

The Witches

We were in the big living-room of her house in Oslo and I was ready for bed. The curtains were never drawn in that house, and through the windows I could see huge snowflakes falling slowly on to an outside world that was as black as tar. My grandmother was tremendously old and wrinkled, with a massive wide body which was smothered in grey lace. She sat there majestic in her armchair, filling every inch of it. Not even a mouse could have squeezed in to sit beside her. I myself, just seven years old, was crouched on the floor at her feet, wearing pyjamas, dressing-gown and slippers. 5

"You swear you aren't pulling my leg?" I kept saying to her. "You swear you aren't just pretending?" 10

"Listen," she said, "I have known no less than five children who have simply vanished off the face of this earth, never to be seen again. The witches took them."

"I still think you're just trying to frighten me," I said. 15

"I am trying to make sure you don't go the same way," she said. "I love you and I want you to stay with me."

"Tell me about the children who disappeared," I said. 20

My grandmother was the only grandmother I ever met who smoked cigars. She lit one now, a long black cigar that smelt of burning rubber. "The first child I knew who disappeared", she said, 'was called Ranghild Hansen. Ranghild was about eight at the time, and she was playing with her little sister on the lawn. Their mother, who was baking bread in the kitchen, came outside for a breath of air. 'Where's Ranghild?' she asked. 25

'She went away with the tall lady,' the little sister said.

'What tall lady?' the mother said. 30

'The tall lady in white gloves,' the little sister said. 'She took Ranghild by the hand and led her away.' No one', my grandmother said, 'ever saw Ranghild again.'

'Didn't they search for her?' I asked. 35

'They searched for miles around. Everyone in the town helped, but they never found her.'

'What happened to the other four children?' I asked.

'They vanished just as Ranghild did.' 40

Turn Over

'How, Grandmamma? How did they vanish?'

'In every case a strange lady was seen outside the house, just before it happened.' 45

"But how did they vanish?" I asked.

"The second one was very peculiar," my grand-mother said. "There was a family called Christian-sen. They lived up on Holmenkollen, and they had an old oil-painting in the living room which they were very proud of. The painting showed some ducks in the yard outside a farmhouse. There were no people in the painting, just a flock of ducks on a grassy farmyard and the farmhouse in the back-ground. It was a large painting and rather pretty. Well, one day their daughter Solveg came home from school eating an apple. She said a nice lady had given it to her on the street. The next morning little Solveg was not in her bed. The parents searched everywhere but they couldn't find her. Then all of a sudden, her father shouted, 'There she is! That's Solveg feeding the ducks!' He was pointing at the oil-painting, and sure enough Solveg was in it. She was standing in the farmyard in the act of throwing bread to the ducks out of a basket. The father rushed up to the painting and touched her. But that didn't help. She was simply a part of the painting, just a picture painted on the canvas. 50 55 60