head.

History and Religion

The origin of the Nac Mac Feegle is lost in the famous Mists of Time. They say that they were thrown out of Fairyland by the Queen of the Fairies because they objected to her spiteful and tyrannical rule. Others say they were just thrown out for being drunk.

Little is known about their religion, if any, save for one fact: they think they are dead. They like our world, with its sunshine and mountains and blue skies and things to fight. An amazing world like this couldn't be open to just *anybody*, they say. It must be some kind of a heaven or Valhalla, where brave warriors go when they are dead. So, they reason, they have already been alive somewhere else, and then died and were allowed to come here because they have been so *good*.

This is a *quite* incorrect and fanciful notion because, as we know, the truth is exactly the other way round.

There is not a great deal of mourning when a Feegle dies, and it's only because his brothers are sad that he's not spent more time with them before going back to the land of the living, which they also call the 'Last World'.

Habits and Habitat

For choice, the clans of the Nac Mac Feegle live in the burial mounds of ancient kings, where they hollow out a cosy cavern amongst the gold. Generally there will be one or two thorn or elder trees growing on it – the Feegles particularly like old, hollow elder trees, which become chimneys for their fires. And there will, of course, be a rabbit hole. It will look just like a rabbit hole. There will be rabbit droppings around it, and maybe even a few bits of rabbit fur if the Feegles are feeling particularly creative.

Down below, the world of the Feegle is a bit like a beehive, but with a lot less honey and a lot more sting.

The reason for this is that females are very rare among the Feegle. And, perhaps because of this, Feegle women give birth to lots of babies, very often and very quickly. They're about the size of peas when born but grow extremely fast if they're fed well **(**Feegles like to live near humans so that they can steal milk from cows and sheep for this purpose**)**.

The 'queen' of the clan is called the Kelda, who as she gets older becomes the mother of most of it. Her husband is known as The Big Man. When a girl child is born – and it doesn't often happen – she stays with her mother to learn the *hiddlins*, which are the secrets of keldaring. When she is old enough to be married, *she must leave the clan*, taking a few of her brothers with her as a bodyguard on her long journey.

Often she'll travel to a clan that has no kelda. Very, very rarely, if there is no clan without a kelda, she'll meet with Feegles from several clans and form a completely new clan, with a new name and a mound of its own. She will also

choose her husband. And from then on, while her word is absolute law among her clan and must be obeyed, she'll seldom go more than a little distance from the mound. She is both its queen and its prisoner.

But once, for a few days, there was a kelda who was a human girl . . .

A Feegle Glossary, adjusted for those of a delicate disposition

Bigjobs: human beings

Blethers: rubbish, nonsense

Carlin: old woman

Cludgie: the privy

Crivens!: a general exclamation that can mean anything from 'My goodness!' to 'I've just lost my temper and there is going to be trouble.'

Dree your/my/his/her weird: facing the fate that is in store for you/me/him/her

Geas: a very important obligation, backed up by tradition and magic. Not a bird.

Eldritch: weird, strange. Sometimes means oblong too, for some reason.

Hag: a witch, of any age

Hagging/Haggling: anything a witch does

Hiddlins: secrets

Mudlin: useless person

Pished: I am *assured* that this means 'tired'.

Scunner: a generally unpleasant person

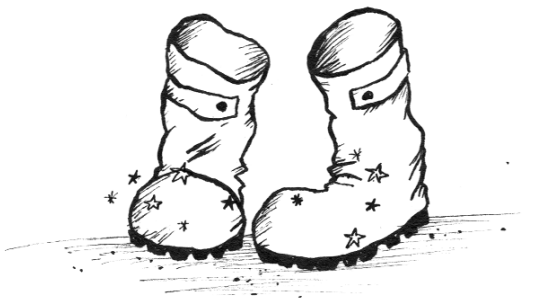
Scuggan: a *really* unpleasant person

Ships: woolly things that eat grass and go baa. Easily confused with the other kind.

Spavie: see *Mudlin*

Special Sheep Liniment: probably moonshine whisky, I am very sorry to say. No one knows what it'd do to sheep, but it is said that a drop of it is good for shepherds on a cold winter's night and for Feegles at any time at all. Do not try to make this at home.

Waily: a general cry of despair



CHAPTER 1

Leaving

It came crackling over the hills, like an invisible fog. Movement without a body tired it, and it drifted very slowly. It wasn't thinking now. It had been months since it had last thought, because the brain that was doing the thinking for it had died. They always died. So now it was naked again, and frightened.

It could *hide in one of the blobby white creatures that baa'd nervously as it crawled over the turf. But they had useless brains, capable of thinking only about grass and making other things that went baa. No. They would not do. It needed, needed something better, a strong mind, a mind with power, a mind that could keep it safe.*

It searched . . .

The new boots were all wrong. They were stiff and shiny. Shiny boots! That was disgraceful. Clean boots,

that was different. There was nothing wrong with putting a bit of a polish on boots to keep the wet out. But boots had to work for a living. They shouldn't *shine*.

Tiffany Aching, standing on the rug in her bedroom, shook her head. She'd have to scuff the things as soon as possible.

Then there was the new straw hat, with a ribbon on it. She had some doubts about that too.

She tried to look at herself in the mirror, which wasn't easy because the mirror was not much bigger than her hand, and cracked and blotchy. She had to move it around to try and see as much of herself as possible and remember how the bits fitted together.

But today . . . well, she didn't usually do this sort of thing in the house, but it was important to look smart today, and since no one was around . . .

