**Karlson Flies Again**

Astrid Lindgren

Translated from the Swedish by Patricia Crampton

Illustrated by Ilon Wikland

****

****

1

Karlson Flies Again

The world is so big, and there are so many houses. There are big houses and small houses, beautiful houses and ugly houses, old houses and new houses. And there is a very small house which belongs to Karlson on the Roof. Karlson thinks it is the best house in the world and just right for the best Karlson in the world. Midge thinks so too.

Midge lives with his mother and father and Bass and Barbie, his brother and sister, in a perfectly ordinary house on a perfectly ordinary street in Stockholm. But up on the roof, just behind the chimney, sits Karlson’s little house with a notice on it:

You may perhaps think it’s odd for someone to live on the roof, but as Midge says:

‘What’s strange about that? People can live where they like!’



Mummy and Daddy also thought people should be allowed to live where they like, but at first they didn’t believe that Karlson really existed. Bass and Barbie didn’t believe it either. They didn’t want to believe that there was a fat little man living on the roof, who had a propeller on his back and could fly.

‘You’re lying, Midge,’ said Bass and Barbie. ‘Karlson is just pretend.’

For safety, Midge asked Karlson if he was pretend, but Karlson said:

‘Pretend themselves!’

Mummy and Daddy had decided that Karlson was one of those made-up friends which a lot of children have when they feel lonely.

‘Poor Midge,’ said Mother, ‘Bass and Barbie are so much older and he has no one to play with. That’s why he’s been imagining this Karlson.’

‘Yes, we really shall have to give him a dog,’ said Midge’s father. ‘He’s been wanting one for such a long time, and as soon as he has one, he’ll forget about Karlson.’



That was how Midge got Bimbo. He was given a dog of his very own on his eighth birthday.

That was also the very day when his mother and father and Bass and Barbie actually saw Karlson at last. Yes, indeed, they saw him! This was how it happened. Midge was having a birthday tea in his room. He had invited Susanna and Chris, who were in the same class as he was, and when the whole family heard all the laughter and chatter from Midge’s room, his mother said:

‘Why don’t we go and have a look at them, they’re such fun!’

‘Yes, let’s,’ said his father.

And what did they see when they looked into Midge’s room? Who should be sitting at the birthday table, with cream cake all over his face, eating fit to bust, but a fat little man who yelled:

‘Heysan hoppsan, my name is Karlson on the Roof! You haven’t had the pleasure of meeting me before, have you?’

Mummy had nearly fainted and Daddy had been quite upset.

‘Don’t tell anyone about this,’ he said. ‘Not anyone at all.’

‘But why not?’ asked Bass.

And he explained:



‘Think what a time we would have if people should find out about Karlson! He would be on TV, you can see that. We should be tripping over TV wires and film cameras all the way up the stairs, and every half-hour a press photographer would want to photograph Karlson and Midge. Poor Midge would be The Boy who Found Karlson on the Roof . . . we wouldn’t have a moment’s peace for the rest of our lives!’

Mother and Bass and Barbie understood and they all promised faithfully not to tell anyone about Karlson.

Now, the very next day Midge was going to stay with his Granny in the country for the whole summer. He was looking forward to it very much, but he was worried about Karlson. What would Karlson get up to all that time? What if he should go, and never come back!

‘Dear, dear Karlson, are you quite sure you’ll still be living on the roof when I come back from Granny’s?’ said Midge.

‘You never know,’ said Karlson. ‘I shall go to my Granny, too. She’s much grannier than yours and she thinks I’m the world’s best grandson. So you never know . . . It would be silly of her to let the world’s best grandson go, wouldn’t it?’

‘Where does your Granny live?’ asked Midge.

‘In a house,’ said Karlson. ‘Did you think she spent the night running around?’

Midge didn’t find out any more and next day he left for his Granny’s house, taking Bimbo with him. It was fun in the country and Midge played all day long. He didn’t think of Karlson often, but when the summer holidays were over and he came back home he asked about Karlson as soon as he came in at the door.

‘Mummy, have you seen anything of Karlson?’ She shook her head.

‘No, I haven’t. He must have moved.’

‘Don’t say that,’ said Midge. ‘I want him to stay on the roof, he *must* come back.’

‘But you’ve got Bimbo,’ his mother tried to comfort him. She thought it was very nice to be rid of Karlson.

Midge patted Bimbo.

‘Yes, of course I have, and he’s so lovely. But he hasn’t got a propeller and he can’t fly, and you can play more games with Karlson.’

Midge ran to his room and opened the window. ‘Are you up there, Karlson?’ he shouted as loudly as he could, but there was no answer. The next day Midge was starting school again and after school he had to sit in his room and do homework. He left the window open so that he could hear the buzz of any engine which might be Karlson’s. But the only engines he heard were those of the cars down in the street below and sometimes an aircraft flying over the roof-tops. Never a buzz from Karlson.

‘Yes, he must have moved,’ Midge told himself sadly.

‘He’ll never come back again.’

When he went to bed at night he thought about Karlson and sometimes he would cry quietly under the blankets, because Karlson had gone. So the days passed, with school and homework and no Karlson.

One afternoon Midge was sitting in his room sorting his stamps. He had a great many in his stamp album already, but there were also a lot waiting to be stuck in. Midge got going and had soon finished his sticking. There was only one stamp left over, the best of all, which he had saved till last. It was a German stamp with Little Red Riding Hood and the Wolf on it, and Midge thought it was beautiful. He put it on the table in front of him.

At the same moment he heard a buzzing sound out­side the window, a buzzing which sounded like ... Yes, it really did sound like Karlson! And it *was* Karlson. He flew straight in through the window, shouting:

‘Heysan hoppsan, Midge!’

‘Heysan hoppsan, Karlson!’ shouted Midge. He jumped up, feeling terribly happy, and watched Karlson flying a couple of turns round the light bulb before he landed in front of Midge with a thud. As soon as Karlson had switched off the engine — he did that by turning a small knob on his tummy — Midge wanted to rush over and hug him. But Karlson gave him a push with his chubby hand and said:

‘Easy, take it easy! Is there anything to eat? A few meatballs, perhaps? Or a little cream cake?’

Midge shook his head.

‘No, Mummy hasn’t made any meatballs today. And we only have cream cakes for birthdays.’



Karlson sniffed.

‘What kind of a family is that? Only for birthdays . . . But what about a visit from a dear old friend you haven’t seen for months? One might think that would mean something to your mother.’

‘Yes, but we didn’t know . . .’ began Midge.

‘Didn’t know,’ said Karlson. ‘You could have hoped! You could have hoped that I would be coming today, and that should have been enough to make your mother begin to cook up meatballs with one hand and whip cream with the other.’

‘We had sausages for lunch,’ said Midge shamefacedly. ‘Perhaps you’d like . . .’

‘Sausages, for an old friend whom you haven’t seen for months!’



Karlson sniffed again.

‘Oh well, if one is to come to this house, one will have to learn to put up with anything. Bring in the sausages!’

Midge ran to the kitchen as fast as he could. His mother was not at home, she had gone to the doctor, so he couldn’t ask her. But he knew he was allowed to offer Karlson some sausages. There were five left over on a plate and he took it in to Karlson. Karlson flung himself on them like a vulture. He stuffed his mouth full of sausage and looked absolutely delighted.

‘Ah well,’ he said, ‘for sausage, it doesn’t taste too bad. Not like meatballs, of course, but you can’t expect too much of some people.’

Midge knew that ‘some people’ meant him, so he hastily began to talk about something else.

‘Did you have fun at your granny’s?’ he asked.

‘I had so much fun that it doesn’t bear talking about,’ said Karlson. ‘So I’m not going to talk about it,’ he said, biting hungrily into his sausage.

‘I had fun, too,’ said Midge. He began to tell Karlson about all the things he’d done at Granny’s.

‘My granny is so nice,’ said Midge. ‘And you can’t imagine how pleased she was when I came. She hugged me as hard as she could.’

‘Why?’ asked Karlson.

‘Because she likes me, you see,’ said Midge.

Karlson stopped chewing.

‘I suppose you don’t think my granny cares much about me, is that it? You don’t think she rushed at me and hugged me until I was blue in the face, just because she likes me so much, you don’t think that, do you? But let me tell you that my granny has fists like iron and if she liked me one single bit more, I wouldn’t be sitting here now, because she would have crushed me to death.’

‘Really?’ said Midge. ‘She must be a great granny for hugging.’

His granny certainly hadn’t hugged him that hard, but she *did* like Midge and she *was* nice to him all the time, as he explained to Karlson.

‘All the same, she can be terribly fussy,’ said Midge when he had thought it over. ‘She goes on and on fuss­ing about changing my socks and not having fights with Alec Johnson and all that.’

Karlson threw away his plate, which was now empty.

‘I suppose you don’t think my granny is fussy, do you? I suppose you don’t think she set the alarm-clock every morning, so that she could get up at five and have enough time to fuss about me changing my socks and not fighting Alec Johnson?’

‘Do you know Alec Johnson?’ asked Midge, sur­prised.

‘No, thank goodness,’ said Karlson.

‘Then why did your granny . . .’ Midge began.

‘Because she’s the fussiest granny in the world,’ said Karlson. ‘Now perhaps you’ll believe me. Just because you know Alec Johnson, how can you possibly claim that your granny is the fussiest granny in the world? No, I can tell you, my granny can fuss all day about not fighting Alec Johnson, although I’ve never seen the boy, and I most heartily hope and trust I shall never have to see him, either.’

Midge pondered. It was rather odd . . . He had been quite annoyed when Granny fussed at him, but now he suddenly felt as if he had to try to convince Karlson that Granny was even fussier than she was.

‘As soon as my feet were the least bit wet she began fussing about changing my socks,’ Midge assured him. Karlson nodded.

‘And I suppose you don’t think my granny wanted me to change my socks, do you? You don’t think she came sprinting right across town as soon as I trod in a puddle and fussed and fussed: “Change your socks, Karlson my boy, change your socks” . . . You don’t believe that, do you?’

Midge wriggled.

‘Well, of course it might. . .’

Karlson pushed him back in a chair and stood in front of him with his hands on his hips.

‘No, you don’t believe it. You listen and I’ll tell you how it was. I was out for a walk and I stepped in a puddle . . . understand? And I was having the greatest fun and in the middle of everything Granny came sprinting up, shouting so that you could hear her all over town: “Change your socks, Karlson my boy, change your socks!” ’

‘What did you say?’ asked Midge.

‘I said I wouldn’t, because I’m the most disobedient person in the world,’ Karlson told him. ‘So I ran away from Granny and climbed a tree so she would leave me in peace.’

‘She must have been disappointed,’ said Midge.

‘I can see you don’t know my granny,’ said Karlson. ‘Granny followed me.’

‘Up the tree?’ said Midge, surprised.

Karlson nodded.

‘I suppose you don’t think my granny can climb trees, do you? Well, when it’s a question of fussing, she’ll do anything. “Change your socks, Karlson my boy, change your socks,” she said, climbing out on the branch I was sitting on.’

‘What did you do?’ asked Midge.

‘Well, what could I do?’ said Karlson. ‘I changed my socks, nothing less would do. Right up a tree on a feeble little branch, risking my life, I sat there and changed my socks.’

‘Ha ha, now I know you’re telling fibs,’ said Midge. ‘You hadn’t any socks up the tree to change into!’

‘You’re pretty stupid,’ said Karlson. ‘No socks to change into?’

He pulled up his trousers and pointed at his fat little legs, in their striped socks.

‘Well, what are these?’ he said. ‘Are they socks, or aren’t they? Two of them, if I’m not mistaken. And didn’t I sit there on my branch, changing them, so that the left-hand sock was on my right foot and the right­hand sock was on my left foot? Just to calm my old granny down?’

‘Yes, but then you didn’t get your feet dry,’ said Midge.

‘Did I say I did?’ said Karlson. ‘Did I?’

‘Yes, but then . . .’ stammered Midge, ‘then you were changing your socks unnecessarily!’

Karlson nodded.

‘Now do you see who’s got the world’s fussiest granny? Your granny fusses about necessary things, because she’s got a stubborn child like you for a grand­son. But mine is the fussiest granny in the world, she fusses over quite *unnecessary* things. Can you finally get that into your poor skull?’

But then Karlson roared with laughter and gave Midge a push.

‘Heysan hoppsan, Midge,’ he said. ‘Bother both our grannies, now let’s have some fun.’

‘Heysan hoppsan, Karlson, that’s a good idea,’ said Midge.

2

Karlson does the spring-cleaning

‘Have you got a new steam-engine?’ asked Karlson. ‘Do you remember what fun we had when we blew up the last one? Haven’t you got a new one yet, so that we can do it again?’

But Midge hadn’t got a new steam-engine and Karlson looked quite annoyed about that. Then he caught sight of the vacuum-cleaner, which his mother had left in Midge’s room when she was cleaning in there. Karlson jumped forward with a little shriek of delight and switched it on.

‘Guess who’s the world’s best vacuum-cleaner?’

And he began to vacuum-clean for dear life.

‘If I can’t have things nice, I’m not staying,’ he said. ‘This mess needs a bit of cleaning up. What luck that you’ve got the world’s best vacuum-cleaner here!’

Midge knew that his mother had cleaned the whole room very thoroughly and he told Karlson so, but Karlson jeered.

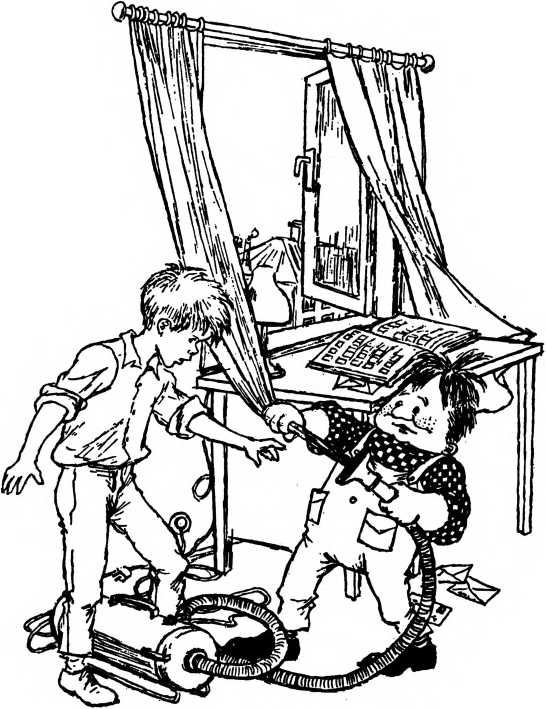
‘Women can’t manage this kind of equipment, every­one knows that. No, this is the way,’ said Karlson and he began to vacuum-clean one of the thin white curtains so that it got sucked half-way down the vacuum-cleaner.

‘No, stop!’ shouted Midge. ‘The curtains are too thin, can’t you see it’s stuck in the cleaner . . . Let it go!’

Karlson shrugged his shoulders.

‘Oh well, if you want to live in an untidy mess, it’s up to you,’ he said.

He began to pull and tug at the curtain without switching off the cleaner, but it was stuck fast and the cleaner wouldn’t let it go.



‘You’d better give up,’ Karlson told the vacuum­cleaner. ‘Now you have Karlson on the Roof to deal with, the world’s best tug-o’-war champion.’

