The
BEAST
and the
BETHANY

For Maureen Meggitt, a 511-year-old who almost certainly keeps a beast in her attic.
J. M. P.

For Amy, my wonderful agent
I. F.

First published in Great Britain 2020 by Egmont Books

An imprint of HarperCollins*Publishers*
1 London Bridge Street
London SE1 9GF

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ISBN 978 1 4052 9888 9

egmontbooks.co.uk

A CIP catalogue record for this title is available from the British Library

Printed and bound in Great Britain by CPI Group
71069/003

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The Beast and the Bethany

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EGMONT

The Purple Parrot

Ebenezer Tweezer was a terrible man with a wonderful life.

He never went hungry because all his fridges were piled with food. He never struggled to understand long words, like confibularity or pinickleruff, because he very rarely read books.

There were no children or friends in his life, so he was never troubled by unpleasant noises or unwanted conversations. There were also no parties or celebrations for him to attend, so he was never hot and bothered about what he should wear.

Ebenezer Tweezer didn't even have to worry about death. At the time this story begins, he was within

a week of his 512th birthday, and yet, if you were to have bumped into him on the street, you would have thought him to be a young man – certainly no more than twenty years old.

You might also have thought that he was quite handsome. He had short golden hair, a small nose, a soft mouth and a pair of eyes which dazzled like diamonds in the moonlight. There was also a wonderful look of innocence about him.

Sadly, looks can be deceiving. You see, at the time when this story begins, Ebenezer was about to do a very bad thing.

All Ebenezer did at first was walk into a bird shop. He then patiently waited behind an impatient person at the till. The impatient person was a small, bony girl who was wearing a backpack with two stickers on it. One read 'BETHANY' and the other 'BOG OFF!'

"I wanna pet!" said the girl to the large, pleasant bird-keeper.

"What sort were you looking for?" he asked in return.

"A frog! Or a panther! Ooh, or a polar bear!"

"'Fraid you're in the wrong place. The polar bear and panther shop is down the road, and the frog market is

BETHANY
BOG OFF!
OWL'S HARMONY

only open on Wednesdays. We can do you a bird, but not much else," explained the bird-keeper.

The girl reached into her backpack and pulled out a flip-flop, a half-eaten biscuit, two seashells and a ruler which said 'PROPERTY OF GEOFFREY' on it. She laid out all the items on the counter.

"What kind of bird will that buy me?" asked the girl.

The bird-keeper looked thoughtfully at the items and did some sums in his head. "If you give me the backpack as well, I'll give you ten worms," he said.

The girl was very pleased with this offer. She shrugged off the backpack and handed it over. In return, the bird-keeper took out ten worms from his pocket and plopped them into her hands. The girl barged past Ebenezer and out of the shop.

"Sorry 'bout that, Mister Tweezer," said the bird-keeper. "How can I help?"

"That's quite all right," said Ebenezer. "I've come to pick up the Wintlorian purple-breasted parrot."

When the bird-keeper brought out the sleeping parrot, Ebenezer did not snatch it away. He waited for the cage to be handed over, and he stayed in the shop to speak for a while even though he was not a big fan

of conversation.

"This is a special one, remember now," said the bird-keeper. "Only twenty of them left in the world. You ain't the sorta person to lose him, are you?"

"I won't do that," answered Ebenezer, shuffling where he stood.

"You don't get many of these around no more – took me a long time to track one down. Ain't every shop can get you a real talking, singing parrot. Especially ones which sing proper human songs, instead of those tweety ones. These sorts of birds love an audience. You ain't that sorta person what's gonna keep it for yourself, hidden away, are you?" asked the bird-keeper.

"I won't do that," said Ebenezer. He was feeling most uncomfortable under the bird-keeper's gaze.

"These sortsa birds need a lotta care and attention. They need love. You ain't gonna treat it bad, are you?" asked the bird-keeper.

"Of course not!" answered Ebenezer, in a high and shaky voice.

The bird-keeper knew and loved each one of his birds, from the aquatic warblers to the yellow-legged seagulls, and he did not want to see any of them go to a bad home.

He took a long, hard stare at Ebenezer.

"I know exactly what sorta person you are," said the bird-keeper, after a second or two of staring.

Ebenezer gulped.

"You're a great bird owner!" said the bird-keeper. "I can see it in your face!"

Ebenezer smiled with relief and handed over the money. He paid far more than the agreed price, as a special thank you to the bird-keeper for his hard work.