She put the mirror down on the rickety table by the bed, stood in the middle of the threadbare rug, shut her eyes and said:

'See me.'

And away on the hills something, a thing with no body and no mind but a terrible hunger and a bottomless fear, felt the power.

It would have sniffed the air, if it had a nose.

It searched.

It found.

Such a strange mind, like a lot of minds inside one another, getting smaller and smaller! So strong! So close!

It changed direction slightly, and went a little faster. As it moved, it made a noise like a swarm of flies.

The sheep, nervous for a moment about something they couldn't see, hear or smell, baa'd . . .

. . . and went back to chewing grass.

Tiffany opened her eyes. There she was, a few feet away from herself. She could see the back of her own head.

Carefully, she moved around the room, not looking down at the 'her' that was moving, because she found that if she did that then the trick was over.

It was quite difficult, moving like that, but at last she was in front of herself and looking herself up and down.

Brown hair to match brown eyes . . . there was nothing she could do about that. At least her hair was clean and she'd washed her face.

She had a new dress on, which improved things a bit. It was so unusual to buy new clothes in the Aching family that, of course, it was bought big so that she'd 'grow into it'. But at least it was pale green, and it didn't actually touch the floor. With the shiny new boots and the straw hat she looked . . . like a farmer's daughter, quite respectable, going off to her first job. It'd have to do.

From here she could see the pointy hat on her head, but she had to look hard for it. It was like a glint in the air, gone as soon as you saw it. That's why she'd been worried about the new straw hat, but it had simply gone through it as if the new hat wasn't there.

This was because, in a way, it wasn't. It was invisible, except in the rain. Sun and wind went straight through, but rain and snow somehow saw it, and treated it as if it were real.

She'd been given it by the greatest witch in the world, a real witch with a black dress and a black hat and eyes that could go through you like turpentine goes through a sick sheep. It had been a kind of reward. Tiffany had done magic, serious magic. Before she had done it she hadn't known that she could; when she had been doing it she hadn't known that she was; and after she had done it she hadn't known how she had. Now she had to *learn* how.

'See me not,' she said. The vision of her . . . or whatever it was, because she was not exactly sure about this trick . . . vanished.

It had been a shock, the first time she'd done this. But she'd *always* found it easy to see herself, at least in her head. All her memories were like little pictures of herself doing things or watching things, rather than the view from the two holes in the front of her head. There was a part of her that was always watching her.

Miss Tick – another witch, but one who was easier to talk to than the witch who'd given Tiffany the hat – had said that a witch had to know how to 'stand apart', and that she'd find out more when her talent grew, so Tiffany supposed the 'see me' was part of this.

Sometimes Tiffany thought she ought to talk to Miss Tick about 'see me'. It felt as if she was stepping out of her body, but still had a sort of ghost body that could walk around. It all worked as long as her ghost

eyes didn't look down and see that she *was* just a ghost body. If that happened, some part of her panicked and she found herself back in her solid body immediately. Tiffany had, in the end, decided to keep this to herself. You didn't have to tell a teacher *everything*. Anyway, it was a good trick for when you didn't have a mirror.

Miss Tick was a sort of witch-finder. That seemed to be how witchcraft worked. Some witches kept a magical lookout for girls who showed promise, and found them an older witch to help them along. They didn't teach you how to do it. They taught you how to know what you were doing.

Witches were a bit like cats. They didn't much like one another's company, but they *did* like to know where all the other witches *were*, just in case they needed them. And what you might need them for was to tell you, as a friend, that you were beginning to cackle.

Witches didn't fear much, Miss Tick had said, but what the powerful ones were afraid of, even if they didn't talk about it, was what they called '*going to the bad*'. It was too easy to slip into careless little cruelties because you had power and other people hadn't, too easy to think other people didn't matter much, too easy to think that ideas like right and wrong didn't apply to *you*. At the end of *that* road was you dribbling and cackling to yourself all alone in a gingerbread house, growing warts on your nose.

Witches needed to know other witches were watching them.

And that, Tiffany thought, was why the hat was there. She could touch it any time, provided she shut her eyes. It was a kind of reminder . . .

'Tiffany!' her mother shouted up the stairs. 'Miss Tick's here!'

Yesterday, Tiffany had said goodbye to Granny Aching . . .

The iron wheels of the old shepherding hut were half buried in the turf, high up on the hills. The pot-bellied stove, which still stood lopsided in the grass, was red with rust. The chalk hills were taking them, just like they'd taken the bones of Granny Aching.

The rest of the hut had been burned on the day she'd been buried. No shepherd would have dared to use it, let alone spend the night there. Granny Aching had been too big in people's minds, too hard to replace. Night and day, in all seasons, she *was* the Chalk country: its best shepherd, its wisest woman, and its memory. It was as if the green downland had a soul that walked about in old boots and a sacking apron and smoked a foul old pipe and dosed sheep with turpentine.

The shepherds said that Granny Aching had cussed the sky blue. They called the fluffy little white clouds of summer 'Granny Aching's little lambs'. And although they laughed when they said these things, part of them was not joking.

No shepherd would have dared presume to live in that hut, no shepherd at all.

So they had cut the turf and buried Granny Aching in the Chalk, watered the turf afterwards to leave no mark, then they burned her hut.

Sheep's wool, Jolly Sailor tobacco and turpentine . . .