He tugged for all he was worth and got the curtain out. It was quite black and a little frayed as well.

‘Oh dear, just look at the curtain,’ said Midge unhappily. ‘Look, it’s quite black!’

‘Well, well, and yet you don’t think a curtain like that needs cleaning, you piggy little boy,’ said Karlson.

He patted Midge on the head.

‘But never mind, you can still be a good chap, even though you’re so messy. To make up for it I’ll vacuum­clean you a little ... Or has your mother done it already?’

‘No, she hasn’t really,’ said Midge.

Karlson brought the vacuum-cleaner over.

‘Just like a woman,’ he said, ‘cleans the whole room and forgets the muckiest bit of all! Come on, let’s start with the ears!’

Midge had never been vacuum-cleaned before, but now he was, and it tickled so much that he shrieked with laughter. Karlson did it properly. He vacuum-cleaned Midge’s ears and hair and round his neck and under his arms and down his back and over his tummy and right down to his feet.

‘This is what’s called spring-cleaning,’ said Karlson.

‘You can’t think how much it tickles,’ said Midge.

‘Yes, you should really pay extra for that,’ said Karlson.

Afterwards Midge wanted to spring-clean Karlson.

‘It’s my turn now. Come on, I’m going to vacuum­clean your ears!’



‘No need,’ said Karlson. ‘I washed them in September last year. There are things here which need it much more.’

He looked round the room and discovered Midge’s stamp lying on the table.

‘Nasty little bits of paper lying around everywhere,’ he said. And before Midge could stop him, he had sucked up Red Riding Hood in the vacuum-cleaner.

Midge was desperate.

‘My stamp!’ he screamed. ‘Now you’ve gone and sucked up Red Riding Hood and I’ll never forgive you!’

Karlson switched off the vacuum-cleaner and crossed his arms over his chest.

‘Excuse me,’ he said, ‘excuse me for being a nice, helpful, clean little man who’s only trying to do his best. Please excuse me!’ It sounded as if he were going to cry.

‘What’s the use?’ he said, his voice trembling. ‘You never get any thanks, just knocks and more knocks!’

‘Oh,’ said Midge, ‘Oh, don’t be upset, but you see, Red Riding Hood . . .’

‘What’s this old Riding Hood you’re whining about?’ asked Karlson, who wasn’t crying any more.

‘She’s on the stamp,’ said Midge, ‘my best stamp!’

Karlson stood still and thought. Then his eyes began to gleam and he smiled cunningly.

‘Guess who’s the World’s Best Pretender? And guess what we’re going to pretend . . . Red Riding Hood and the Wolf! We’ll pretend the vacuum-cleaner is the wolf and I’m the huntsman coming to slit open his tummy and whoops, out comes Red Riding Hood!’

He looked round eagerly.

‘Have you got an axe somewhere? A vacuum-cleaner like this is as tough as iron.’

Midge had no axe, and he was glad about that.

‘You could just open the vacuum-cleaner and pretend you were slitting the wolfs tummy open,’ he said.

‘If you want to cheat, yes,’ said Karlson. ‘That’s not what I *usually* do when I slit wolves open, but since there isn’t *anything* in this wretched house, we’ll have to pretend!’

He threw himself on the vacuum-cleaner and bit the handle. ‘Stupid thing!’ he shouted, ‘why did you suck up Red Riding Hood?’

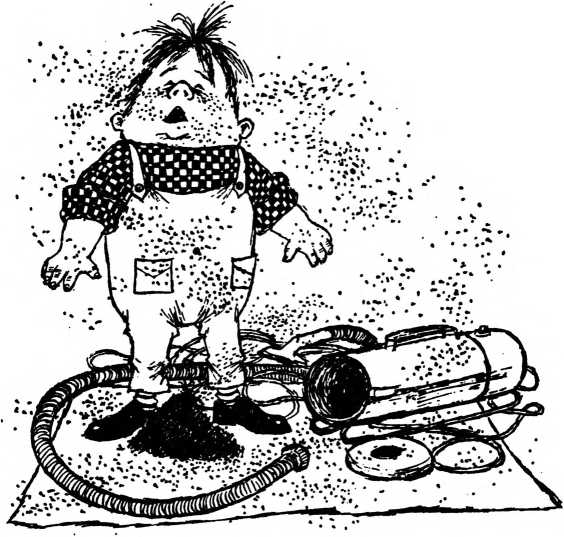
Midge thought it was very childish of Karlson to play such childish games, but it was great fun to watch.

‘Easy, take it easy, Little Red Riding Hood!’ shouted Karlson. ‘Put on your hat and galoshes, you’re coming out!’

Then Karlson opened the vacuum-cleaner and emptied everything which had been inside it on to the mat. It made a nasty grey heap.

‘Oh dear, you should have emptied it into a paper bag,’ said Midge.

‘Paper bag . . . Is that in the story?’ said Karlson. ‘Does it say that the huntsman split open the wolfs tummy and emptied Red Riding Hood out into a paper bag?’



‘No,’ said Midge, ‘of course it doesn’t. . .’

‘Well, be quiet then,’ said Karlson. ‘Don’t try to make up things that aren’t there, or I’m not staying!’

After that he couldn’t say anything, because a gust of wind came through the window and a whole mass of dust flew up his nose. He had to sneeze. He sneezed right over the dust heap and that blew up a little scrap of paper, which flew across the floor and landed right in front of Midge.

‘Look, there’s Red Riding Hood!’ shouted Midge, running to pick up the dusty little stamp. Karlson looked pleased.

‘That’s what I do,’ he said. ‘I put things right with a sneeze. So perhaps you can stop grumbling about Little Red Riding Hood now!’

Midge dusted his stamp and felt very happy.

Then Karlson sneezed again and a cloud of dust rose up from the floor.

‘The world’s best sneezer, guess who that is,’ said Karlson. ‘I can sneeze all the dust back into its right place, wait and see!’

Midge wasn’t listening. All he wanted to do was to stick his stamp in.

But inside the cloud of dust stood Karlson, sneezing. He sneezed and he sneezed and when he had finished sneezing almost all the heap of dust had been sneezed off the floor.

‘There, you see, you don’t need any old paper bags,’ said Karlson.

‘Now all the dust is where it should be. Order in all things, that’s what I like to see. If I can’t have things nice and tidy, I’m not staying!’

But Midge was only looking at his stamp. It was stuck in place now, and how splendid it looked!

‘Have I got to vacuum-clean your ears again?’ said Karlson. ‘You’re not listening.’

‘What did you say?’ asked Midge.

‘I said there was no point in me toiling and moiling until I get blisters on my hands. Here I’ve been, clean­ing and cleaning, so now it’s not too much to ask for you to come and clean up my place.’

Midge threw down his stamp album. Up to the roof . . . There was nothing he wanted to do more! He had only once been up to see Karlson in his little house on the roof, and his mother had got into a fearful state and called the fire engine to get him down.

Midge thought. It was such a long time ago and he was much bigger now, and could climb on any old roof. But did Mummy realise that, that’s what he wanted to know? She wasn’t in, so he couldn’t ask her, and it might be wisest to leave it alone.

‘Well, are you coming?’ said Karlson.

Midge thought some more.

‘Suppose you dropped me while we were flying?’ he asked anxiously.

Karlson didn’t look worried.

‘Well,’ he said, ‘there are so many children. One child more or less is a mere trifle.’

Midge got very cross with Karlson.

‘It’s not a mere trifle, and if I were to fall. . .’

‘Easy, take it easy,’ said Karlson, patting him on the head, ‘you’re not going to fall. I shall hang on to you as hard as Granny did. Of course you’re only a piggy little boy, but I like you all the same. Especially now you’ve had your spring-cleaning and everything.’

He patted Midge again.

‘Yes, it is odd, but I still like you, silly little boy that you are. Just wait till we get up on the roof, then I shall hug you until you go blue in the face, just like Granny did.’



He turned the knob on his tummy, the engine started and Karlson took a firm grip of Midge. Then they flew out of the window and into the blue. The frayed curtain waved gently, as if to say goodbye.

3

Karlson’s house

Little houses on the roof can be very cosy, especially if they are like Karlson’s. Karlson’s house has green win­dow-frames and a porch which is very nice to sit on. You can sit there in the evenings, looking at the stars, or by day drinking orange juice and eating biscuits, that is, if you have any biscuits. You can sleep there at night, if it feels too hot inside the house, and in the morning you can wake up there and watch the sun rising over the roofs to the east.

Yes, it really is a cosy little house and it’s so neatly tucked in between a chimney and a wall that you can hardly see it. That is, unless you are walking about on the roof and happen just to go behind that particular chimney. But people seldom do.

‘Everything is so different up here,’ said Midge, when Karlson had landed with him on the step of his house.

‘Yes, thank goodness,’ said Karlson.

Midge looked about him.

‘More roofs and so on,’ he said.

‘Miles and miles of roofs,’ said Karlson, ‘which you can go round and play tricks on to your heart’s content.’

‘Shall we play a few tricks?’ asked Midge eagerly.

He remembered how exciting it had been the first time he and Karlson had played tricks together on the roof.

But Karlson looked sternly at him.

‘So that you can get out of doing the cleaning, eh? First I have to practically work myself to death to get things straight in your place and then you want to go round playing tricks for the rest of the day. Was that what you had worked out for yourself?’

Midge hadn’t worked out anything at all.

‘I’ll be glad to help clean up, if it’s necessary’ he said.

‘Well, then,’ said Karlson.

He opened the door to his house and Midge walked in to the home of the world’s best Karlson.

‘Well, all right then,’ said Midge, ‘if I have to . . .’

Then he stood in silence for some time and his eyes grew very big.

‘You have to,’ he said in the end.

There was only one room in Karlson’s house. In that room Karlson had a workbench to work on and eat on and put things on, and a sofa to sleep on and jump on and hide things in. And two chairs to sit on and put things on and climb on, if he needed to stuff some more things in his cupboard. But he couldn’t, because it was already so full of other things, the things which couldn’t stand on the floor, or hang on nails on the wall, because there were already other things there ... a great many of them. Karlson had an open oven, too, with things in it, and a grill for grilling things on. There were a lot of things on the saucepan shelf, but there was scarcely anything hanging from the ceiling. Only a rotary drill and a bag of nuts and a cap-pistol, and some pincers and a pair of boots, and a plane and Karlson’s nightshirt, and the dishcloth and saucepans, and a little knapsack and a bag of dried berries, that was all there was.

Midge stood silently on the threshold for a long time, looking round him.

‘Now I think I’ve taken your breath away,’ said Karlson. ‘There are things here, not like your house, where there’s scarcely anything at all.’

‘Yes, there certainly are things,’ said Midge. ‘But I can see why you want to clean up.’

Karlson threw himself on the sofa and settled down comfortably.

‘You’ve got that back to front,’ he said. ‘I don’t want to clean up. *You* are going to clean up . . . after the way I’ve worked my fingers to the bone in your place!’

‘Aren’t you going to help at all?’ asked Midge anxiously.

Karlson propped himself up on the cushion and grunted, in the way people do when they are really comfortable.

‘Yes, of course I’ll help,’ he said, when he had finished grunting.

‘Good,’ said Midge. T was afraid you were think­ing . . .’

‘Yes, of course I’ll help,’ said Karlson. ‘I’ll sing to you all the time and cheer you up. Hey, hey, we’re going to have a ball.’

Midge wasn’t so sure of that. He hadn’t done a lot of cleaning up in his life. Of course he knew about picking his toys up; his mother only had to tell him to do that three or four or five times and he did it, even if he thought it was a nuisance and quite unnecessary. But cleaning up in Karlson’s place was something quite dif­ferent.

‘Where shall I begin?’ asked Midge.

‘You begin with the nutshells, of course, silly,’ said Karlson. ‘You don’t have to go in for any really grand-

scale cleaning, since I’m at it all the time and never let it get bad. You just need to tidy up a bit.’

The nutshells were on the floor among piles of apple peel and cherry pips and sausage skin and paper bags and burnt matches and so on. The floor itself could not be seen at all.

‘Haven’t you got a vacuum-cleaner?’ asked Midge, when he had thought for a bit.

You could see that Karlson didn’t like that question. He looked crossly at Midge.

‘Some people really are lazy, I must say! I’ve got the world’s best scrubbing brush and the world’s best dust­pan, but that’s not enough for some lazy bones. Oh no, they’ve got to have vacuum-cleaners so that they can get out of doing anything themselves.’



Karlson sniffed.

T could have a thousand vacuum-cleaners if I liked, but I’m not as lazy as some people. I like hard work.’

‘So do I,’ said Midge quickly, ‘but . . . Well, in any case you haven’t got electricity for a vacuum-cleaner, of course.’

He remembered now that Karlson’s house was quite old-fashioned. There was no electricity or water supply. Karlson had a paraffin lamp which he lighted in the evening and he got his water from the rain butt outside.

‘You haven’t got a dustbin, either,’ said Midge, ‘but you really do need one.’

‘So I haven’t got a waste-paper basket!’ said Karlson. ‘What do you know about it? Once you get started, I’ll show you the world’s best dustbin!’

Midge sighed. Then he picked up the brush and started. Karlson lay with his hands behind his head, watching with great pleasure. And he sang to Midge just as he had promised:

Daylight gives way to darkness,

soon comes the hour of rest.

He who works the hardest

enjoys his supper best.

‘That’s right, that’s the way,’ said Karlson, burrowing into the cushions to make himself even more comfort­able. Then he sang it again and Midge brushed and brushed, but in the middle of it all Karlson said:

‘While you’re busy, you might make me some coffee.’

‘Must I?’ said Midge.

‘Yes, please,’ said Karlson. ‘Although of course I don’t want to give you any extra trouble for my sake. You only have to light the stove and bring in some water and boil it up. I’ll drink the coffee myself.’

Midge looked unhappily at the floor, which was not in the least tidy yet.

‘Couldn’t *you* manage the coffee while I’m cleaning?’ he suggested.

Karlson sighed heavily.

‘How does one become as lazy as you are?’ he asked. ‘Since you’re busy already . . . would it be so difficult to boil up a little coffee?’

‘Of course not,’ said Midge, ‘but if I was to tell you what *I* think . . .’

‘But you’re not,’ said Karlson. ‘Don’t strain yourself, please! Try to be a little helpful towards someone who has worked himself to the bone for you, vacuum- cleaned your ears and I don’t know what else.’

Midge put down the brush. He took a jug and went out to fetch water. He got some wood from the wood box and arranged it in the stove and did his best to light the fire, but it was no use.

‘I’m not used to it,’ he excused himself, ‘couldn’t you . . . couldn’t you just light it, I mean?’

‘Don’t give me that!’ said Karlson. ‘Yes, if I was up and about it would be different, then I could show you what to do, but now I happen to be lying here. You can’t very well ask me to do everything for you.’

Midge could see that. He tried again and suddenly the stove began to crackle and hiss.

‘It’s alight,’ said Midge, relieved.

‘There you are! It only needed a little more energy,’ said Karlson. ‘Now just put on the coffee, and set a nice little tray and get out a few little buns and then you can go on cleaning while it’s boiling.’

‘Are you sure you can manage to drink the coffee by yourself?’ said Midge. He really could be quite sarcastic sometimes.



‘Oh yes, I’ll drink the coffee myself,’ said Karlson, ‘but you can have a little too, because I’m so extraordi­narily hospitable.’