He bid farewell, and left with the caged and sleeping parrot. He climbed into his car and started the short drive back to his house. Just as he was parking, the parrot woke up with a large yawn.

"Good morning!" said the parrot, in a distinctly unparroty voice. He spoke in low, chocolatey tones.

"It's late afternoon," said Ebenezer.

"Whoopsie-poopsie! Well. Good late afternoon. My name is Patrick."

"And mine is Mr Tweezer. Welcome to your new home."

"Whoa and gosh!" exclaimed Patrick.

The whoa and the gosh were both the right sorts of words to say, because Ebenezer's house was nothing

short of extraordinary. It was fifteen storeys tall and twelve elephants wide. The front of it had been painted red, and the gardens were large enough to host a dozen different tea parties, all at once.

As Patrick looked up from his cage, he was filled with excitement. He was a well-travelled parrot, having performed singing tours in several countries, but he had never seen anything like this. He wanted to fly around every part of the house and take it all in.

"Can I come out of my cage now?" he asked.

"Not yet," answered Ebenezer. "There's someone I want you to meet first. Well, some*thing* is perhaps a better description.

Ebenezer got out of the car and took Patrick into the house. He headed up the stairs, carrying Patrick in his cage.

"This thing lives on the top floor," said Ebenezer. "And it's very excited to meet you."

Ebenezer climbed the stairs, whilst Patrick took in everything around him. The journey up fifteen flights of stairs passed quickly, as Patrick looked around at all the beautiful pictures and antiques which lined the walls.

"Try not to be scared," said Ebenezer, once they reached the top floor. "It won't like you if you are scared."

Ebenezer pushed down the handle of the rickety old door at the top of the stairs. It opened with a creak.

He switched on the light. The room was not like the rest of the house at all. It was damp and smelled strongly of boiled cabbage. It was bare, save for the presence of a set of red velvet curtains and a small, golden bell at the end of the room.

Ebenezer walked over to the curtains. He paused before drawing them open.

"Don't shout and don't scream. It doesn't like those sorts of noises," he warned Patrick.

Ebenezer drew the curtains open and revealed the beast. The beast was a big blob of grey, with three black eyes, two black tongues, and a large, dribbling mouth. It had tiny hands and tiny feet.

Ebenezer was pleased to see that Patrick reacted remarkably well. He didn't scream and he didn't shout 'Ewww, gross!'

After taking a moment to compose himself, Patrick said, "Good morning! My name's Patrick."

"It's late afternoon." The beast's voice was soft and slithery – like a snake made of feathers. "I want you to sing."

"What would you like me to sing?" asked Patrick.

"Sing a song about me!" demanded the beast.

Patrick paused for a moment. Then, he began to sing.

"The beast has the finest house in the land.
It's so tall and long and terribly grand.
Even the Queen, with her palace so wide,
Couldn't compete with the beast if she tried."

Ebenezer was impressed. The tune was pleasing to hear, and the lyrics seemed to make the beast happy.

"The beast has a face, so useful and round.
With three eyes to make sure lost things are found,
And two tongues for licking all it can find,
The beast is quite clearly one of a kind."

Patrick stopped singing. He said he was sorry that it was such a short song, and that he would be able to sing something a little longer once he got to know the beast better.

Ebenezer let out a sigh of relief when he saw that the beast was smiling. The smile was wet with dribble.

"That was beautiful. Tell me, are there many birdies like you?" asked the beast.

"Oh gosh no. There are only twenty of us left in the whole world." Patrick's eyes filled with purple tears. He

tried to distract himself from his own sadness by asking, "How many beasts like you are there?"

"I am the only one, the last survivor." The beast smiled as it said this. "It's good that you're rare. I like rare things. Come a little closer so that I can see you better, birdy."

The beast eyed Ebenezer expectantly. Ebenezer picked up the cage and brought Patrick closer to the beast's three black, blinking eyes.

"Closer," ordered the beast.

Ebenezer dragged the cage so that it was within three footsteps of the beast.

"Even closer," said the beast.

Ebenezer brought the cage so that it was right in front of the beast's large, dribbling mouth. The smell of boiled cabbage was now eye-wateringly strong.

"Can you see me now?" asked Patrick, a little nervously.

"Oh, I could see you fine the whole time," said the beast, as it licked its dribbling mouth with its two black tongues.

"Then . . . then why did you need me to come closer?" asked Patrick.

It was the last question that he ever asked.