. . . had been the smells of the shepherding hut, and the smell of Granny Aching. Such things have a hold on people that goes right to the heart. Tiffany only had to smell them now to be back there, in the warmth and silence and safety of the hut. It was the place she had gone to when she was upset, and the place she had gone to when she was happy. And Granny Aching would always smile and make tea and say nothing. And nothing bad could happen in the shepherding hut. It was a fort against the world. Even now, after Granny had gone, Tiffany still liked to go up there.

Tiffany stood there, while the wind blew over the turf and sheep bells *clonked* in the distance.

'I've got . . .' She cleared her throat. 'I've got to go away. I . . . I've got to learn proper witching, and there's no one here now to teach me, you see. I've got to . . . to look after the hills like you did. I can . . . *do* things but I don't *know* things, and Miss Tick says what you don't know can kill you. I want to be as good as you were. I will come back! I will come back soon! I promise I will come back, better than I went!'

A blue butterfly, blown off course by a gust, settled on Tiffany's shoulder, opened and shut its wings once or twice, then fluttered away.

Granny Aching had never been at home with words. She collected silence like other people

collected string. But she had a way of saying nothing that said it all.

Tiffany stayed for a while, until her tears had dried, and then went off back down the hill, leaving the everlasting wind to curl around the wheels and whistle down the chimney of the pot-bellied stove. Life went on.

It wasn't unusual for girls as young as Tiffany to go 'into service'. It meant working as a maid somewhere. Traditionally, you started by helping an old lady who lived by herself; she wouldn't be able to pay much, but since this was your first job you probably weren't worth much, either.

In fact, Tiffany practically ran Home Farm's dairy by herself, if someone helped her lift the big milk churns, and her parents had been surprised she had wanted to go into service at all. But as Tiffany said, it was something everyone did. You got out into the world a little bit. You met new people. You never knew what it could lead to.

That, rather cunningly, got her mother on her side. Her mother's rich aunt had gone off to be a scullery maid, and then a parlour maid, and had worked her way up until she was a housekeeper and married to a butler and lived in a fine house. It wasn't *her* fine house, and she only lived in a bit of it, but she was practically a *lady*.

Tiffany didn't intend to be a lady. This was all a ruse, anyway. And Miss Tick was in on it.

You weren't allowed to charge money for the

witching, so all witches did some other job as well. Miss Tick was basically a witch disguised as a teacher. She travelled around with the other wandering teachers who went in bands from place to place teaching anything to anybody in exchange for food or old clothes.

It was a good way to get around, because people in the chalk country didn't trust witches. They thought they danced around on moonlit nights without their drawers on. (Tiffany had made enquiries about this, and had been slightly relieved to find out that you didn't have to do this to be a witch. You could if you wanted to, but only if you were certain where all the nettles, thistles and hedgehogs were.)

But if it came to it, people were a bit wary of the wandering teachers too. They were said to pinch chickens and steal away children (which was true, in a way) and they went from village to village with their gaudy carts and wore long robes with leather pads on the sleeves and strange flat hats and talked amongst themselves using heathen lingo no one could understand, like '*Alea jacta est*' and '*Quid pro quo*'. It was quite easy for Miss Tick to lurk amongst them. *Her* pointy hat was a stealth version, which looked just like a black straw hat with paper flowers on it until you pressed the secret spring.

Over the last year or so Tiffany's mother had been quite surprised, and a little worried, at Tiffany's sudden thirst for education, which people in the village thought was a good thing in moderation but if taken unwisely could lead to restlessness.

Then a month ago, the message had come: *Be ready*.

Miss Tick, in her flowery hat, had visited the farm and had explained to Mr and Mrs Aching that an elderly lady up in the mountains had heard of Tiffany's *excellent* prowess with cheese and was willing to offer her the post of maid at four dollars a month, one day off a week, her own bed and a week's holiday at Hogswatch.

Tiffany knew her parents. Three dollars a month was a bit low, and five dollars would be suspiciously high, but prowess with cheese was worth the extra dollar. And a bed all to yourself was a very nice perk. Before most of Tiffany's sisters had left home, sleeping two sisters to a bed had been normal. It was a *good* offer.

Her parents had been impressed and slightly scared of Miss Tick, but they had been brought up to believe that people who knew more than you and used long words were quite important, so they'd agreed.

Tiffany accidentally heard them discussing it after she had gone to bed that night. It's quite easy to accidentally overhear people talking downstairs if you hold an upturned glass to the floorboards and accidentally put your ear to it.

She heard her father say that Tiffany didn't have to go away at all.

She heard her mother say that all girls wondered what was out there in the world, so it was best to get it out of her system. Besides, she was a very capable girl with a good head on her shoulders. Why, with

hard work there was no reason why one day she couldn't be a servant to someone quite important, like Aunt Hetty had been, and live in a house with an inside privy.

Her father said she'd find that scrubbing floors was the same everywhere.

Her mother said, well, in that case she'd get bored and come back home after the year was up and, by the way, what did 'prowess' mean?

'Superior skill', thought Tiffany to herself. They did have an old dictionary in the house, but her mother never opened it because the sight of all those words upset her. Tiffany had read it all the way through.

And that was it, and suddenly here she was, a month later, wrapping her old boots, which'd been worn by all her sisters before her, in a piece of clean rag and putting them in the second-hand suitcase her mother had bought her, which looked as if it was made of bad cardboard or pressed grape pips mixed with ear wax, and had to be held together with string.