So when Midge had finished brushing the floor and brushed up all the nutshells and cherry stones and paper bags into Karlson’s big bucket, he and Karlson drank coffee on the edge of Karlson’s sofa-bed. They are a lot of buns with it and Midge sat there thinking how happy he felt in Karlson’s house, even if it was hard work tidying up for him.

‘Where’s that rubbish bin you were talking about?’

Midge asked when he had swallowed the last bite of bun.

‘I’ll show you,’ said Karlson. ‘Take the bucket and follow me!’

He went out on to the step ahead of Midge.

‘There!’ he said, pointing to the gutter.

‘What do you mean?’ said Midge.

‘Go and have a look,’ said Karlson. ‘That’s the world’s best rubbish bin.’

‘Do you mean throw the rubbish into the *street?’* said Midge. ‘You can’t do that!’

Karlson snatched the bucket.

‘You’ll soon see, come here!’

At top speed he rushed down the roof and Midge was terrified. What if Karlson couldn’t stop when he got to the gutter?

‘Stop!’ shrieked Midge, ‘stop!’



And Karlson stopped, but not until he was at the very edge.

‘What are you waiting for?’ shouted Karlson. ‘Come here!’

Midge sat down and edged cautiously towards the gutter.

‘The world’s best dust-bin . . . depth twenty metres,’ said Karlson, shaking the bucket up and down. Over the world’s best rubbish bin cherry stones, nutshells and paper bags poured in a messy flood towards the street, and landed right on the head of a dignified gentleman who was walking along the pavement, smoking a cigar.

‘Help,’ said Midge, ‘oh help, look, he got it all over him!’

Karlson shrugged his shoulders.

‘Who asked him to walk right under my rubbish? Right in the middle of my spring-cleaning!’

Midge looked concerned.

‘Yes, but now he’ll have nutshells inside his shirt and cherry stones in his hair, that’s not very nice.’

‘It’s a mere nothing’, said Karlson. ‘If you have no worse troubles in life than a few nutshells inside your shirt, you can be really happy.’

But it didn’t look as if the gentleman with the cigar was very happy. You could see him shaking himself and then you could hear him shouting for the police.

‘What a lot of people make a fuss about nothing,’ said Karlson. ‘He ought to be grateful. Now, if the cherry stones take root in his hair, he might find a lovely little cherry tree growing up there, and he could go round picking cherries and spitting the stones out all day long.’

There were no policemen in the street, so the gentle­man with the cigar had to go home with his nutshells and his cherry stones.

Karlson and Midge climbed back up the roof to Karlson’s house.

‘Actually, I like spitting cherry stones too,’ said Karlson. ‘While you carry on, you could get down the bag of cherries hanging from the roof.’

‘Do you think I can reach?’ asked Midge.

‘Climb on the workbench,’ said Karlson.

Midge did, and then Karlson and Midge sat on the porch, eating cherries and spitting the stones in all dir­ections. They rolled down the roof with a rattle. It sounded very funny.

Now it was beginning to be dusk. A soft, warm dusk, falling over all the roofs and houses. Midge drew closer to Karlson. It was nice sitting up there on the porch, spitting cherry stones, while darkness fell. Suddenly the houses looked different, dark and mysterious and finally quite black. It was as if someone with a big pair of scissors had cut them out of black paper and stuck on a few squares of silver paper for windows. More and more shining squares sprang up all over the black, as people began to turn the lights on in their houses.

Midge tried to count them. At first there were only three, then there were ten and then there were lots and lots of them. Behind the windows you could see people walking about doing this and that, and he wondered what they were doing and who they were and why they lived there, instead of somewhere else.

It was Midge who did the wondering. Karlson didn’t wonder.

‘They have to live somewhere, poor people,’ said Karlson. ‘After all, everyone can’t have a house on the roof. Not everyone can be the World’s Best Karlson.’

4

The Black Beetle

While Midge was visiting Karlson, his mother was seeing the doctor. It took longer than she had thought and when she got home at last, Midge was already sit­ting quite calmly in his room, looking at his stamps.

‘Hallo, Midge,’ said Mother, ‘playing with your stamps as usual?’

‘Yes,’ said Midge, and it was true. He didn’t mention that he had been up on the roof just a little time before. Of course, his mother was bright and understood almost everything, but climbing about on the roof was not one of the things he was sure she did understand. Midge decided not to say anything at all about Karlson. Not just now. Not until the whole family was there. It would be a splendid surprise to produce at supper. In any case his mother wasn’t looking very happy. She had a wrinkle between her eyes which was not usually there. Midge wondered why.

Then the rest of the family came in and it was supper time. They were all sitting round the table together, Mummy and Daddy and Bass and Barbie and Midge. They had stuffed cabbage, and as usual Midge peeled off the cabbage. He didn’t like cabbage. He only liked what was inside it. But at his feet, under the table, lay Bimbo and he would eat anything. Midge squashed the cabbage into the smallest possible parcel and handed it down to Bimbo.

‘Mummy, do tell him not to do that,’ said Barbie. ‘Bimbo is becoming unbearable . . . like Midge.’

‘Yes, yes,’ said Midge’s mother, ‘yes, yes!’

But it didn’t sound as if she were listening.

‘I was certainly made to eat absolutely everything when *I* was little,’ said Barbie.

Midge put out his tongue at her.

‘That’s what you say! But there’s no sign that it did you much good.’

Suddenly there were tears in their mother’s eyes.

‘Don’t squabble, please,’ she said. T can’t bear to listen to it.’

And then she suddenly poured out the reason why she was not happy.

‘The doctor said I was run down. He said I was completely worn out. I’ve got to go away and rest . . . but I can’t imagine how.’

There was complete silence at the table. No one said a word for a long time. What terrible news! Mummy was ill, that was really terrible, they all thought that. And she was going away, too, and that was still worse, thought Midge.

‘But I want you to be in the kitchen every day when I come home from school, and have your apron on and bake buns,’ said Midge.

‘You’re only thinking of yourself,’ said Bass firmly.

Midge pressed close to his mother.

‘Yes, otherwise we won’t get any buns,’ he said. But Mother wasn’t listening now, either. She was talking to Daddy.

‘We’ll have to try to get ourselves a Home Help, though goodness knows how.’

Both Mother and Father looked unhappy. It was nothing like as jolly at supper as it usually was. Midge realised that something must be done to cheer everyone up and who could do that better than he?

‘Guess something that is fun,’ he said. ‘Guess who’s come back!’

‘Who . . . oh, surely not Karlson?’ said Mummy. ‘Don’t tell me we’re going to be faced with that as well!’

Midge looked reproachfully at her.

‘I think it’s fun having Karlson.’

Bass burst out laughing.

‘Things certainly are going to liven up. No mother, only Karlson and a Home Help who can carry on just as she pleases.’

‘Don’t scare the life out of me,’ said Mummy. ‘Imagine if the Home Help catches sight of Karlson, what would happen then?’

Daddy looked sternly at Midge.

‘Nothing will “happen”. The Home Help must neither see nor hear about Karlson, promise me that, Midge!’

‘Karlson flies where he likes,’ said Midge. ‘But I promise not to talk about him.’

‘Not to anyone at all,’ said Daddy. ‘Don’t forget what we agreed.’

‘No, not to anyone,’ said Midge. ‘Just to my teacher at school.’

But Daddy shook his head.

‘Certainly not to your teacher! Not on any account!’

‘Sss,’ said Midge, ‘then I certainly shan’t tell her about the Home Help either. The Home Help is sure to be much worse than Karlson.’

His mother sighed.

‘I don’t know if we can get hold of a Home Help,’ she said.

But she put an advertisement in the paper the very next day. Only one person answered. Her name was Miss Black, and a few hours later she arrived to apply for the job. Midge had got earache at that time and wanted to be as close to his mother as possible, preferably sitting on her knee, although he was really too big for that.

‘But when you’ve got earache you have to,’ said Midge, climbing on his mother’s knee.

There was a ring at the door. Miss Black had arrived and Midge could not sit on any more knees. But all the time Miss Black was there, he hung about by his mother’s chair, leaning his bad ear against her arm and sometimes, when his ear hurt sharply, he moaned a little.



Midge had hoped that Miss Black would be young and beautiful and nice, rather like his teacher. But, on the contrary, she was a brusque, elderly lady who looked very determined. She was tall and heavily built, with a number of chins and ‘angry eyes’ which Midge was so afraid of. He knew at once he didn’t like her. Bimbo seemed to know too, because he barked as loudly as he could.

‘I see, so there’s a dog,’ said Miss Black.

Midge’s mother looked worried.

‘Don’t you like dogs, Miss Black?’

‘Oh yes, if they’re well-trained,’ said Miss Black.

T don’t really know if Bimbo is all that well-trained,’ said Mother awkwardly.

Miss Black nodded energetically.

‘But he will be, if I decide to take this job. I’ve taken care of dogs before.’

Midge hoped in his heart of hearts that she would not decide. Then his ear hurt and he couldn’t help giving a little moan.

‘Oh dear me yes, dogs that growl and kids that howl,’ said Miss Black, making a face. It was probably meant to be a joke, but Midge didn’t think it was a very funny joke and he said, as if to himself:

‘And I’ve got squeaky shoes, too.’

Mother heard him. Her face went pink and she said quickly:

T hope you like children, Miss Black. Surely you do?’

‘Yes, if they’re well brought up,’ said Miss Black narrowing her eyes at Midge.

Once again Mummy looked rather embarrassed.

‘I don’t know if Midge is exactly well brought up,’ she murmured.

‘But he will be,’ said Miss Black. ‘You wait, I’ve taken care of children before.’

Midge was frightened. He felt very sorry for the chil­dren Miss Black had taken care of before. Now he was going to be one of those children, so it was no wonder he looked scared.

His mother seemed to be a little thoughtful as well. She stroked Midge’s hair and said:

‘As far as he’s concerned, friendliness is usually the best way.’

‘But it doesn’t always help, I’ve noticed,’ said Miss Black. ‘You need a firm hand as well.’

Then Miss Black announced how much pay she wanted and decided that she would be called ‘house­keeper’ and not ‘home help’, and the matter was ar­ranged.

Father came home from the office just then, and he was introduced:

‘Our housekeeper, Miss Black.’

‘Our black beetle,’ said Midge. Then he shot out of the door as fast as he could, followed by Bimbo, barking wildly.

The next day Midge’s mother went to stay with Granny. Everyone cried when she left, especially Midge.

‘I don’t want to be left alone with the Black Beetle,’ he sobbed.

That would be the position, he realised. Bass and Barbie were at school until late in the afternoon, and Father didn’t get home from the office until later still, so Midge would have to do battle with the Black Beetle for hours and hours every day. So he cried.

His mother kissed him.

‘Now try to be good . . . for my sake! And whatever you do, don’t call her Black Beetle!’

His troubles began on the very next day when he came home from school. There was no Mummy waiting in the kitchen with hot chocolate and buns, only Miss Black, and she didn’t look at all pleased to see him.

‘Snacks between meals ruin your appetite,’ she said.

‘There will be no buns here.’

She *had* baked buns. There was a whole dish of them on the window-sill.



‘Yes but . . . said Midge.

‘No buts,’ said Miss Black. ‘And I don’t want any children in the kitchen, either. Go to your room and do your homework. Hang up your jacket and wash your hands, quick march!’

Midge went to his room, cross and hungry. Bimbo was asleep in his basket but he shot up like a rocket when Midge arrived. At least there was someone who was glad to see him. Midge flung his arms round Bimbo.

‘Has she been stupid to you too? Oh, I hate her! Hang up your jacket and wash your hands . . . Shouldn’t I clean out the wardrobe and wash my feet too? I *always* hang up my jacket without anyone telling me, so there!’

He threw his jacket into Bimbo’s basket and Bimbo immediately lay down on it and started chewing one sleeve.

Midge went over to the window and looked out. He stood there thinking how miserable he was and how he missed his mother. Then he suddenly saw something which cheered him up. Above the roof of the house, on the other side of the street, Karlson was busy with his flying practice. He circled to and fro between the chim­neys and from time to time he turned a somersault in the air.

Midge waved excitedly to him and Karlson came whizzing over at such speed, that Midge had to jump backwards in order not to be struck on the head as he rushed in through the window.

‘Heysan hoppsan, Midge,’ said Karlson. ‘Have I done something wrong? Why are you looking so sour? Don’t you feel well?’

‘No, far from it,’ said Midge and he told Karlson his troubles. Mummy had gone and they had a black beetle instead, who was so stuffy and mean and nasty that you didn’t even get a bun when you got in from school, although there was a whole dish of freshly baked buns on the window ledge.

Karlson’s eyes began to sparkle.

‘You’re in luck,’ he said. ‘Guess who’s the World’s Best Black Beetle-tamer?’

Midge realised at once that it must be Karlson, but he could not imagine how Karlson could do anything about Miss Black.

‘I shall begin by tirritating her,’ said Karlson.

‘You mean irritating,’ said Midge.

Karlson didn’t care for silly remarks like that.

‘If I had meant “irritating”, I would have said it. “Tirritating” is roughly the same thing, but more deadly. You can hear that from the sound of it.’

Midge tried saying it to himself and had to admit that Karlson was right. ‘Tirritating’ did sound more deadly.

‘I think I shall start with a little bun-tirritating,’ said Karlson. ‘You’re going to help.’

‘How?’ asked Midge.

‘Just go out to the kitchen and talk to the Black Beetle.’

‘Yes, but. . .’ said Midge.

‘No buts,’ said Karlson. ‘Talk to her, so that she has to take her eyes off the bun dish for a moment.’

Karlson shook with laughter. He turned his starter knob and the engine began to buzz. Shaking cheerfully, Karlson steered his way through the window.

Midge went to the kitchen, feeling quite perky. Now that he had the world’s best black beetle-tamer to help him, he was no longer afraid.

This time Miss Black was still less pleased to see him. She was busy making coffee for herself and Midge realised that she had been looking forward to a pleasant time with coffee and fresh buns. It was obviously only children who shouldn’t eat between meals.



Miss Black glared sourly at Midge.

‘What do you want?’ she asked, her voice as sour as her face.

Midge thought, now was the time to start talking. But what on earth was he going to say?

‘Guess what I’m going to do when I’m as old as you,’ he said at last.

At the same time he could hear a buzzing outside the window and it was a buzzing he recognised. But he couldn’t see Karlson. All he could see was a pudgy hand which came over the window ledge and took one of the buns off the plate. Midge giggled. Miss Black had not noticed anything.

‘What are you going to do when you’re older?’ she asked impatiently. It wasn’t that she really wanted to know, she just wanted to get rid of Midge as quickly as possible.

‘Guess,’ said Midge.

Once again he saw the pudgy hand snatching a bun from the dish as it passed and once again Midge giggled. He tried to stop, but it was no good. There was so much giggle inside him that it just bubbled out. Miss Black looked crossly at him. She obviously thought he was the world’s most tiresome boy. And just when she was going to have her nice coffee break, too!

‘Guess what I’m going to do when I’m as big as you are, Miss Black,’ said Midge again, still giggling. This time he could see two small hands clutching the rest of the buns.

‘I’ve no time to stand here listening to your non­sense,’ said Miss Black, ‘and I don’t care what you do when you’re grown-up. But as long as you’re not, you have to be good and obedient and do your homework and get out of the kitchen.’

