

## Snow

WHEN WE GOT TO THE STRANGE HOUSE IT BEGAN TO snow in quite a different way. A mass of tired old clouds opened and flung snow at us, all of a sudden and just anyhow. They weren't ordinary snowflakes – they fell straight down in large sticky lumps, they clung to each other and sank quickly and they weren't white, but grey. The whole world was as heavy as lead.

Mummy carried in the suitcases and stamped her feet on the doormat and talked the whole time because she thought the whole thing was such fun and that everything was different.

But I said nothing because I didn't like this strange house. I stood in the window and watched the snow falling, and it was all wrong. It wasn't the same as in town. There it blows black and white over the roof or

falls gently as if from heaven, and forms beautiful arches over the sitting-room window. The landscape looked dangerous too. It was bare and open and swallowed up the snow, and the trees stood in black rows that ended in nothing. At the edge of the world there was a narrow fringe of forest. Everything was wrong. It should be winter in town and summer in the country. Everything was topsy-turvy.

The house was big and empty, and there were too many rooms. Everything was very clean and you could never hear your own steps as you walked because the carpets were so big and they were as soft as fur.

If you stood in the furthest room, you could see through all the other rooms and it made you feel sad; it was like a train ready to leave with its lights shining over the platform. The last room was dark like the inside of a tunnel except for a faint glow in the gold frames and the mirror which was hung too high on the wall. All the lamps were soft and misty and made a very tiny circle of light. And when you ran you made no noise.

It was just the same outside. Soft and vague, and the snow went on falling and falling.

I asked why we were living in this strange house but got no proper answer. The person who cooked the food was hardly ever to be seen and didn't talk. She padded in without one noticing her and then out again. The door swung to without a sound and rocked backwards and forwards for a long time before it was still. I showed that I didn't like this house by keeping quiet. I didn't say a word.

In the afternoon the snow was even greyer and fell in flocks and stuck to the window-panes and then slid down and new flocks appeared out of the twilight and replaced them. They were like grey hands with a hundred fingers. I tried to watch one all the way as it fell, it spread out and fell, faster and faster. I stared at the next one and the next one and in the end my eyes began to hurt and I got scared.

It was hot everywhere and there was enough room for crowds of people but there were only two of us. I said nothing.

Mummy was happy and rushed all over the place saying: "What peace and quiet! Isn't it lovely and warm!" And so she sat down at a big shiny table and began to draw. She took the lace tablecloth off and spread out all her illustrations and opened the bottle of Indian ink.

Then I went upstairs. The stairs creaked and groaned and made lots of noises that stairs make when a family has gone up and down them for ages. That's good. Stairs should do that sort of thing. One knows exactly which step squeaks and which one doesn't and where one has to tread if one doesn't want to make oneself heard. It was just that this staircase wasn't our staircase. Quite a different family had used it. Therefore I thought this staircase was creepy.

Upstairs all the soft lamps were on in the same way and all the rooms were warm and tidy and all the doors were standing open. Only one door was closed. Inside, it was cold and dark. It was the box room. The other family's belongings were lying there in packing-cases and



trunks and there were mothproof bags hanging in long rows with a little snow on top of them.

Now I could hear the snow. It was falling all the time, whispering and rustling to itself and in one corner it had crept onto the floor.

The other family was everywhere in there, so I shut the door and went down again and said I wanted to go to bed. Actually I didn't want to go to bed at all, but I thought it would be best. Then I wouldn't have to say anything. The bed was as wide and desolate as the landscape. outside. The eiderdown was like a hand, too. You sank and sank right to the bottom of the earth under a big soft hand. Nothing was like it was at home, or like anywhere else.

In the morning it was still snowing in just the same way. Mummy had already got started with her work and was very cheerful. She didn't have to light fires or get meals ready and didn't have to be worried about anybody. I said nothing.

I went to the furthest room and watched the snow. I had a great responsibility and had to see what the snow was doing. It had risen since yesterday. A thousand tons of wet snow had slithered down the window-panes, and I had to climb onto a chair to see the long grey landscape. The snow had risen out there, too. The trees were thinner and more timid and the horizon had moved further away. I looked at everything until I knew that soon we would be done for. This snow had decided to go on falling until everything was a single, vast wet snowdrift, and nobody would remember what had been underneath it.

All the trees would sink into the earth and all the houses. No roads and no tracks – just snow falling and falling and falling.

I went up to the boxroom and listened to it falling, I heard how it stuck fast and grew. I couldn't think of anything but the snow.

Mummy went on drawing.