There were goodbyes. She cried a bit, and her mother cried a lot, and her little brother Wentworth cried as well just in case he could get a sweet for doing so. Tiffany's father didn't cry but gave her a silver dollar and rather gruffly told her to be sure to write home every week, which is a man's way of crying. She said goodbye to the cheeses in the dairy and the sheep in the paddock and even to Ratbag the cat.

Then everyone apart from the cheeses and the cat stood at the gate and waved to her and Miss Tick – well, except for the sheep too – until they'd gone

nearly all the way down the chalky-white lane to the village.

And then there was silence except for the sound of their boots on the flinty surface and the endless song of the skylarks overhead. It was late August, and very hot, and the new boots pinched.

'I should take them off, if I was you,' said Miss Tick after a while.

Tiffany sat down by the side of the lane and got her old boots out of the case. She didn't bother to ask how Miss Tick knew about the tight new boots. Witches paid attention. The old boots, even though she had to wear several pairs of socks with them, were much more comfortable and really easy to walk in. They had been walking since long before Tiffany was born, and knew how to do it.

'And are we going to see any . . . little men today?' Miss Tick went on, once they were walking again.

'I don't know, Miss Tick,' said Tiffany. 'I told them a month ago I was leaving. They're very busy at this time of year. But there's *always* one or two of them watching me.'

Miss Tick looked around quickly. 'I can't see anything,' she said. 'Or hear anything.'

'No, that's how you can tell they're there,' said Tiffany. 'It's always a bit quieter if they're watching me. But they won't show themselves while you're with me. They're a bit frightened of hags – that's their word for witches,' she added quickly. 'It's nothing personal.'

Miss Tick sighed. 'When I was a little girl I'd have loved to see the pictsies,' she said. 'I used to put out

little saucers of milk. Of course, later on I realized that wasn't quite the thing to do.'

'No, you should have used strong licker,' said Tiffany.

She glanced at the hedge and thought she saw, just for the snap of a second, a flash of red hair. And she smiled, a little nervously.

Tiffany had been, if only for a few days, the nearest a human being can be to a queen of the fairies. Admittedly, she'd been called a *kelda* rather than a queen, and the Nac Mac Feegle should only be called fairies to their face if you were looking for a fight. On the other hand the Nac Mac Feegle were *always* looking for a fight, in a cheerful sort of way, and when they had no one to fight they fought one another, and if one was all by himself he'd kick his own nose just to keep in practice.

Technically, they *had* lived in Fairyland, but had been thrown out, probably for being drunk. And now, because if you'd ever been their kelda they never forgot you . . .

. . . they were always there.

There was always one somewhere on the farm, or circling on a buzzard high over the chalk downs. And they watched her, to help and protect her, whether she wanted them to or not. Tiffany had been as polite as possible about this. She'd hidden her diary right at the back of a drawer and blocked up the cracks in the privy with wadded paper, and done her best with the gaps in her bedroom floorboards too. They were

little *men*, after all. She was sure they tried to remain unseen so as not to disturb her, but she'd got very good at spotting them.

They granted wishes – not the magical fairytale three wishes, the ones that always go wrong in the end, but ordinary, everyday ones. The Nac Mac Feegle were immensely strong and fearless and incredibly fast, but they weren't good at understanding that what people *said* often wasn't what they *meant*. One day, in the dairy, Tiffany had said, 'I wish I had a sharper knife to cut this cheese,' and her mother's sharpest knife was quivering in the table beside her almost before she'd got the words out.

'I wish this rain would clear up' was probably OK, because the Feegles couldn't do actual magic, but she had learned to be careful not to wish for anything that might be achievable by some small, determined, strong, fearless and fast men who were also not above giving someone a good kicking if they felt like it.

Wishes needed thought. She was never likely to say, out loud, 'I wish that I could marry a handsome prince,' but knowing that if you did you'd probably open the door to find a stunned prince, a tied-up priest and a Nac Mac Feegle grinning cheerfully and ready to act as Best Man definitely made you watch what you said. But they could be helpful, in a haphazard way, and she'd taken to leaving out for them things that the family didn't need but might be useful to little people, like tiny mustard spoons, pins, a soup bowl that would make a nice bath for a Feegle

and, in case they didn't get the message, some soap. They didn't steal the soap.

Her last visit to the ancient burial mound high on the chalk down where the pictsies lived had been to attend the wedding of Rob Anybody, the Big Man of the clan, to Jeannie of the Long Lake. She was going to be the new kelda and spend most of the rest of her life in the mound, having babies like a queen bee.

Feegles from other clans had all turned up for the celebration, because if there's one thing a Feegle likes more than a party, it's a bigger party, and if there's anything better than a bigger party, it's a bigger party with someone else paying for the drink. To be honest, Tiffany had felt a bit out of place, being ten times as tall as the next tallest person there, but she'd been treated very well and Rob Anybody had made a long speech about her, calling her 'our fine big wee young hag' before falling face first into the pudding. It had all been very hot, and very loud, but she'd joined in the cheer when Jeannie had carried Rob Anybody over a tiny broomstick that had been laid on the floor. Traditionally, both the bride and the groom should jump over the broomstick but, equally traditionally, no self-respecting Feegle would be sober on his wedding day.

She'd been warned that it would be a good idea to leave then, because of the traditional fight between the bride's clan and the groom's clan, which could take until Friday.

Tiffany had bowed to Jeannie, because that's what hags did, and had a good look at her. She was small

and sweet and very pretty. She also had a glint in her eye and a certain proud lift to her chin. Nac Mac Feegle girls were very rare and they grew up knowing they were going to be keldas one day, and Tiffany had a definite feeling that Rob Anybody was going to find married life trickier than he thought.