‘Yes, of course,’ said Midge, giggling so much that he had to lean against the door. ‘But when I’m as big as you are, Miss Black, I’m going to start slimming, that’s for sure!’

Miss Black looked as if she would have liked to attack him, but at the same moment they both heard a mooing sound from the window, just like a cow. That made her turn round quickly and then she saw that her buns had gone.

Miss Black gave a scream.

‘Gracious Heavens, where are my buns?’

She rushed to the window. Perhaps she thought she was going to see a thief running off with his pockets full of buns, but Midge’s family lived on the fourth floor and there aren’t any thieves with legs that long, as she realised.

Miss Black sank down on a chair, deeply shocked. ‘Could it be pigeons?’ she muttered.

‘It sounded more like a cow,’ said Midge. ‘Perhaps there’s some cow flying around today who likes buns.’

‘Don’t be silly,’ said Miss Black.

Then Midge heard Karlson’s buzz outside the win­dow again, and to prevent Miss Black from hearing it too he began to sing as loudly as he could:

‘A moo-cow on shining wings

comes sailing down from the sky;

a cow that loves buns and things

and is always pinching the pie.’

Midge often made up verses with his mother, and he himself thought this one about the cow was good. Miss Black didn’t agree.

‘Stop all that nonsense,’ she screamed.

At that moment they heard a little sound from the window which made both of them jump. Then they saw what had made the sound. On the empty bun-dish lay a 5P piece.

Midge started to giggle again.

‘What a wonderful cow,’ he said, ‘she even pays for her buns!’

Miss Black went red in the face with rage.

‘What sort of a silly joke is this?’ she screeched, rush­ing over to the window again. ‘It must be someone in the flat above, amusing themselves by stealing buns and throwing down coins.’

‘There isn’t a flat above this,’ said Midge. ‘We live at the top, there’s only the roof up there.’

Miss Black went quite mad.

‘I don’t understand it,’ she screeched. ‘I don’t under­stand anything!’

‘No, I’ve noticed that,’ said Midge. ‘But don’t let it upset you, we can’t all be clever.’

A hefty slap landed on Midge’s cheek.

‘I’ll teach you to be cheeky,’ screamed Miss Black.

‘No, don’t do that,’ said Midge, ‘because if you do then Mummy won’t recognise me when she comes home.’

Midge’s eyes were rather shiny. He was going to cry. He had never had his face slapped before and he didn’t like it. He blinked angrily at Miss Black. She grabbed him by the arm and shoved him into his room.

‘You sit there till you’re sorry,’ she said. ‘I’m going to lock the door and take away the key, so perhaps that will stop you running out to the kitchen all the time.’

Then she looked at her watch.

‘Perhaps an hour will be enough to make you behave.

I will open the door at three o’clock. Till then you can think what you ought to say to tell someone you’re sorry.’

Miss Black went out. Midge heard her turning the key in the lock. He was shut in and could not get out. It felt awful. He was bursting with anger at Miss Black, but at the same time he had rather a bad conscience, because he hadn’t behaved particularly well himself. Mummy would probably think he had annoyed the Black Beetle and been cheeky.

Mummy . . . he wondered if he might cry a little after all.

But then he heard the buzzing again, and in through the window came Karlson.

5

Karlson’s bun party

‘What about a little snack between meals?’ said Karlson.

‘Chocolate and buns on my verandah . . . My treat!’

Midge just stared at him. Oh, there was no one as wonderful as Karlson, Midge wanted to hug him. He tried to, but Karlson gave him a push.

‘Easy, take it easy! You’re not with your Granny now. Well, are you coming?’

‘Aren’t I just,’ said Midge, ‘but actually I’ve been locked in. It’s just like being in prison.’

‘That’s what the Black Beetle thinks,’ said Karlson. ‘And she can go on thinking so.’

His eyes began to twinkle and he performed a series of small, delighted jumps in front of Midge.

‘Do you know what? We’ll pretend you’re sitting in prison and having a dreadful time with a nasty black beetle as your prison guard and then a very brave, strong, beautiful and reasonably stout hero comes to rescue you.’

‘What hero?’ asked Midge. Karlson looked at him reproachfully.

‘Try to guess, if you can!’

‘Oh, you mean *you!’* said Midge. ‘But you could rescue me right away, couldn’t you?’

Karlson had nothing against that.

‘The hero is very quick too, you see,’ Karlson assured him. ‘As fast as a hawk, oh yes, and brave and strong and beautiful and reasonably stout and he comes gallop­ing in and rescues you as bravely as anything. Ahoy, ahoy, here he comes!’

Karlson took a firm hold of Midge and rose quickly and bravely into the air. Bimbo barked when he saw Midge disappearing out of the window but Midge shouted: ‘Easy, take it easy! I’ll be back soon!’

Up on Karlson’s verandah there were ten buns in a row, looking quite delicious.

‘Honestly paid for, too,’ said Karlson. ‘We’ll share them out fairly, seven for you and seven for me.’

‘That’s no good,’ said Midge. ‘Seven and seven are fourteen and there are only ten buns here.’



Karlson quickly made seven buns into a heap.

‘Here are mine, anyway,’ he said, placing a pudgy hand over the heap of buns. ‘You go in for such ridiculous arithmetic at school,’ he said. ‘But there’s no need for me to suffer because of it. I said we would have seven each, and these are mine.’

Midge nodded.

T wouldn’t be able to eat more than three, anyway. But what have you done with the chocolate?’

‘It’s down with the Black Beetle,’ said Karlson. ‘And we’re going to get it now.’

Midge gave him a frightened look. He had no wish to meet Miss Black again and perhaps have his face slapped some more. Nor could he see how they could get at the chocolate. It wasn’t standing by the open window like the buns. It was on a shelf by the stove, right under Miss Black’s eye.

‘How on earth can we do that?’ asked Midge.

Karlson shook with delight.

‘No, of course you wouldn’t be able to work it out, silly little boy that you are! But fortunately the world’s best trickster is in charge here, so you can relax.’

‘Yes, but how . . .’ Midge began.

‘Tell me,’ said Karlson, ‘have you ever noticed the little balconies there are on this house?’

Midge certainly had. His mother always shook the kitchen mats out on the balcony, which was half-way up the outside steps from their kitchen door.

‘Just ten steps from the outside door,’ said Karlson. ‘Even a silly little sausage like you should be able to manage that quite quickly.’

Midge didn’t understand.

‘What am I supposed to be doing on the balcony?’

Karlson sighed.

‘Do I have to explain everything to you, you silly little boy! Now, keep your ears open and listen to my plan.’

‘Yes, I’m listening,’ said Midge.

‘Well, then,’ said Karlson, ‘the silly little boy lands by Karlsonair on the balcony, then creeps down half a staircase and rings the door bell long and hard, do you understand? The angry Black Beetle in the kitchen hears the signal and walks with heavy footsteps to open the door and hey presto! An empty kitchen! Brave and reason­ably stout hero flies in through window and out again quickly, now with the drinking chocolate tin in hand. Silly little boy rings again, just to annoy, and leaps back to balcony. Angry Black Beetle opens door, and gets angrier still when there is no one outside with a bunch of red roses for her. She slams the door. Silly little boy goes on giggling on the balcony, until reasonably stout hero comes to collect him for bun party on roof. Heysan hoppsan, Midge, who’s the World’s Best Trickster? Now let’s go!’

And before Midge could blink he was on his way from the roof to the half-balcony. Karlson did a power dive with him until the wind whistled round his ears and his tummy felt more wobbly than it did on the big dipper. After that everything went exactly as planned. Karlson buzzed off to the kitchen window and Midge tore down and rang the doorbell loud and long. Soon he heard footsteps approaching across the hall. Then he giggled a lot and rushed back to the balcony. Seconds later the door opened and Miss Black put her head out. He could see her if he peeped cautiously down round the edge of the stairs and it was obvious that Karlson was right . . . angry Black Beetle got angrier still when there was no one outside. She muttered loudly to herself and stayed in the doorway for a long time, as if expect­ing the person who had rung to appear suddenly before her. But the person who had rung stood giggling quietly on the balcony and he went on doing it until the reas­onably stout hero came to collect him for the bun party on his verandah.

It was the best bun party Midge had ever been to.

‘I feel good now,’ he said, as he sat on the porch beside Karlson chewing his bun and drinking his chocolate and looking out over the roofs and towers of the town, shimmering in the sunshine. The buns were good, the chocolate was also extremely good. He had cooked it himself on Karlson’s stove.

Karlson had rescued everything they needed, milk and drinking chocolate and sugar, from the kitchen.

‘And all properly paid for, with a 5p piece on the kitchen table,’ said Karlson. ‘Once an honest man, always an honest man, there’s nothing anyone can do about it.’

‘Where did you get all the 5p pieces?’ asked Midge.

‘From a wallet I found on the street,’ said Karlson.

‘Full of 5p pieces, and other money too!’

‘Poor person who lost the wallet,’ said Midge. ‘He must have been upset.’

‘Oh well,’ said Karlson, ‘if you’re a taxi-driver you ought to take better care of things!’

‘How do you know it was a taxi-driver?’ asked Midge, surprised.

T saw him drop the wallet, of course,’ said Karlson. ‘And you could see he was a taxi-driver from the badge on his cap. I’m not stupid.’

Midge looked reproachfully at Karlson. You really couldn’t behave like that about things you find. He *must* tell Karlson that. But he didn’t have to talk about it just now . . . Another time! Now he just wanted to sit on the step and enjoy the sunshine and the buns and the chocolate and Karlson.



Karlson had soon stuffed all his seven buns inside him. Midge was not so quick. He was busy on his second bun and the third lay beside him on the step.

‘Oh, I do feel good,’ said Midge.

Karlson leaned forward and looked closely into his eyes.

‘No, you don’t. You don’t feel well at all.’

He put his hand on Midge’s forehead.

‘Just as I thought! A typical case of bun-fever.’

Midge looked surprised.

‘What’s that . . . bun-fever?’

‘You get it from eating too many buns.’

‘Then you must have even worse bun-fever,’ said Midge.

‘You would think so,’ said Karlson, ‘but you see, I had bun-fever when I was three years old, and you can only get it once. Just like measles and whooping-cough.’

Midge didn’t feel at all ill and he tried to tell Karlson. But Karlson forced him to lie down on the verandah and enthusiastically sprinkled his face with chocolate.

‘So that you don’t faint,’ Karlson explained. Then he grabbed Midge’s last bun.

‘No more buns for you, that would be quite fatal! But what luck for this poor little bun that *I* am here. Other­wise it would have had to lie on the step all alone,’ said Karlson, eating the bun quickly.

‘But now it’s not so lonely,’ said Midge.

Karlson patted himself contentedly on the tummy.

‘No, now it’s with its seven friends and it’s happy there!’

Midge was happy too. He continued to lie on the verandah feeling good, in spite of the bun-fever. He was quite full, and happy for Karlson to have his bun.

Then he happened to look at his watch. It was a few minutes to three. He began to laugh.

‘Now Miss Black will be coming to open my door in a minute. Oh, I wish I could see her when she comes into my room!’

Karlson patted him kindly on the shoulder.

‘Bring all your little wishes to Karlson and he will arrange everything for you. Just run in and get my binoculars. They’re hanging on the fourteenth nail counting from the sofa, quite high up. You’d better climb on the work-bench.’

Midge giggled.

‘Yes, but I’ve got bun-fever, shouldn’t I be keeping still?’

Karlson shook his head.

‘Keeping still and giggling . . . Do you think that does bun-fever any good? On the contrary, the more you climb around on walls and roofs, the quicker you’ll be well. You can read that in any medical book.’

And since Midge was quite pleased to be rid of his bun-fever, he ran into the house obediently, climbed on the work-bench and took down the binoculars, which were hanging on the fourteenth nail, counting from the sofa.

Karlson was ready for take-off when Midge came back with the binoculars. And before Midge could blink Karlson had buzzed with him across the road and landed on the roof opposite.

Then Midge understood.

‘Oh, what a good look-out point, when you’ve got binoculars and want to look into my room!’

‘We have, and we do,’ said Karlson, putting the binoculars

to his eyes. Then Midge was allowed to borrow them as well. He could see his room as clearly as if he were inside it. There was Bimbo, asleep in his basket, there was Midge’s bed, there was the table with his school books and there was the clock on the wall. It was striking three, but Miss Black was nowhere to be seen.

‘Easy, take it easy,’ said Karlson. ‘She’s on her way, because I can feel shivers down my spine, my skin has goose-pimples!’

He snatched the binoculars from Midge and put them to his eyes.

‘What did I say? Now the door is opening, here she comes, sweet and pretty as a cannibal chief.’

He shook with laughter.

‘Oh yes, now her eyes are stretching! Where is Midge? What if he’s fallen out of the window?’

That must have been what Miss Black was thinking, because she hurried over to the window in a fright.



Midge felt quite sorry for her. He leaned over and looked down at the street himself, as if he too expected to see Midge down there.

‘No, he’s not there,’ said Karlson. ‘Disappointed, eh?’

Miss Black looked relieved. She went back into the room.

‘Now she’s searching,’ said Karlson. ‘She’s looking in the bed . . . and behind the table and *under* the bed, ha ha ha! . . . Wait, now she’s going to the wardrobe, she thinks you’re lying there in a little heap, crying.’

Karlson shook again.

‘It’s time we began to tease her,’ he said.

‘How?’ asked Midge.

‘Like this,’ said Karlson. And before Midge could blink, Karlson buzzed off with him, straight across the street, and threw him into his room.

‘Heysan hoppsan, Midge, be nice to the Black Beetle,’ said Karlson, and flew away.

Midge didn’t think that was at all a good trick to play, but he would have to do the best he could. So he crept quietly across the room and sat down at the table with his arithmetic book in front of him. He could hear Miss Black scrambling about in the wardrobe. He waited, full of excitement, for her to come out.

Out she came. The first thing she saw was Midge. She staggered back against the wardrobe doors. She stood there in complete silence, staring at him. Then she blinked her eyes a couple of times as if to check that her eyes were not deceiving her.

‘Where in the world were you hiding yourself?’ she asked at last.

Midge looked up innocently from his book.

‘I wasn’t hiding. I was sitting here doing my sums. I didn’t know you were going to play hide-and-seek, Miss Black. But if you like . . . you creep back into the ward­robe and I’ll be glad to play with you.’

Miss Black had no answer for that. She stood there for a while without speaking, and thought.

‘Surely I can’t be getting ill,’ she muttered. ‘There are so many strange things happening in this house.’

Just then Midge heard someone cautiously locking the door from the outside. Midge giggled. The World’s Best Black Beetle-tamer had obviously flown in through the kitchen window, to teach the Black Beetle how it feels to be locked in.

Miss Black did not notice. She just stood there, look­ing puzzled. In the end she said:

‘Extraordinary! Well, you can go out and play now while I get supper.’

‘Thank you, that’s nice,’ said Midge. T don’t have to be locked in any more?’

‘No, you don’t,’ said Miss Black and went over to the door. She put her hand on the door knob and turned it, first one way, then the other. But the door would not open. Then she threw herself against it with all her weight. It was no use. The door was locked and remained closed.

Miss Black gave a scream.

‘Who locked the door?’ she shrieked.