I was building with the cushions on the sofa and sometimes I looked at her through a peephole between them. She felt me looking and asked: "Are you alright?" While she went on drawing. And I answered: "Of course". Then I crept on hands and knees into the end room and climbed onto a chair and saw how the snow was sinking down over me. Now the whole horizon had crept below the edge of the world. The fringe of forest couldn't be seen any longer; it had slid over. The world had capsized, it was turning over quietly, a little bit every day.

The very thought of it made me feel giddy. Slowly, slowly, the world was turning, heavy with snow. The trees and houses were no longer upright. They were slanting. Soon it would be difficult to walk straight. All the people on earth would have to creep. If they had forgotten to fasten their windows, they would burst open. The doors would burst open. The water barrels would fall over and begin to roll over the endless field and out over the edge of the world. The whole world was full of things rolling, slithering and falling. Big things rumbled, you could hear them from far off, and you had to work out where they would come, and get away from them. Here they were, rumbling past,

leaping in the snow when the angle was too great, and finally falling into space. Small houses without cellars broke loose and whirled away. The snow stopped falling downwards, it flew horizontally. It fell upwards and disappeared. Everything that couldn't hold on tight rolled out into space, and slowly the sky went dark and turned black. We crept under the furniture between the windows, taking care not to tread on the glass. But from time to time a picture or a lamp bracket fell and smashed the window-pane. The house groaned and the plaster came loose. And outside, large heavy objects rumbled past, rolling right through the whole of Finland all the way down from the Arctic Circle, and they were even heavier because they had collected so much snow as they rolled and sometimes people fell past screaming all the time.

The snow on the ground began to slither away. It slid in an enormous avalanche which grew and grew over the edge of the world ... oh no! oh no!

I rolled backwards and forwards on the carpet to make the horror of it seem greater, and in the end I saw the wall heave over me and the pictures hung straight out on their wires.

"What are you doing?" Mummy asked.

Then I lay still and said nothing.

"Shall we have a story?" she asked, and went on drawing.

But I didn't want any other story than this one of my own. But one doesn't say that sort of thing. So I said: "Come up and look at the attic."

Mummy dried her Indian ink pen and came with me. We stood in the attic and froze for a while and Mummy said "It's lonely here," so we went back into the warmth again and she forgot to tell me a story. Then I went to bed.

Next morning the daylight was green, underwater lighting throughout the room. Mummy was asleep. I got up and opened the door and saw that the lamps were on in all the rooms although it was morning and the green light came through the snow which covered the windows all the way up. Now it had happened. The house was a single enormous snowdrift, and the surface of the ground was somewhere high up above the roof. Soon the trees would creep down into the snow until only their tops stuck out, and then the tops would disappear too and everything would level itself off and be flat. I could see it, I knew. Not even praying would stop it.

I became very solemn and quite calm and sat down on the carpet in front of the blazing fire.

Mummy woke up and came in and said, "Look how funny it is with snow covering the windows," because she didn't understand how serious it all was. When I told her what had really happened, she became very thoughtful.

"In fact," she said after a while, "we have gone into hibernation. Nobody can get in any longer and no one can get out!"

I looked carefully at her and understood that we were saved. At last we were absolutely safe and protected. This menacing snow had hidden us inside in the warmth

for ever and we didn't have to worry a bit about what went on there outside. I was filled with enormous relief, and I shouted, "I love you, I LOVE YOU," and took all the cushions and threw them at her and laughed and shouted and Mummy threw them all back, and in the end we were lying on the floor just laughing.

Then we began our underground life. We walked around in our nighties and did nothing. Mummy didn't draw. We were bears with pine needles in our stomachs and anyone who dared come near our winter lair was torn to pieces. We were lavish with the wood, and threw log after log onto the fire until it roared.

Sometimes we growled. We let the dangerous world outside look after itself; it had died, it had fallen out into space. Only Mummy and I were left.

It began in the room at the end. At first it was the nasty scraping sound made by shovels. Then the snow fell down over the windows and grey light came in everywhere. Somebody tramped past outside and came to the next window and let in more light. It was awful.

The scraping sound went along the whole row of windows until the lamps were burning as if at a funeral. Outside snow was falling. The trees were standing in rows and were as black as they had been before and they let the snow fall on them and the fringe of forest on the horizon was still there.

We went and got dressed. Mummy sat down to draw.

A dark man went on shovelling outside the door and all of a sudden I started to cry and I screamed: "I'll bite him! I'll go outside and bite him!"

"I shouldn't do that," Mummy said. "He wouldn't understand." She screwed the top onto the bottle of Indian ink and said: "What about going home?"

"Yes," I said.

So we went home.