She was going to be sorry to leave them behind, but not *terribly* sorry. They were nice in a way but they could, after a while, get on your nerves. Anyway, she was eleven now, and had a feeling that after a certain age you shouldn't slide down holes in the ground to talk to little men.

Besides, the look that Jeannie had given her, just for a moment, had been pure poison. Tiffany had read its meaning without having to try. Tiffany had been the kelda of the clan, even if it was only for a short time. She had also been engaged to be married to Rob Anybody, even if that had only been a sort of political trick. Jeannie knew all that. And the look had said: *He is mine. This place is mine. I do not want you here! Keep out!*

A pool of silence followed Tiffany and Miss Tick down the lane, since the usual things that rustle in hedges tended to keep very quiet when the Nac Mac Feegle were around.

They reached the little village green and sat down to wait for the carrier's cart that went just a bit faster than walking pace and would take five hours to get to the village of Twoshirts, where – Tiffany's parents thought – they'd get the big coach that ran all the way to the distant mountains and beyond.

Tiffany could actually see it coming up the road when she heard the hoofbeats across the green. She turned, and her heart seemed to leap and sink at the same time.

It was Roland, the Baron's son, on a fine black horse. He leaped down before the horse had stopped, and then stood there looking embarrassed.

'Ah, I see a very fine and interesting example of a . . . a . . . a big stone over there,' said Miss Tick in a sticky-sweet voice. 'I'll just go and have a look at it, shall I?'

Tiffany could have *pinched* her for that.

'Er, you're going, then,' said Roland as Miss Tick hurried away.

'Yes,' said Tiffany.

Roland looked as though he was going to explode with nervousness.

'I got this for you,' he said. 'I had it made by a man, er, over in Yelp.' He held out a package wrapped in soft paper.

Tiffany took it and put it carefully in her pocket.

'Thank you,' she said, and dropped a small curtsey. Strictly speaking that's what you had to do when you met a nobleman, but it just made Roland blush and stutter.

'O-open it later on,' said Roland. 'Er, I hope you'll like it.'

'Thank you,' said Tiffany sweetly.

'Here's the cart. Er . . . you don't want to miss it.'

'Thank you,' said Tiffany, and curtsied again, because of the effect it had. It was a little bit cruel, but sometimes you had to be.

Anyway, it would be very hard to miss the cart. If you ran fast, you could easily overtake it. It was so slow that 'stop' never came as a surprise.

There were no seats. The carrier went around the villages every other day, picking up packages and, sometimes, people. You just found a place where you could get comfortable among the boxes of fruit and rolls of cloth.

Tiffany sat on the back of the cart, her old boots dangling over the edge, swaying backwards and forwards as the cart lurched away on the rough road.

Miss Tick sat beside her, her black dress soon covered in chalk dust to the knees.

Tiffany noticed that Roland didn't get back on his horse until the cart was nearly out of sight.

And she knew Miss Tick. By now she would be just *bursting* to ask a question, because witches hate not knowing things. And, sure enough, when the village was left behind, Miss Tick said, after a lot of shifting and clearing her throat:

'Aren't you going to open it?'

'Open what?' said Tiffany, not looking at her.

'He gave you a present,' said Miss Tick.

'I thought you were examining an interesting stone, Miss Tick,' said Tiffany accusingly.

'Well, it was only *fairly* interesting,' said Miss Tick, completely unembarrassed. 'So . . . are you?'

'I'll wait until later,' said Tiffany. She didn't want a discussion about Roland at this point or, really, at all.

She didn't actually *dislike* him. She'd found him in the land of the Queen of the Fairies and had sort of

rescued him, although he had been unconscious most of the time. A sudden meeting with the Nac Mac Feegle when they're feeling edgy can do that to a person. *Of course*, without anyone actually lying, everyone at home had come to believe that *he* had rescued *her*. A nine-year-old girl armed with a frying pan couldn't possibly have rescued a thirteen-year-old boy who'd got a sword.

Tiffany hadn't minded that. It stopped people asking too many questions she didn't want to answer or even know how to. But he'd taken to . . . hanging around. She kept accidentally running into him on walks more often than was really possible, and he always seemed to be at the same village events she went to. He was always polite, but she couldn't stand the way he kept looking like a spaniel that had been kicked.

Admittedly – and it took some admitting – he was a lot less of a twit than he had been. On the other hand, there had been such of lot of twit to begin with.

And then she thought, Horse, and wondered why until she realized that her eyes had been watching the landscape while her brain stared at the past . . .

'I've never seen that before,' said Miss Tick.

Tiffany welcomed it as an old friend. The Chalk rose out of the plains quite suddenly on this side of the hills. There was a little valley cupped into the fall of the down, and there was a carving in the curve it made. Turf had been cut away in long flowing lines so that the bare chalk made the shape of an animal.

'It's the White Horse,' said Tiffany.

'Why do they call it that?' said Miss Tick.

Tiffany looked at her. 'Because the chalk is white?' she suggested, trying not to suggest that Miss Tick was being a bit dense.

'No, I meant why do they call it a horse? It doesn't *look* like a horse. It's just . . . flowing lines . . .'

. . . that look as if they're moving, Tiffany thought.