‘You must have done it yourself, Miss Black,’ said Midge.

Miss Black sniffed.

‘Rubbish! How can the door be locked from the out­side when I’m on the inside!’

‘I don’t know,’ said Midge.

‘Could it be Bass or Barbie?’ asked Miss Black.

‘No, they’re still at school,’ Midge assured her.

Miss Black sat down heavily on a chair.

‘Do you know what I think?’ she said, ‘I think this house must be haunted.’

Midge nodded. Oh, it would be good if Miss Black thought Karlson was a ghost, then perhaps she would go away. Surely she wouldn’t want to stay in a house which was haunted?

‘Are you frightened of ghosts, Miss Black?’ asked Midge.

‘On the contrary,’ said Miss Black, ‘I like them! Just imagine, I might be on TV! You know, there’s that series with people who talk about their experiences, and the things that have happened here in a single day, would be enough for ten TV programmes.’

Miss Black looked positively cheerful.

‘That would annoy my sister Freda, believe me. Freda has been on TV and talked about all the ghosts she’s seen and the ghostly voices she’s heard and I don’t know what all. But now I could really fix her.’

‘Have you heard any ghostly voices, Miss Black?’ asked Midge.

‘Yes, don’t you remember that mooing noise outside the window just now, when the buns disappeared? I could try to imitate that on TV so that people would hear how it sounded.’

And Miss Black gave out a moo which made Midge jump off his chair.

‘Something like that,’ said Miss Black, pleased. Then there was an even worse mooing sound from outside the window and Miss Black turned pale.

‘It’s answering me,’ she whispered, ‘the ghost is ans­wering me. I’ll tell them that on TV. Gracious Heavens, Freda will be cross!’

She told Midge how Freda had shown off on TV about all her ghosts.

‘If you believed her, you’d think the whole of her town was haunted, and most of the ghosts live in our flat, of course, but never in *my* room, only in Freda’s. Imagine, a ghostly hand appeared one evening and wrote a warning on the wall to Freda. And she deserved it,’ said Miss Black.

‘What kind of a warning was it?’ asked Midge.

Miss Black thought.

‘Now, how was it again? . . . Yes, it said: “Watch out! You should take the few, precious days of your life more seriously!” ’

It didn’t look as if Midge understood a word of it; nor did he. Miss Black had to explain.

‘It was a warning to Freda to change her ways and live a better life without so much stuff and nonsense.’

‘And did she?’ asked Midge.

Miss Black sniffed.

‘No, I should think not. She goes on showing off and regards herself as a TV star, although she’s only been on it once. But now I know someone who’s going to fix her.’

Miss Black rubbed her hands. She was so pleased to be going to fix Freda at last that she didn’t mind being shut in with Midge. She sat there happily comparing Freda’s ghosts with her own, until Bass got back from school.

Then Midge shouted:

‘Unlock the door! I’m shut in with the Black . . . with Miss Black!’

Bass opened the door, very surprised.

‘Who in the world locked you in?’ he asked.

Miss Black looked very mysterious.

‘You can hear about it one day on television.’

Now she was in a hurry to get supper. She marched off to the kitchen with long strides.



The next moment they heard a shrill scream from the kitchen. Midge ran to see.

Miss Black was sitting on a chair, paler than before, pointing open-mouthed at the wall.

Freda was not the only one to get warnings written by a ghostly hand. Miss Black had one too. There it was, on the wall, written in big, scrawling letters which could be seen a long way off:

‘Watch out! There ought to be more cinnamon in your very expensive buns!’

6

Karlson and the television box

Daddy came home for supper with another worry.

‘Poor children! It looks as if you’ll have to look after yourselves all on your own for a day or two. I’ve sud­denly got to fly to London on business. Do you think it will be all right?’

‘It’ll be all right,’ said Midge, ‘as long as you don’t get in the way of the propeller.’

His father laughed.

‘I was really thinking about how you would get on here, without either your mother or me.’

Bass and Barbie thought it would be fine; in fact it might be quite fun to have no parents around for once, Barbie said.

‘Yes, but what about Midge?’ said Daddy.

Barbie patted her brother’s fair head tenderly.

‘I’ll be like a mother to him,’ she assured them. But her father didn’t really believe that, and neither did Midge.

‘You’re always running about with your boy-friends just when you’re most needed,’ muttered Midge.

Bass tried to console him.

‘You’ve always got me.’

‘Yes, at the football ground,’ said Midge.

Bass laughed.

‘So there’s only the Black Beetle left. She doesn’t run around with boy-friends or kick footballs.’

‘No, worst luck,’ said Midge.

He sat there, trying to think how much he disliked Miss Black. But then he noticed something odd — he wasn’t angry with her any more.

Not in the least big angry. Midge was surprised. How had this happened? Did you just have to be locked in with someone for two hours, in order to find out how to put up with them? It wasn’t that he suddenly liked Miss Black — far from it — but she had just become a bit more human. Poor thing, she had to live with that Freda all the time! Midge knew just what it meant to have annoy­ing sisters. All the same, Barbie didn’t go on about ghosts on television like Freda.

‘I don’t want you to feel lonely at night,’ said Midge’s father. ‘I’d better ask Miss Black to stay here while I’m away.’

‘Have I got to put up with her night *and* day now?’ said Midge. But in his heart of hearts, he thought it would be nice to have someone looking after them, even if it was only a black beetle.

Miss Black was more than ready to come and live with the children. When she was alone with Midge she explained why.

‘Ghosts are always at their worst at night, you see. Now I shall be able to give them a TV programme which will make Freda fall off her chair when she sees me.’

Midge was worried. What if Miss Black brought lots of TV people to the house while his father was away, and some of them caught sight of Karlson? Help, then he would be on TV for certain, although he wasn’t a ghost at all, but only Karlson. Then all that peace and quiet his mother and father were so worried about, would be gone for ever. Midge realised that he would have to warn Karlson and ask him to be careful.

He didn’t manage it until next evening, when he was alone in the house. His father had already left for London; Bass and Barbie were out about their own business, and Miss Black had popped home to see Freda and ask her if she had seen any ghosts lately.

‘I’ll be back soon,’ she told Midge as she left, ‘and if you see any ghosts, just ask them to stay around, ha ha ha!’

Miss Black seldom joked and almost never laughed; which was just as well, because when she did, it was pretty horrible. But just now she was very excited. Midge could hear her laughing a long way down the stairs. Her laugh echoed round the walls.

Soon afterwards Karlson came flying through the window.

‘Heysan hoppsan, Midge, what shall we do now?’ he asked. ‘Have you got a steam-engine for us to blow up, or a black beetle for us to tirritate? Anything you like, but I must have fun, otherwise I won’t stay!’

‘We could watch television,’ suggested Midge.

And then it was that he discovered that Karlson knew nothing about TV! He had never seen a television-set in his life. Midge took him into the living-room and pointed proudly at their fine new colour set.

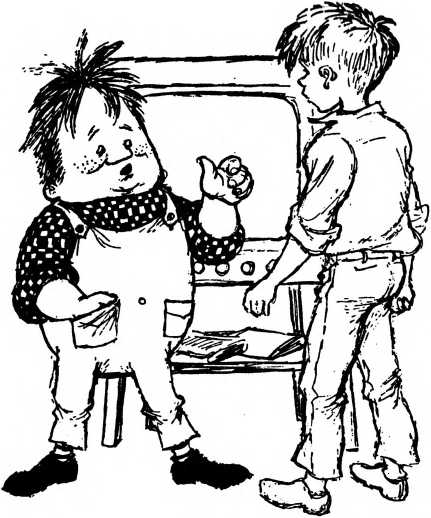
‘Look at that!’

‘What kind of a box is that?’ asked Karlson.

‘It’s not a box, it’s television,’ Midge explained.

‘What do you keep in that kind of box?’ asked Karlson. ‘Are there any buns?’

Midge laughed.



‘Not really! I’ll show you what there is.’

He switched on the set and almost immediately a man appeared on the screen, talking about what the weather was going to be like in the North.

Karlson’s eyes grew round with amazement.

‘How did you get him into the box?’

Midge roared with laughter.

‘What do you think? He crawled in when he was little, can’t you see!’

‘What do you have him there for?’ Karlson wanted to know.

‘Oh, can’t you see I’m joking?’ said Midge. ‘Of course he didn’t crawl in there when he was little, and we don’t *have* him for anything. He just *is* there, you see, and he’s telling us what the weather is going to be like tomorrow. He’s one of those weather men, you see.’

Karlson giggled.

‘So you have a special man, stuffed into a box, just to tell you what the weather’s going to be like tomorrow . . . but you’ll see what it’s like! Why don’t you ask me? There will be fog and rain and hail and storm and earth­quakes. Satisfied?’

‘Storm and rain tomorrow along the North Sea Coast,’ said the weather man on the television screen. Karlson laughed delightedly.

‘There, what did I say? Storm and rain!’

He went up to the set and pressed his nose against the weather man’s nose.

‘Earthquakes too, don’t forget! Poor northerners, what weather they’re going to have! But they should be glad they’re getting any weather at all. Just suppose they were left without any!’

He gave the man on the screen a friendly pat.

‘What a nice little fellow,’ he said. ‘Smaller than me. I like that.’

Then he knelt down and looked underneath the set.

‘How did he get in, anyway?’

Midge tried to explain that it was only a picture and not a live human being on the screen, but that made Karlson quite angry.

‘Try pulling someone else’s leg, dummy! He’s mov­ing, you can see. Do dead people usually talk about the weather in the north, then?’

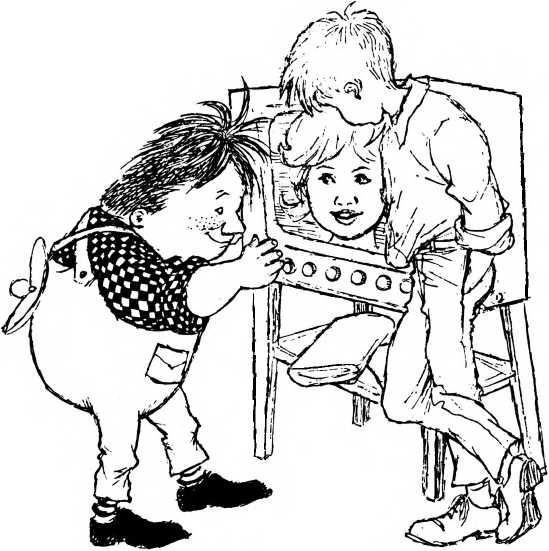
Midge didn’t know much about television, but he did his best to explain it all to Karlson. And then he tried to pass on the necessary warning as well.

‘You see, Miss Black very much wants to be on

television,’ he began, but Karlson burst out laughing at that.

‘The Black Beetle, in a little box like that! That great lump, she’d have to fold herself in four!’

Midge sighed. Obviously Karlson hadn’t understood at all. Midge had begun to begin again from the begin­ning. It seemed hopeless, but in the end he made Karlson understand how miraculously such a device worked. Miss Black didn’t have to crawl inside the set herself, she could sit miles away in peace and quiet; yet you would still be able to see her in the picture frame, if not as large as life, certainly as natural, Midge assured him.



‘A natural black beetle . . . Oh, how awful,’ said Karlson. ‘You’d better throw the box out, or exchange it for one full of chocolates; you’d get more out of it.’

Just then an attractive lady announcer appeared on the screen. She was smiling sweetly and Karlson’s eyes opened wide.

‘Well, of course,’ he said, ‘in that case they would have to be *very* good chocolates. I do see that there’s more to this box than one realises to start with.’

The announcer continued to smile at Karlson and Karlson smiled back. At the same time he gave Midge a nudge in the ribs.

‘Look at that little sweetie pie! She likes me . . . Oh yes, because she can see that I am a handsome, highly intelligent, reasonably stout man in my prime.’

Suddenly the announcer lady disappeared and was replaced by two solemn, ugly men who talked and talked. Karlson didn’t like that. He began to twiddle all the knobs he could find.

‘Oh no, don’t do that,’ said Midge.

‘Oh yes, I’m going to twiddle that sweetie pie back again,’ said Karlson.

He twiddled like mad, but the pretty announcer didn’t come back. The only thing that happened was that the ugly men got even uglier. They got short little legs and great, high foreheads. That made Karlson laugh. He amused himself for a long time by switching the set rapidly on and off.

‘Those fellows come and go just as I like,’ he said delightedly. The two gentlemen talked and talked when­ever Karlson gave them the chance.

‘For my part, I like it this way,’ said one.

‘I can’t help that,’ said Karlson. ‘Go home and go to bed!’

He switched off the set with a click and laughed happily.

‘Think how annoyed that fellow is going to be that he can’t go on talking about what, for his part, he likes this way!’

But Karlson was tired of the TV by now and wanted something else to amuse him.

‘Where is the Black Beetle? Bring her here so that I can swiveleyes her.’

‘Swiveleyes . . . how do you do that?’ asked Midge, getting worried.

‘There are,’ said Karlson, ‘three ways of taming black beetles. You can tirritate them, or play tricks on them or swiveleyes them. Actually, they all boil down to the same thing, but when you swiveleyes it’s more face-to- face.’

Midge was getting more and more worried. What if Karlson found himself face-to-face with Miss Black! That would mean she had seen him, and that was not allowed to happen. Midge had to keep an eye on him while Mummy and Daddy were away, however difficult it might be. In some way he had to try to scare Karlson, so that Karlson himself would be eager to keep away from Miss Black. Midge thought, and then said cun­ningly:

‘I say, Karlson, you don’t want to be on TV, do you?’

Karlson shook his head violently.

‘In that box there? Me? Not as long as I have my health and can defend myself.’

But after that he looked a little thoughtful.

‘Of course . . . if that little sweetie pie were there at the same time!’

Midge said decidedly that Karlson was not to imagine any such thing. Oh no, if Karlson were on TV it would be with the Black Beetle.

Karlson jumped.

‘The Black Beetle and me in the same box? . . . Ho ho, if there’s never been an earthquake in these parts before, there would be then, you can quote me! How can you think of anything so ridiculous?’

Then Midge told him all about the ghost programme which Miss Black was thinking of doing on television to make Freda fall off her chair.

‘Has the Black Beetle seen any ghosts then?’ asked Karlson.

‘No, not *seen,’* said Midge. ‘But she has *heard* one which was buzzing outside the window. She thinks you’re a ghost.’

Midge carefully explained the connection between Freda and the Black Beetle and Karlson and television, but if he thought that was going to scare Karlson, he thought wrong. Karlson slapped his knees and rubbed his hands with delight and when he had finished rub­bing them he thumped Midge on the back.

‘Watch out for the Black Beetle! That’s the best piece of furniture you’ve got in the house! Whatever you do, watch out for her! Now we’re *really* going to have fun.’

‘How?’ asked Midge anxiously.

‘Ho!’ yelled Karlson. ‘It’s not only Freda who’s going to fall off her chair, no, look out now, all you black beetles and TV fellows, and you’ll see who’s going to come popping up!’

Midge grew still more anxious.

‘Who is going to come popping up?’

‘The World’s Best Flying Ghost!’ yelled Karlson. ‘Ho ho ho!’