It had been cut out of the turf right back in the old days, people said, by the folk who'd built the stone circles and buried their kind in big earth mounds. And they'd cut out the Horse at one end of this little green valley, ten times bigger than a real horse and, if you didn't look at it with your mind right, the wrong shape too. Yet they must have known horses, owned horses, seen them every day, and they weren't stupid people just because they lived a long time ago.

Tiffany had once asked her father about the look of the Horse, when they'd come all the way over here for a sheep fair, and he told her what Granny Aching had told him too, when he was a little boy. He passed on what she said word for word, and Tiffany did the same now.

''Taint what a horse *looks* like,' said Tiffany. 'It's what a horse *be*.'

'Oh,' said Miss Tick. But because she was a teacher as well as a witch, and probably couldn't help herself, she added, 'The funny thing is, of course, that officially there is no such thing as a white horse. They're called grey.'*

*She had to say that, because she was a witch and a teacher and that's a terrible combination. They want things to be *right*. They like things to be *correct*. If you want to upset a witch you don't have to mess around with charms and spells, you just have to put her in a room with a picture that's hung slightly crooked and watch her squirm.

'Yes, I know,' said Tiffany. 'This one's white,' she added flatly.

That quietened Miss Tick down, for a while, but she seemed to have something on her mind.

'I expect you're upset about leaving the Chalk, aren't you?' she said as the cart rattled on.

'No,' said Tiffany.

'It's OK to be,' said Miss Tick.

'Thank you, but I'm not really,' said Tiffany.

'If you want to have a bit of a cry, you don't have to pretend you've got some grit in your eye or anything—'

'I'm all right, actually,' said Tiffany. 'Honestly.'

'You see, if you bottle that sort of thing up it can cause terrible damage later on.'

'I'm not bottling, Miss Tick.'

In fact, Tiffany was a bit surprised at not crying, but she wasn't going to tell Miss Tick that. She left a sort of space in her head to burst into tears in, but it wasn't filling up. Perhaps it was because she'd wrapped up all those feelings and doubts and left them up on the hill by the pot-bellied stove.

'And if of course you were feeling a bit downcast at the moment, I'm sure you could open the present he—' Miss Tick tried.

'Tell me about Miss Level,' Tiffany said quickly. The name and address was all she knew about the lady she was going to stay with, but an address like 'Miss Level, Cottage in the Woods near the dead oak tree in Lost Man's Lane, High Overhang, If Out Leave Letters in Old Boot by Door' sounded promising.

'Miss Level, yes,' said Miss Tick, defeated. 'Er, yes. She's not really very old but she says she'll be happy to have a third pair of hands around the place.'

You couldn't slip words past Tiffany, not even if you were Miss Tick.

'So there's someone else there already?' she said.

'Er . . . no. Not exactly,' said Miss Tick.

'Then she's got four arms?' said Tiffany. Miss Tick had sounded like someone trying to avoid a subject.

Miss Tick sighed. It was difficult to talk to someone who paid attention all the time. It put you off.

'It's best if you wait until you meet her,' she said. 'Anything I tell you will only give you the wrong idea. I'm sure you'll get along with her. She's very good with people, and in her spare time she's a research witch. She keeps bees – and goats, the milk of which, I believe, is very good indeed owing to homogenized fats.'

'What does a research witch do?' Tiffany asked.

'Oh, it's a very ancient craft. She tries to find new spells by learning how old ones were really done. You know all that stuff about "ear of bat and toe of frog"? They never work, but Miss Level thinks it's because we don't know exactly what *kind* of frog, or which toe—'

'I'm sorry, but I'm not going to help anyone chop up innocent frogs and bats,' said Tiffany firmly.

'Oh, no, she never kills any!' said Miss Tick hurriedly. 'She only uses creatures that have died naturally or been run over or committed suicide. Frogs can get quite depressed at times.'

The cart rolled on, down the white, dusty road, until it was lost from view.

Nothing happened. Skylarks sang, so high up they were invisible. Grass seeds filled the air. Sheep baa'd, high up on the Chalk.

And then something came along the road. It moved like a little slow whirlwind, so it could be seen only by the dust it stirred up. As it went past, it made a noise like a swarm of flies.

Then it, too, disappeared down the hill . . .

After a while a voice, low down in the long grass, said: 'Ach, *crivens*! And it's on her trail, right enough!'

A second voice said: 'Surely the old hag will spot it?'

'Whut? The teachin' hag? She's nae a proper hag!'

'She's got the pointy hat under all them flowers, Big Yan,' said the second voice, a bit reproachfully. 'I seen it. She presses a wee spring an' the point comes up!'

'Oh, aye, Hamish, an' I daresay she does the readin' and the writin' well enough, but she disnae ken aboot stuff that's no' in books. An' I'm no' showin' meself while she's aroond. She's the kind of a body that'd write things doon about a man! C'mon, let's go and find the kelda!'

The Nac Mac Feegle of the Chalk hated writing for all kinds of reasons, but the biggest one was this: writing *stays*. It fastens words down. A man can speak his mind and some nasty wee *scuggan* will write it down and who knows what he'll do with those words? Ye might as weel nail a man's shadow tae the wall!

But now they had a new kelda, and a new kelda

brings new ideas. That's how it's supposed to *work*. It stopped a clan getting too set in its ways. Kelda Jeannie was from the Long Lake clan, up in the mountains – and they *did* write things down.

She didn't see why her husband shouldn't, either. And Rob Anybody was finding out that Jeannie was definitely a kelda.

Sweat was dripping off his forehead. He'd once fought a wolf all by himself, and he'd cheerfully do it again with his eyes shut and one hand tied behind him rather than do what he was doing now.