Then Midge gave up. He had warned Karlson and tried to do what Daddy had wanted. Now things would have to be as Karlson wanted, because they always were in any case. Karlson could play tricks and haunt and swiveleyes as much as he liked, Midge was not going to stop him. Once he had decided this, he knew that it might easily be fun. He remembered another time when Karlson had been a ghost, and scared off some thieves who were going to take Mummy’s shopping money and all the silver. Karlson hadn’t forgotten either.

‘Do you remember what fun we had?’ he said. ‘Come to think of it. . . where is the ghost costume I had then?’

Midge had to confess that Mummy had taken it. She had been extremely annoyed about the blanket which Karlson had ruined, but since then she had mended the holes and made the ghost costume back into a blanket. Karlson sniffed when he heard this.

‘That kind of stinginess plagues the life out of me. You can never have anything in peace in this house.’

He sat down on a chair and sulked.

‘If it’s going to be like this, I’m not going to stay. You can find yourself a ghost as best you can.’

But then he ran to the linen cupboard and opened the door.

‘Luckily there are quite a lot of sheets here.’

He snatched down one of Mummy’s best linen sheets, but that brought Midge over with a rush.

‘Oh no, not that! Let go . . . there are some torn old sheets here which will do quite well.’

Karlson looked offended.

‘Torn old sheets! I had imagined that the World’s Best Flying Ghost would have some smart Sunday clothes. However . . . this isn’t much of a place, after all . . . Give me the rags!’



Midge found a couple of tattered sheets which he gave to Karlson.

‘If you sew them together, they will still make a ghost costume,’ he said.

Karlson stood there grimly, with the sheets in his arms.

‘If *I* sew them together! If *you* sew them together, you mean. Come on, we’ll fly up to my house so that the Black Beetle doesn’t come rushing in in the middle of the cobbling.’

For the next hour Midge sewed ghost costumes in Karlson’s house. He had learned running stitch and backstitch and cross-stitch at nursery school, but no one had taught him about sewing tattered sheets together for a ghost costume. He had to work that out for himself. He made one small attempt to ask Karlson for help.

‘You could at least do some cutting out,’ said Midge.

Karlson shook his head.

‘If I’m going to cut anything out it will be your mother; I would gladly cut her out. Why did she have to go and take my ghost costume away? It’s no more than right and just that you should sew me a new one. Get going now, and stop moaning!’

In any case, Karlson said, he had no time at all for sewing because he had to paint a picture, and right away.

‘That’s what you have to do when you’ve got an inspiration, you see, and I got one just now. Plop, it went, and that was the inspiration dropping in!’

Midge had no idea what inspiration was, but Karlson explained. It was a sort of illness which attacked all painters of pictures so that they just had to paint and paint and paint instead of sewing ghost costumes.

So Midge sat crosslegged on the work-bench like a tailor, and sewed and snipped while Karlson sat cross- legged by the hearth and painted his picture. Outside the window the sky was black but in Karlson’s house it was bright and cosy; the paraffin lamp was alight and there was a fire burning in the stove.

T hope you’ve been skilful and industrious at your sewing,’ said Karlson, ‘because I do at least want a decent ghost suit. I wouldn’t mind a little blanket-stitch round the neck, or perhaps some featherstitching.’

Midge didn’t answer. He went on sewing, the fire crackled and Karlson painted.

‘What are you painting?’ asked Midge.

‘You’ll see when you’re finished,’ said Karlson.



At last Midge had put together a ghost costume which he thought might do. Karlson tried it on and was highly delighted. He flew a few turns around the room to show himself off.

Midge shivered. He thought Karlson looked awful and ghostly. Poor Miss Black, she had wanted ghosts and now she would certainly be getting one which would scare anyone.

‘Now the Black Beetle can send for the TV fellows,’ said Karlson. ‘For now the World’s Best Flying Ghost is coming, motorised, bold and beautiful and terribly, ter­ribly dangerous.’



Karlson flew round the room, chuckling delightedly.

He didn’t give a further thought to his picture. Midge went over to see what Karlson had been painting.

‘Portrait of my Rabbits’ was written along the bot­tom, but what Karlson had painted was a little red animal which looked more like a fox.

‘Isn’t that a fox?’ asked Midge.

Karlson came swooping down and landed beside him. He put his head on one side and peered at his picture.

‘Yes, certainly it’s a fox, without doubt, it is a fox painted by the World’s Best Fox Painter.’

‘Yes, but,’ said Midge, ‘it says “portrait of my rab­bits” . . . Where are the rabbits?’

‘They’re inside the fox,’ said Karlson.

7

Karlson’s bell-pull

Next morning both Bass and Barbie woke up with some peculiar red spots on their bodies. ‘Scarlet fever,’ said Miss Black, after inspecting them. The doctor she sent for said the same.

‘Well!’ said the Black Beetle, ‘Housekeepers can’t be nurses. They can’t stay in bed here!’

‘I’ll get them into the hospital for a week or so,’ the doctor promised.

He pointed at Midge.

‘And this one must be quarantined until further notice.’

Midge began to cry. He didn’t want to be quaran­tined. Not that he knew what it was, but it sounded horrible.

‘Oh,’ said Bass when the doctor had gone, ‘it only means that you get out of going to school and you mustn’t see other children. Because of the infection, you see.’

Barbie lay in bed with tears in her eyes.

‘Poor Midge,’ she said, ‘you’re going to be so lonely!

Perhaps we ought to telephone Mummy.’ But Miss Black wouldn’t hear of it.

‘Certainly not! Mrs. Sanderson needs peace and quiet. Remember that she needs a rest. I’ll look after him!’

She nodded at Midge, who stood beside Barbie’s bed, his face streaked with tears.

Then there wasn’t time to say much more because the ambulance came and fetched Bass and Barbie. Midge cried. Of course, he sometimes got cross with his brother and sister, but he liked them very much all the same and it was so sad that they had to go into hospital.

‘Bye bye, Midge,’ said Bass when the ambulance men carried him away.

‘Goodbye, darling Midge, don’t be upset! We’ll be home soon,’ said Barbie.

Midge howled.

‘That’s what you think! What if you die?’

Later on Miss Black scolded him for being so stupid as to think that people died of scarlet fever.

Midge went up to his room. He had Bimbo and he took the puppy in his arms.

‘Now I’ve only got you,’ said Midge, hugging Bimbo, ‘and Karlson, of course.’

Bimbo must have known that Midge was upset. He licked his face, as if to say:

‘Yes, but at least you *have* got me. And Karlson!’

For a long time Midge just sat there, thinking what a good thing it was that he had Bimbo. But at the same time he was missing his mother very much. He remem­bered that he had promised to write to her and he decided to do it at once.

‘Dear Mummy,’ he wrote.

‘It looks as if this family is coming to an end. Bass and Barbie have Scarlat Fever and they have gone to hosspitle and I am kworenteened. It doesn’t hurt but

I am sure to get Scarlat Fever too and Daddy is in London if he is alive I haven’t heard if hes ill but he must be ill becos everyone else is ill. I miss you how are you are you very ill? There was something I wanted to tell you about Karlson but I won’t becos it would only wurry you and the Black Betle says you must have piece and quite she isn’t ill and Karlson isn’t but they soon will be.

Goodbye Mummy, rest in piece!’

‘I won’t write any more,’ Midge told Bimbo, ‘because I don’t want to scare her.’

Then he went over to the window and rang for Karlson. Yes, he actually rang. Karlson had done some­thing terribly clever the night before. He had fixed up a bell-pull between his house on the roof and Midge’s room down here.

‘You can’t go around haunting just any old time,’ said Karlson. ‘But now Karlson has made the world’s best bell-pull, so you can ring and order a haunting just when the Black Beetle is sitting in some suitable spot and gazing out into the night at awful little me.’

The bell-pull consisted of a cow-bell which was fixed just under the eaves of Karlson’s house, and a cord which ran from the cow-bell to Midge’s window.

‘You pull the cord,’ said Karlson, ‘the bell rings up here and whoops, down comes the World’s Best Flying Ghost and the Black Beetle falls down in a faint, isn’t that wonderful?’

It was wonderful; Midge thought so too. Not just for the haunting. Previously he had always had to wait and wait till it suited Karlson to drop in. Now he could ring for him when he felt he needed to talk to him.

Just then Midge felt that he did need to talk to

Karlson. He pulled and tugged at the cord and heard the cow-bell ringing and ringing up on the roof. Soon he heard the buzz of Karlson’s engine, but it was a newly wakened and very sour Karlson who came flying in through the window.

‘Did you think that this was meant to be some sort of alarm-clock?’ he said testily.

‘Oh, I’m sorry,’ said Midge, ‘were you asleep?’

‘You should have asked me that before you woke me up. You who always sleep like a log, you don’t know what it’s like for us poor folk who can seldom get a wink of sleep. When we have dropped off for once, one might expect that one’s friends would keep absolutely quiet and hold their breath, instead of starting to clang bells as if a fire had broken out!’

Midge thought this sounded very miserable.

‘Do you really sleep so badly?’ he asked.

Karlson nodded grimly.

‘Worse than badly,’ said Karlson. ‘That is, I do sleep like a stone at night and in the morning too, but it’s worst in the afternoons. I just lie there, tossing and turning.’

He spent a few moments in silence, thinking how dreadful that was and then looked eagerly round the room.

‘If I could have a little present, I might not be so upset because you woke me up.’

Midge didn’t want Karlson to be upset and he began to search among his things.

‘Would you like my mouth organ?’

Karlson snatched the mouth organ.

‘Yes, I’ve always wanted a musical instrument. Thanks, I’ll take this . . . I suppose you haven’t got a double bass?’

He put the mouth organ to his mouth and blew a fewmournful notes. Then he looked at Midge with spark­ling eyes.

‘Did you hear that? I was just making a tune. It’s called “The Little Ghost’s Lament”.’

Then Midge said that laments were very suitable just now, because everyone was ill, and he told Karlson about the scarlet fever.

‘Isn’t it awful for Bass and Barbie?’ said Midge.

But Karlson said scarlet fever was a mere trifle and nothing to worry about. In any case, it was a good thing to have Bass and Barbie in hospital when a big haunt was in progress.

He had scarcely said that before Midge jumped with fright. He had heard Miss Black’s footsteps outside the door and realised she was going to barge into his room at any moment. Karlson also realised that this was an emergency. He flung himself to the floor with a crash and rolled under Midge’s bed like a little football. Midge quickly sat down on the bed and spread his dress­ing-gown over his knees, so that it would hang down and hide Karlson as much as possible.

At that moment the door opened and Miss Black did barge in, dustpan and brush in hand.

‘I’m going to clean up in here,’ she said, ‘out to the kitchen till I’ve finished!’

Midge felt so nervous that he began to sweat.

‘No, I don’t want to,’ he said. ‘I’m going to sit here and be quarantined.’

Miss Black looked angrily at him.

‘Do you know what there is under your bed?’ she asked.

Midge’s face turned red . . . had she really spotted Karlson already?

‘There’s . . . there’s nothing under my bed,’ he stam­mered.

‘Of course there is,’ said Miss Black, ‘it’s covered with great balls of dust, which I’m going to clean up. Get moving!’

Midge became quite wild.

‘No, I’m going to sit here and be isolated,’ he shouted.

Muttering, Miss Black began to sweep the other end of the room.

‘Sit there, then, for heaven’s sake, until I’ve finished over here! But then you’ll kindly go and isolate yourself somewhere else, you obstinate boy!’

Midge chewed his nails and wondered what was going to happen. But suddenly he jumped and began to giggle. Karlson was tickling the backs of his knees and Midge was very ticklish.

Miss Black stared at him.

‘Oh yes, you can laugh, although your mother and brother and sister are all sick and suffering! Some people cheer up very quickly, I must say.’

Once again Midge felt Karlson tickling him behind the knees and this time he giggled so hard that he almost fell off the bed.

‘May one ask what is so funny?’ said Miss Black acidly.

‘He-he-he!’ said Midge, ‘I remembered a funny story.’ He thought hard, trying to remember a story.

‘That one about the tiger which was chasing a horse and the horse got so frightened that it climbed a tree, have you heard that one?’

Bass used to tell the story, but Midge never laughed at it because he was so sorry for the poor horse which had to climb a tree.



‘Don’t give me your silly old stories. You know quite well that horses can’t climb trees.’

‘No, they can’t,’ said Midge, just as Bass always said, ‘but it had an angry tiger after it, so what the devil could it do?’

Bass said that you were allowed to say ‘devil’ when you were telling a story with ‘devil’ in it. But Miss Black didn’t think so. She stared at Midge with loathing.

‘Here you sit, laughing and swearing, with your whole family sick and suffering. I must say I’m surprised . . .’

At that moment she was interrupted by the strains of ‘The Little Ghost’s Lament’ coming from under the bed — only a few mournful notes, but enough to make Miss Black jump.

‘What in heaven’s name was that?’

‘I don’t know,’ said Midge.

But Miss Black knew, yes she did!

‘That was music from another world, as sure as I’m born.’

‘From another world . . . what does that mean?’ asked Midge.

‘From the ghost world,’ said Miss Black. ‘There’s no one but you and me in this room and neither of us can produce sounds like that. That was no human sound, it was a ghostly sound. Didn’t you hear . . . it sounded exactly like a soul in torment!’

She gazed at Midge with round eyes.

‘Gracious Heavens, now I *must* write to those TV people.’

She flung down her brush and pan and sat down beside Midge’s desk. She got out pen and paper and for a long time she wrote busily. Then she read what she had written aloud to Midge.

‘Listen to this!

To Television House.

My sister Freda Black appeared in a series about spirits and ghosts. I didn’t think it was a good pro­gramme at all, but Freda can think what she likes. There was certainly room for improvement, and that’s just what there can be now, because I myself have come to live in a real haunted house and this is a list of my haunts:

1. Strange mooing sounds outside the window, and it wasn’t a cow because we live four storeys up. It was just a kind of mooing.
2. Bits and bobs disappearing mysteriously, for instance buns, and little boys locked in their room.
3. Doors locked on the outside while I am on the inside, explain that if you can!
4. Awful ghostly writing on the kitchen wall.
5. Sudden funeral music under the bed. Makes you want to cry.

Come here at once, because this may well be a programme which will make people talk!

Respectfully,

Hilda Black

P.S. What gave you the idea of having Freda on television?’

Then Miss Black ran out, filled with enthusiasm, to post her letter. Midge peered down at Karlson. There he lay under the bed, his eyes sparkling, but after a moment he crawled out, fresh and cheerful.

‘Ho!’ he shouted, ‘just you wait till evening, when it’s dark, then the Black Beetle will really have something to write to the TV about.’

Midge began giggling again and gazed tenderly at Karlson.

‘It’s fun being quarantined, as long as I’m quaran­tined with you,’ said Midge.

For a moment he thought about Chris and Susanna whom he usually played with. He really ought to have been sorry, because he wouldn’t be allowed to see them for some time.

‘But it doesn’t matter, it’s more fun playing with Karlson,’ thought Midge.

Just now, however, Karlson had no more time for play. He had to go home and rig up his silencer, he said.

‘It’s no good the World’s Best Flying Ghost coming thundering down like a flying barrel, you know. No, it’s got to be silent and ghostly and ghastly so that the hairs rise on the Black Beetle’s back.’

Then Karlson and Midge invented a special system of signals for their bell-pull.

‘If you ring *once?* said Karlson, ‘it means “come at once”. If you ring twice it means “don’t come, whatever you do” and three times means “fancy there being any­one in the world as handsome and intelligent and reas­onably stout and brave and good at everything as Karlson”.’

‘Why should I want to ring that?’ asked Midge.

‘Oh, well, you should say kind and encouraging things to your friends roughly every five minutes, and I can’t keep running down here *that* often, you can see that.’

Midge looked thoughtfully at Karlson.

‘But I’m your friend, aren’t I? I can’t remember *you* ever saying anything like that to *me.’*

Karlson laughed.

‘There’s a difference, for heaven’s sake! You, you’re just a stupid little boy!’

Midge nodded. He knew that Karlson was right.

‘But you do like me, don’t you?’

‘Oh yes, I certainly do,’ Karlson assured him. T can’t think why, but I often wonder about it when I lie there awake in the afternoons.’

He patted Midge on the cheek.

‘Of course I like you, and there must be a reason for it . . . perhaps because you’re so unlike me, poor little thing!’

He flew up to the window and waved goodbye.

‘And if you ring as if fire had broken out,’ he said, ‘either it means that fire *has* broken out, or else it means “Now I’ve woken you up again, dear Karlson, please

bring down a large bag, and take all my toys away . . . I’m giving you them to make up”!’

Then Karlson had gone.

But Bimbo threw himself on the floor in front of Midge and wagged his tail so hard, it smacked on the rug. That was his way of showing that he was really fond of someone and wanted them to take notice of him. Midge lay down on the floor beside him and Bimbo jumped up and barked for joy. Then he curled up on Midge’s arm and shut his eyes.

‘You love me being home from school and quaran­tined,’ said Midge. ‘You really do think I’m the nicest person in the world, don’t you, Bimbo?’



8

The World’s Best Flying Ghost

Midge had a long, lonely day and he was looking for­ward tremendously to the evening. He thought it felt almost like Christmas Eve. He played with Bimbo and looked at his stamps and did a few sums, so as not to be too far behind his school friends. And when he thought Chris must be back from school he rang up and told him about the scarlet fever.

T can’t even go to school, because I’m quarantined, you see!’

He thought it sounded very grand and Chris must have thought so too, because he was quite silent.

‘You can tell Susanna about it,’ said Midge.

‘Aren’t you very bored?’ asked Chris when he got his tongue back.

‘Oh no,’ said Midge, ‘I’ve got. . .’

Then he stopped. He had been going to say ‘Karlson’, but his father had said he mustn’t. In the spring Chris and Susanna had actually met Karlson several times, but that was *before* his father had told him that they were not to talk about him to anyone else at all. By this time Chris and Susanna had probably forgotten him and that was a good thing, Midge thought.

‘Now he really is my own secret Karlson,’ he thought. He said goodbye to Chris quickly.

‘Goodbye then, I’ve got to hurry now.’

It was gloomy eating supper alone with Miss Black, but she had made some really good meatballs. Midge ate a lot. For dessert he got apple pie and custard and he began to think that Miss Black perhaps wasn’t so com­pletely hopeless after all.

‘The best thing about the Black Beetle is the apple pie,’ thought Midge, ‘and the best thing about the apple pie is custard and the best thing about custard is that I’m eating it.’

It was not a jolly supper, with so many empty places around the table. Midge missed his mother and his father and Bass and Barbie in turn. No, it really was no fun, especially as Miss Black talked about Freda all the time and Midge was already thoroughly sick of Freda.

At last nightfall came. It was autumn now and darkness came earlier. Midge stood at his window, pale with excitement, watching the stars come out above the rooftops. He was waiting. This was. actually *worse* than Christmas Eve. Then you were only waiting for Father Christmas, and what was that compared to the World’s Best Flying Ghost? Nothing! Midge chewed his nails nervously. He knew that Karlson was also waiting some­where up there. Miss Black was sitting in the kitchen with her feet in a bowl of water. She was taking her daily footbath, but afterwards she would come and say goodnight to Midge, as she had promised. Then it was time to ring the bell. And then . . . Gracious Heavens, as Miss Black said . . . Gracious Heavens, how exciting it all was!

‘If she doesn’t come soon I’ll burst,’ muttered Midge.

She came. In through the door barged Miss Black on her big, bare, newly washed feet, and Midge leaped like a little fish with fright although he had been waiting for her and knew she was coming. Miss Black looked at him with displeasure.

‘Why are you standing by the open window in your pyjamas? Go to bed!’

‘I . . . I was only looking at the stars,’ stammered Midge. ‘Wouldn’t you like to have a look at them too?’

He said that rather cunningly, to get her over to the window. At the same time he put his hand secretly behind the curtain where the bell-pull hung and gave it a hefty tug. He heard it ringing up on the roof and so did Miss Black.

T can hear bells ringing in space,’ she said. ‘How strange!’

‘Yes, it is strange,’ said Midge.

Then he held his breath. Gliding silently down from the roof came a white and almost circular little ghost, hovering to a musical accompaniment. It sounded very faint and very sorrowful, but there was no mistaking the fact that it was ‘The Little Ghost’s Lament’ which they could hear on the autumn air.

‘There . . . Oh, look there . . . Oh, Gracious Heavens!’ said Miss Black. Her face was chalk-white and she had to sit down. And she was the one who had said she wasn’t afraid of ghosts!

Midge tried to calm her down.

‘Yes, I’m beginning to believe in ghosts too,’ he said. ‘But it’s such a small ghost, it can’t be really dangerous.’

Miss Black was not listening to him. She was staring out of the window, where the ghost had embarked on a fantastic flying demonstration.

‘Take it away! Take it away!’ she panted.

But there was no taking the World’s Best Flying Ghost away. It wafted to and fro, soared and dived, and from time to time it turned a somersault in the air. And the mournful music didn’t even stop for the somersault.



Midge thought it was all quite splendid and atmo­spheric: the Flying Ghost, the dark starlit sky and the sorrowful music. But Miss Black didn’t think so. She caught hold of Midge.

‘Let’s run to the bedroom and hide there!’

The Sandersons’ flat consisted of five rooms and a kitchen and a hall and bathroom. Bass and Barbie and Midge had a little room each, their parents had the big bedroom and then there was a big living-room. While Mummy and Daddy were away, Miss Black was sleep­ing in their bedroom. It looked on to the yard and Midge’s room looked out on the street.

‘Come on,’ panted Miss Black, ‘come on, we’ll hide in the bedroom!’

Midge struggled. They were not going to escape from the haunt just as it had begun! But Miss Black was determined.

‘Hurry up, before I pass out!’

And although Midge didn’t want to, he allowed him­self to be dragged to the bedroom. The window was open there too, but Miss Black rushed to shut it with a bang. She pulled down the blind and closed the curtains tightly. Then she began to stack furniture against the door as fast as she could. It was obvious that she didn’t want to see any more ghosts, whatever happened. Midge couldn’t understand it, she had been so keen on ghosts before. He sat on his father’s bed and watched her toil­ing away, and he shook his head.

‘Freda wouldn’t be as scared as that,’ he said.

But just then Miss Black didn’t want to hear about Freda. She went on stacking furniture, the desk and the table and all the chairs and a little bookcase. Soon there was a splendid barricade in front of the door.

‘There we are,’ said Miss Black with satisfaction. ‘Now I think we can relax.’

Then, from under Daddy’s bed, they heard a deep voice saying with even greater satisfaction:

‘There we are! Now I think we can relax! Now we are shut in for the night!’

And up flew the ghost, with a rush and a roar.

‘Help!’ screamed Miss Black. ‘Help!’

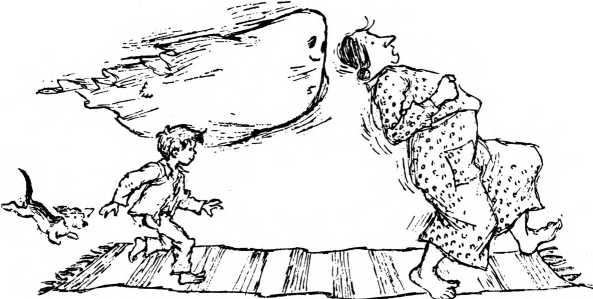
‘What with?’ said the ghost. ‘Stacking furniture, eh?

Well, I’m no builder’s labourer, worse luck.’

At this the ghost laughed long and loud. Miss Black didn’t. She rushed to the door and began to unstack the furniture till the chairs crashed to the floor. Soon she had undone the barricade and shot into the hall with loud shrieks.

The ghost followed. So did Midge. Last came Bimbo, barking wildly. He recognised the ghost by the smell and thought this was an amusing game. The ghost obviously thought so too.

‘Ahoy, ahoy,’ it yelled, flapping round Miss Black’s ears. But from time to time it let her get ahead a little, to make it more exciting. The procession travelled right through the flat, Miss Black in front and the little ghost at the back, into the kitchen and out of the kitchen, into the living-room and out of the living-room, into Midge’s room and out of Midge’s room, round and round!



Miss Black was screeching and yelling all the time and in the end the ghost had to try to calm her down.

‘Easy, take it easy, stop howling! We’re having such fun!’

But it was no use. Miss Black went on shrieking and ran back into the kitchen. There was the bowl of water on the floor, from her footbath. The ghost was close on her heels.

‘Ahoy, ahoy,’ he shouted right in her ear, and Miss Black fell headlong over the bowl with a crash. Then she gave another hoot like a foghorn and the ghost said:

‘Ssshh! You’re scaring the life out of me and the neighbours. The police will be here soon, if you don’t watch out!’

The floor was swimming with water and in the middle of it all lay Miss Black. But she scrambled to her feet remarkably fast and rushed out of the kitchen, with her wet skirt flapping round her legs.

The ghost couldn’t resist taking a couple of mighty leaps into the basin, which still had a little water in it.



‘It splashes nicely round the walls, this does,’ the ghost told Midge. ‘And everyone likes paddling in bowls of water, so what is she fussing about?’

The ghost took a last leap and was then going after Miss Black again. She was nowhere to be seen. But the marks of her wet feet showed up on the floor in the hall.

‘A running black beetle,’ said the ghost. ‘Here are the fresh tracks. And we shall soon see where they lead. Guess who is the world’s best tracker dog!’

The tracks led to the bathroom. Miss Black had locked herself in and you could hear her triumphant laughter a long way off.

Midge knocked on the door.

‘Open up, I tell you!’

A fresh burst of scornful laughter came from the bathroom.

‘Open up ... or I won’t play,’ shouted the ghost.

Miss Black was silent now, but she didn’t open the door. The ghost turned to Midge, who was out of breath after all that running.

‘You tell her! It’s no fun when she behaves like this!’

Midge tapped cautiously at the door.

‘It’s only me,’ he said. ‘How long are you going to stay in the bathroom, Miss Black?’

‘All night, you can depend on that,’ said Miss Black. ‘I’ll just go to bed in the bath, with all the towels.’

Then the ghost butted in.

‘Yes, do, by all means! Just upset everything, so that we have no fun at all! But guess who’s going to go and haunt Freda, then!’

There was a long silence from the bathroom. Miss Black must be thinking over the awful thing she had heard. But in the end she said in a rather faint, pleading voice:

‘No, don’t do that, eh? I . . . I wouldn’t like that!’

‘Well, come out then,’ said the ghost. ‘Otherwise I’m making tracks, straight for Freda’s house. And then we’ll have Freda on the box again as sure as fate.’

They could hear Miss Black sighing several times. At last she called:

‘Here, Midge, put your ear to the keyhole, I want to whisper something.’

Midge did as she asked. He put his ear to the keyhole and Miss Black whispered to him:

‘I thought, you see, that I wasn’t frightened of ghosts, but I am. You’re so brave, couldn’t you ask that awful creature to vanish and come again another time, when I’ve got a little more used to it? But he mustn’t go to Freda’s, he’ll have to promise me that!’

‘I’ll see what I can do,’ said Midge. He turned to talk to the ghost, but there was no ghost there. ‘He’s gone!’ shouted Midge. ‘He must have gone home. Come out now!’

But Miss Black did not dare to come out, until Midge had searched the whole flat and made sure that there was no ghost there.

Then Miss Black sat at the end of Midge’s room, shaking all over. Gradually she began to be her old self again — well and truly!

‘Oh, that was awful while it lasted,’ she said, ‘but think, *think* what a TV programme it’s going to be! Freda has never experienced anything at all like this!’

She sat there, pleased as a child, with only an oc­casional shudder when she thought about the ghost­hunt.

‘To be honest, that’s enough haunting now,’ she said. ‘I hope I never have to see that horror again!’

Scarcely had she spoken when they heard a low

mooing from Midge’s cupboard and that was all Miss Black needed to start screaming again.

‘Did you hear that! My sainted aunt, now we’ve got ghosts in the wardrobe . . . Oh, I’m going to die.’

Midge was sorry for her, but he didn’t know what to say to console her.

‘Oh, no,’ he said at last, ‘it isn’t a ghost . . . what if it were a little cow? . . . Yes, let’s hope it’s a little cow.’

But then they heard a voice from the wardrobe: ‘Little cow! Let’s hope it’s not!’



The wardrobe door opened, and out came the flying ghost in the white costume which Midge had made for him. It rose into the air with low, ghostly sighs and began to circle the ceiling light in tight turns.

‘Ho, ho, the World’s most Dangerous Ghost, *not* a little cowl’

Miss Black screamed. Round and round flew the ghost, faster and faster he went, louder and louder screamed Miss Black, wilder and wilder grew the ghost. But then something happened. The ghost turned rather too tight a corner and in a flash the ghost costume was hooked on one of the decorations on the lamp.

Rip! went the worn old sheet, off came the costume, caught on the lamp, and round flew Karlson in his ordinary blue trousers, his check shirt and his red and white striped socks. He was so absorbed that he didn’t even know what had happened. He flew and flew, sigh­ing and groaning in more ghostly ways than ever. But on the fourteenth turn he suddenly noticed what was hang­ing from the light and swaying in the draught as he flew past.

‘What’s that rag you’ve hung on the light?’ he said. ‘Is it some kind of fly-catcher?’

Midge could only wail: ‘No, Karlson, it’s not a fly­catcher.’

Then Karlson looked down at his chubby body and saw the disaster, saw his blue trousers, saw that he was no longer the World’s Best Flying Ghost, but just Karlson.

He landed in front of Midge with an embarrassed thud.

‘Oh well,’ he said, ‘accidents can happen to the best of us, we’ve just had an example of that . . . Oh well, it’s a mere trifle in any case!’

Miss Black, white-faced, sat staring at him. She was gasping for breath like a fish on dry land, but at last she succeeded in squeezing out a few words.

‘Who . . . who . . . Gracious Heavens, who is this?’

And with a sob in his throat, Midge answered:

‘This is Karlson on the Roof.’

‘And who,’ panted Miss Black, ‘who is Karlson on the Roof?’

Karlson bowed.

‘A handsome and intelligent and reasonably stout man in his prime . . . That’s who I am!’

9

Karlson is no ghost

That was an evening which Midge never forgot. Miss Black sat on a chair and cried, and Karlson stood a little way off, looking almost shamefaced. No one said any­thing, everything was miserable.

‘This is what gives you wrinkles on your forehead,’ thought Midge, because that’s what his mother sometimes said. For instance, when Bass came home from school with three ‘unsatisfactories’ on one day, or when Barbie nagged and wanted a short fur jacket, just when Daddy had to pay for the TV, or when Midge had been throwing stones in the school yard and broken a window. Then his mother would sigh and say: ‘This is the kind of thing that gives you wrinkles on your fore­head!’