He had mastered the first two rules of writing, as he understood them.

1) Steal some paper.

2) Steal a pencil.

Unfortunately there was more to it than that.

Now he held the stump of pencil in front of him in both hands, and leaned backwards as two of his brothers pushed him towards the piece of paper pinned up on the chamber wall (it was an old bill for sheep bells, stolen from the farm). The rest of the clan watched, in fascinated horror, from the galleries around the walls.

'Mebbe I could kind o' *ease* my way inta it gently,' he protested as his heels left little grooves in the packed-earth floor of the mound. 'Mebbe I could just do one o' they commeras or full stoppies—'

'You're the Big Man, Rob Anybody, so it's fittin' ye should be the first tae do the writin',' said Jeannie. 'I cannae hae a husband who cannae even write his ain name. I showed you the letters, did I not?'

'Aye, wumman, the nasty, loopy, bendy things!' growled Rob. 'I dinnae trust that Q, that's a letter that has it in for a man. That's a letter with a sting, that one!'

'You just hold the pencil on the paper and I'll tell ye what marks to make,' said Jeannie, folding her arms.

'Aye, but 'tis a bushel of trouble, writin',' said Rob. 'A word writ doon can hang a man!'

'Wheest, now, stop that! 'Tis easy!' snapped Jeannie. 'Bigjob babbies can do it, and you're a full growed Feegle!'

'An' writin' even goes on sayin' a man's wurds after he's *deid*!' said Rob Anybody, waving the pencil as if trying to ward off evil spirits. 'Ye cannae tell me that's right!'

'Oh, so you're *afeared* o' the letters, is that it?' said Jeannie artfully. 'Ach, that's fine. All big men fear something. Take the pencil off'f him, Wullie. Ye cannae ask a man to face his fears.'

There was silence in the mound as Daft Wullie nervously took the pencil stub from his brother. Every beady eye was turned to Rob Anybody. His hands opened and shut. He started to breathe heavily, still glaring at the blank paper. He stuck out his chin.

'Ach, ye're a harrrrd wumman, Jeannie Mac Feegle!' he said at last. He spat on his hands and snatched back the pencil stub from Daft Wullie. 'Gimme that tool o' perdition! Them letters won't know whut's hit them!'

'There's my brave lad!' said Jeannie as Rob squared up to the paper. 'Right, then. The first letter is an R.

That's the one that looks like a fat man walking, remember?'

The assembled pictsies watched as Rob Anybody, grunting fiercely and with his tongue sticking out of the corner of his mouth, dragged the pencil through the curves and lines of the letters. He looked at the kelda expectantly after each one.

'That's it,' she said, at last. 'A bonny effort!'

Rob Anybody stood back and looked critically at the paper.

'That's it?' he said.

'Aye,' said Jeannie. 'Ye've writ your ain name, Rob Anybody!'

Rob stared at the letters again. 'I'm gonna go to pris'n noo?' he said.

There was a polite cough from beside Jeannie. It had belonged to the Toad. He had no other name, because toads don't go in for names. Despite sinister forces that would have people think differently, no toad has ever been called Tommy the Toad, for example. It's just not something that happens.

This toad had once been a lawyer (a human lawyer; toads manage without them) who'd been turned into a toad by a fairy godmother who'd *intended* to turn him into a frog but had been a bit hazy on the difference. Now he lived in the Feegle mound, where he ate worms and helped them out with the difficult thinking.

'I've told you, Mr Anybody, that *just* having your name written down is no problem at all,' he said. 'There's nothing illegal about the words "Rob

Anybody". Unless, of course,' and the toad gave a little legal laugh, 'it's meant as an instruction!'

None of the Feegles laughed. They liked their humour to be a bit, well, funnier.

Rob Anybody stared at his very shaky writing. 'That's my name, aye?'

'It certainly is, Mr Anybody.'

'An' nothin' bad's happenin' at a',' Rob noted. He looked closer. 'How can you tell it's my name?'

'Ah, that'll be the readin' side o' things,' said Jeannie.

'That's where the lettery things make a sound in yer heid?' said Rob.

'That's the bunny,' said the toad. 'But we thought you'd like to start with the more *physical* aspect of the procedure.'

'Could I no' mebbe just learn the writin' and leave the readin' to someone else?' Rob asked, without much hope.

'No, my man's got to do both,' said Jeannie, folding her arms. When a female Feegle does that, there's no hope left.

'Ach, it's a terrible thing for a man when his wumman gangs up on him wi' a toad,' said Rob, shaking his head. But, when he turned to look at the grubby paper, there was just a hint of pride in his face.

'Still, that's my name, right?' he said, grinning.

Jeannie nodded.

'Just there, all by itself and no' on a Wanted poster or anything. My name, drawn by me.'

'Yes, Rob,' said the kelda.

'*My* name, under my thumb. No scunner can do anythin' aboot it? *I've* got my name, nice and safe?'

Jeannie looked at the toad, who shrugged. It was generally held by those who knew them that most of the brains in the Nac Mac Feegle clans ended up in the women.

'A man's a man o' some standin' when he's got his own name where no one can touch it,' said Rob Anybody. 'That's serious magic, that is—'

'The R is the wrong way roond and you left the A and a Y out of "Anybody",' said Jeannie, because it is a wife's job to stop her husband actually exploding with pride.

'Ach, wumman, I didna' ken which way the fat man wuz walking,' said Rob, airily waving a hand. 'Ye canna trust the fat man. That's the kind of thing us nat'ral writin' folk knows about. One day he might walk this way, next day he might walk *that* way.'

He beamed at his name:

'And I reckon you got it wrong wi' them Y's,' he went on. 'I reckon it should be N E Bo D. That's Enn . . . eee . . . bor . . . dee, see? That's *sense*!'

He stuck the pencil into his hair, and gave her a defiant look.

Jeannie sighed. She'd grown up with seven hundred brothers and knew how they thought, which was often quite fast while being totally in the wrong direction. And if they couldn't bend their thinking around the world, they bent the world around their

thinking. Usually, her mother had told her, it was best not to argue.

Actually, only half a dozen Feegles in the Long Lake clan could read and write very well. They were considered odd, strange hobbies. After all, what – when you got out of bed in the morning – were they good for? You didn't need to know them to wrestle a trout or mug a rabbit or get drunk. The wind couldn't be read and you couldn't write on water.

But things written down lasted. They were the voices of Feegles who'd died long ago, who'd seen strange things, who'd made strange discoveries. Whether you approved of that depended on how creepy you thought it was. The Long Lake clan approved. Jeannie wanted the best for her new clan too.

It wasn't easy, being a young kelda. You came to a new clan, with only a few of your brothers as a bodyguard, where you married a husband and ended up with hundreds of brothers-in-law. It could be troubling if you let your mind dwell on it. At least back on the island in the Long Lake she'd had her mother to talk to, but a kelda never went home again.

Except for her bodyguard brothers, a kelda was all alone.

Jeannie was homesick and lonely and frightened of the future, which is why she was about to get things wrong . . .

'Rob!'

Hamish and Big Yan came tumbling through the fake rabbit hole that was the entrance to the mound.

Rob Anybody glared at them. 'We wuz engaged in a lit'try enterprise,' he said.

'Yes, Rob, but we watched the big wee young hag safe awa', like you said, but there's a hiver after her!' Hamish blurted out.

'Are ye sure?' said Rob, dropping his pencil. 'I never heard o' one of them in this world!'

'Oh, aye,' said Big Yan. 'Its buzzin' fair made my teeths ache!'

'So did you no' tell her, ye daftie?' said Rob.

'There's that other hag wi' her, Rob,' said Big Yan. 'The educatin' hag.'

'Miss Tick?' said the toad.

'Aye, the one wi' a face like a yard o' yoghurt,' said Big Yan. 'An' you said we wuzna' to show ourselves, Rob.'

'Aye, weel, this is different—' Rob Anybody began, but stopped.

He hadn't been a husband for very long, but upon marriage men get a whole lot of extra senses bolted into their brain, and one is there to tell a man that he's suddenly neck deep in real trouble.

Jeannie was tapping her foot. Her arms were still folded. She had the special smile women learn about when they marry too, which seems to say 'Yes, you're in big trouble but I'm going to let you dig yourself in even more deeply.'

'What's this about the big wee hag?' she said, her voice as small and meek as a mouse trained at the Rodent College of Assassins.

'Oh, ah, ach, weel, aye . . .' Rob began, his face

falling. 'Do ye not bring her to mind, dear? She was at oor wedding, aye. She was oor kelda for a day or two, ye ken. The Old One made her swear to that just afore she went back to the Land o' the Livin',' he added, in case mentioning the wishes of the last kelda would deflect whatever storm was coming. 'It's as well tae keep an eye on her, ye ken, her being oor hag and a' . . .'

Rob Anybody's voice trailed away in the face of Jeannie's look.

'A true kelda has tae marry the Big Man,' said Jeannie. 'Just like I married ye, Rob Anybody Feegle, and am I no' a good wife tae ye?'

'Oh, fine, fine,' Rob burbled. 'But—'

'And ye cannae be married to two wives, because that would be bigamy, would it not?' said Jeannie, her voice dangerously sweet.

'Ach, it wasnae *that* big,' said Rob Anybody, desperately looking around for a way of escape. 'And it wuz only temp'ry, an' she's but a lass, an' she wuz good at thinkin'—'

'*I'm* good at thinking, Rob Anybody, and I am the kelda o' this clan, am I no'? There can only be one, is that not so? And I am thinking that there will be no more chasin' after this big wee girl. Shame on ye, anyway. She'll no' want the like o' Big Yan a-gawpin' at her all the time, I'm sure.'

Rob Anybody hung his head. 'Aye . . . but . . .' he said.

'But what?'

'A hiver's chasin' the puir wee lass.'

There was a long pause before Jeannie said, 'Are ye sure?'

'Aye, Kelda,' said Big Yan. 'Once you hear that buzzin' ye never forget it.'

Jeannie bit her lip. Then, looking a little pale, she said, 'Ye said she's got the makin's o' a powerful hag, Rob?'

'Aye, but nae one in his'try has survived a hiver! Ye cannae kill it, ye cannae stop it, ye cannae—'

'But wuz ye no' tellin' me how the big wee girl even fought the Quin and won?' said Jeannie. 'Wanged her wi' a skillet, ye said. That means she's good, aye? If she is a true hag, she'll find a way hersel'. We all ha' to dree our weird. Whatever's out there, she's got to face it. If she cannae, she's no true hag.'

'Aye, but a hiver's worse than—' Rob began.

'She's off to learn hagglin' from other hags,' said Jeannie. 'An' I must learn keldarin' all by myself. Ye must hope she learns as fast as me, Rob Anybody.'