That was just how Midge felt now. Ugh, how uncom­fortable everything was! Miss Black was positively spurting tears. And why? Just because Karlson was not a ghost.

‘There goes my ghost programme,’ she said, glaring angrily at Karlson. ‘And to think that I’ve already told Freda . . . .’

She clapped her hands to her face and cried so hard that no one could hear what it was that she had told Freda.

‘But after all, I’m a handsome and intelligent and reasonably stout man in my prime,’ Karlson tried to console her. ‘I might just as well appear in that box . . . perhaps with some little sweetie pie or other!’

Miss Black took her hands away from her face and looked at Karlson. She sniffed.

‘Handsome and intelligent and reasonably stout man, that’s just what I need — they’ve got masses of *them* on TV.’

She looked angrily and suspiciously at Karlson . . . This short fat person — he must surely be a boy, although he looked like a small man? She asked Midge:

‘What sort of a creature is he, really?’

And Midge told the truth:

‘He’s my friend.’

‘I can well believe it,’ said Miss Black.

Then she began crying again. Midge was surprised. After all, his mother and father thought that as soon as anyone set eyes on Karlson, there would be tremendous excitement, everyone would come rushing up and want to put him on TV. But the only person who actually *had* seen him was crying and thought Karlson was quite useless because he was not a ghost. The fact that he had a propeller and could fly failed to impress her. Karlson was just flying up into the air to get his ghost costume down from the light fixture, but Miss Black glared at him more fiercely than ever and said:

‘Propellers and thingumajigs, and I don’t know what- all children want to have these days! Soon they’ll be flying to the moon too, before they’ve even started school!’

She sat there, getting more and more furious, because now she suddenly understood who it was who had pinched the buns and mooed outside the window and written ghost writing on the kitchen wall. Fancy giving children machines to fly around with and tease old folk like that! All the ghostly happenings she had written about to the television people were just boyish pranks, and she could not bear to look at this fat wretch any longer.



‘Be off with you, go home at once you . . . whatever you’re called!’

‘Karlson,’ said Karlson.

‘I know that,’ said Miss Black angrily, ‘but you must have a first name too, haven’t you?’

‘Karlson is my first name and Karlson is my last name,’ said Karlson.

‘Don’t annoy me just to make me angry, because I’m angry already,’ said Miss Black. ‘A first name is some­thing people *call* you, don’t you know that? What does your father call you, when he does call you?’

‘Little devil,’ said Karlson delightedly.

Miss Black nodded her agreement.

‘Your father is absolutely right!’

Karlson agreed with her.

‘Oh yes, when I was little, I was a real little devil! But that was a long time ago, these days I’m the best Karlson in the world!’

But Miss Black was no longer listening to him. She sat thinking in silence and began to calm down a little.

‘Oh well,’ she said at last, ‘at least I know someone who’ll be glad about this.’

‘Who’s that?’ asked Midge.

‘Freda,’ said Miss Black bitterly. Then she went out to the kitchen, sighing, to mop up the water and put the basin away.

Midge and Karlson thought it was nice to be alone.

‘What a lot of fuss people make about trifles,’ said Karlson, shrugging his shoulders. ‘After all, I didn’t do anything to her!’

‘No,’ said Midge, ‘just tirritated her a bit, perhaps. But now we’re going to be very good.’

Karlson thought so too.

‘Of course we’re going to be good! I’m *always* the best in the world. But I must have fun, otherwise I won’t stay.’

Midge sat down, and tried to think of something which would be fun for Karlson. But it wasn’t neces­sary, because Karlson did that for himself. He rushed into Midge’s wardrobe.

‘Wait, I saw a funny thing in here when I was a ghost.’

He came out, holding a mousetrap in his fist. Midge had got hold of it when he was staying with his granny in the country, and brought it home with him.

‘I would love to catch a mouse and tame it and have it as a pet.’ Midge had explained to his mother. But Mummy said that thank God there were no mice in town flats, at least not in theirs. Midge told Karlson about this, but Karlson said:

‘There might be a mouse nobody knew about. A sur­prise mouse which tiptoed in, just to make your mother happy.’

He explained to Midge what a good thing it would be if they could catch that surprise mouse, because then Karlson would be able to have it up in his house on the roof, and if it had babies he could eventually have a whole mouse farm.

‘And then I’ll put an advertisement in the news­paper,’ said Karlson. “‘If it’s mice you need, ring Karlson’s mouse farm right away!”’

‘Yes, and then there will be mice in the town flats as well,’ said Midge happily. He showed Karlson how to set the trap.

‘But of course you have to have a bit of cheese or a scrap of meat in it as well, otherwise the mice won’t come.’

Karlson dug his hand into his trouser pocket and took out a scrap of meat.

‘Then it was a good thing I saved this from lunch, although I thought of throwing it in the dustbin.’

He fixed the scrap of meat in the trap and then set it under Midge’s bed.

‘There! Now the mouse can come as soon as he likes.’

They had almost forgotten Miss Black, but then they heard bangings from the kitchen.

‘It sounds as if she’s getting a meal ready,’ said Karlson, ‘she’s banging about with the saucepans.’

He was right. In the kitchen they could soon smell a faint but delicious scent of meatballs.

‘She’s heating up the meatballs which were left over from lunch,’ said Midge. ‘Oh, do I feel hungry!’

Karlson rushed to the door.

‘To the kitchen; run!’ he shouted.

Midge thought Karlson was really brave to dare to go in, but he didn’t want to be any less brave. He followed gingerly behind.

Karlson was already in the kitchen.

‘Hey, hey, I think we’re just in time for a little sup­per!’

Miss Black was at the stove with the meatball pan, but she let go of it and came towards Karlson, looking cross and dangerous.

‘Go away!’ she shouted, ‘out of here, out!’

Karlson drew down the corners of his mouth and sulked.



‘I’m not staying if you’re going to be so nasty. I ought to be allowed some meatballs too. Don’t you realise that you can get hungry spending a whole evening haunting?’

He took a step towards the stove and lifted a meatball from the frying pan. But he shouldn’t have done that. Miss Black turned fiery red and rushed at him. She grabbed him by the scruff of his neck and threw him out through the kitchen door.

‘Go away!’ she shrieked, ‘go home and don’t stick your nose in here any more!’

Midge boiled with rage and despair . . . How could anyone do that to his beloved Karlson?

‘Oh, how horrible you are,’ he said, with a sob in his throat. ‘Karlson is my friend, he’s allowed to be here.’

He got no further before the kitchen door opened and in strode Karlson, as enraged as a bee.

‘I’m not staying,’ he shrieked, ‘I’m not staying if it’s going to be like this! Throwing me out of the kitchen . . . I just won’t stay!’

He ran towards Miss Black and stamped his foot on the floor.

‘Kitchen door, oh no . . . You can throw me out of the front door like other respectable people!’

Miss Black took another grip on the scruff of Karlson’s neck.

‘It’s all one to me,’ she said, and although Midge ran after them crying and protesting, she dragged Karlson right through the flat and threw him out through the front door, since that was what he wanted.

‘There you are,’ she said, ‘is that respectable enough for you?’

‘Yes, that’s quite respectable,’ said Karlson, and then Miss Black slammed the door behind him so that it echoed all over the house.

‘At last,’ she said, and returned to the kitchen. Midge ran after her, scolding.

‘Oh, how horrible and unfair you are! Karlson *is* al­lowed in the kitchen!’

And there he was! When Miss Black and Midge went in, Karlson was standing by the stove, eating meatballs.

‘Well, of course I wanted to be thrown out through one door, so that I could come in through the other,’ he explained. ‘And get myself a few nice meatballs.’

Then Miss Black took him by the scruff of the neck and threw him out for the third time, this time through the kitchen door.

‘How extraordinary,’ she said, ‘what a little scoundrel . . . but if I lock the door, perhaps I shall manage to get rid of you.’

‘We shall have to see,’ said Karlson mildly.

The door slammed behind him and Miss Black made sure that it was properly locked.

‘Oh, you are horrible!’ said Midge, but she wasn’t listening to him. She went straight to the stove, where the meatballs were crackling merrily in the frying pan.

‘Perhaps I can get a meatball myself at last, after everything I’ve had to put up with this evening,’ she said.

Then they heard a voice from the open window.

‘Good evening, all, anyone at home? And are there any meatballs left?’

There sat Karlson, happily humming on the window ledge. Midge burst out laughing.

‘Did you fly across from the balcony?’

Karlson nodded. ‘That’s right. And here I am again. How happy you must be . . . especially you over there by the stove!’

Miss Black had a meatball in her hand. She had been

just about to stuff it in her mouth, but when she caught sight of Karlson she stood still and stared.

‘I’ve never seen such a greedy girl,’ said Karlson, making a power dive at her. As he passed he snatched the meatbail, swallowed it hastily and rose even more hurriedly towards the ceiling.

But then Miss Black sprang into action. She gave a little scream, then snatched up the carpet beater and began to chase Karlson with it.

‘You mischievous scamp, blessed if I don’t drive you out!’

Karlson circled triumphantly round the ceiling light.

‘Hey, hey, shall we have another little tussle,’ he shouted. ‘I haven’t had such fun since I was a boy and my father chased me around with the fly-swat, hey, what fun we had!’



Out they went, Karlson flying into the hall and then a mad chase began, all round the flat. First there was Karlson flying and screaming with delight, followed by Miss Black with the carpet beater and then came Midge and last of all Bimbo, barking madly.

‘Hey, hey!’ shrieked Karlson.

Miss Black was close on his heels, but as soon as she came too close, Karlson got up speed and rose towards the ceiling. And however much Miss Black flourished her carpet beater, she never succeeded in touching more than the soles of his feet.

‘Now, now,’ said Karlson, ‘no tickling people’s feet, that won’t do, I shan’t stay!’

Miss Black panted and puffed and ran, and her big, broad feet slammed on the wooden floor. Poor thing, she never had time to put on her shoes and stockings with all the haunting and chasing she had had all the evening. Now she was beginning to get tired, but she had no intention of giving up.

‘Just you wait!’ she shrieked, still running after Karlson. From time to time she took little leaps to reach him with the carpet beater, but Karlson just roared with laughter and took avoiding action. Midge laughed too, he simply couldn’t help it. He giggled so much that he got a pain in his tummy and when, for the third time, the hunt was tearing through his own room, he flung himself on his bed to rest for a bit. There he lay, quite worn out, but still he couldn’t stop laughing when he saw Miss Black chasing Karlson all round the walls.

‘Hey, hey!’ shrieked Karlson.

‘I’ll give you hey, hey,’ panted Miss Black. She thrashed wildly about with the carpet beater, and actually succeeded in chasing Karlson into a corner beside Midge’s bed.

‘Now, you,’ screamed Miss Black, ‘now I've got you I' Then she gave such a yell that Midge’s ears weredeafened. He stopped giggling.

‘Help,’ he thought, ‘now Karlson is trapped!’

But it wasn’t Karlson who was trapped, it was Miss Black. She had got her big toe caught in the mousetrap.

‘Ouuuch!’ said Miss Black, ‘Ouuch!’

She withdrew her foot and stared in silent horror at the extraordinary object hanging from her big toe.

‘Oh dear, oh dear,’ said Midge, ‘just a minute, I’ll take it off . . . Oh, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean it!’

‘Ouuch!’ said Miss Black, when Midge had helped her to get free, and she could speak again at last, ‘*why* have you got a mousetrap under your bed?’

Midge was really sorry for her and he stammered desperately:

‘Because . . . because . . . we wanted to catch a sur­prise mouse in it.’

‘But not one of those big ones,’ said Karlson, ‘one of the nice small ones with long tails.’

Miss Black stared at Karlson and groaned.

‘You . . . you . . . Now you *shall* go!’

And she set off after him again with the carpet beater.

‘Hey, hey!’ shrieked Karlson. He flew out into the hall and then the hunt rushed on through the living­room, out of the living-room, into the kitchen, out of the kitchen, into the bedroom . . .

‘Hey, hey,’ shrieked Karlson.

‘I’ll give you hey, hey,’ panted Miss Black and took a specially high leap to strike him with the carpet beater. But she had forgotten all the furniture which she herself had overturned inside the bedroom door, and when she took her high leap, she went head-over-heels over the bookcase and landed on the floor with a crash.

‘Hey, they’re having an earthquake in the North again!’ said Karlson.

Midge hurried anxiously over to Miss Black.

‘Oh, how are you?’ he said. ‘Oh, poor Miss Black!’

‘Help me on to the bed, please,’ said Miss Black.

And Midge did, at least he tried to. But Miss Black was very big and heavy and Midge was very small. He couldn’t manage. Then Karlson came flying down.

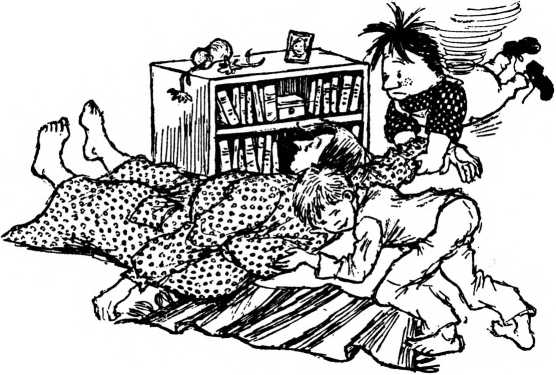
‘Now, now, stop trying,’ he told Midge. ‘I’m going to come and work too. Because *I'm* the kindest person in the world, not you!’

They put everything they had into it, both Karlson and Midge, and at least they succeeded in getting Miss Black on to the bed.

‘Poor Miss Black,’ said Midge. ‘How do you feel, does it hurt anywhere?’

Miss Black lay in silence for a time, as if she were feeling for pains.

‘I know I haven’t an unbroken bone left in my body,’ she said at last. ‘But it doesn’t actually hurt . . . only when I laugh!’



And she began to laugh until the bed shook.

Midge gazed at her in horror. What had come over her?

‘Say what you like,’ said Miss Black, ‘I’ve got a couple of long-distance runs behind me tonight, and Gracious Heavens, how it freshens you up!’

She nodded energetically.

‘You wait! Freda and I do the Women’s Institute gymnastics, and you just wait till the next time! Freda will soon see who can run!’

‘Hey,’ said Karlson, ‘take the carpet beater, then you can chase Freda up and down the gym hall and freshen her up too!’

Miss Black glared at him.

‘Be silent when you speak to me! Be quiet and go and get me some meatballs!’

Midge laughed delightedly.

‘Yes, you get an appetite from running,’ he said.

‘And guess who is the world’s best meatball-fetcher,’ said Karlson. He was already on his way to the kitchen.

Then Karlson and Midge and Miss Black ate a nice supper on the edge of the bed. Karlson came back from the kitchen with a loaded tray.

‘I saw there were some apple tarts and custard, so I brought them too. And then I found some ham and cheese and sausage and salad and a few sardines and a bit of liver paste, but where in the world have you hidden the cream cake?’

‘There isn’t any cream cake,’ said Miss Black.

And the corners of Karlson’s mouth turned down.

‘Do you mean we’re supposed to be satisfied with a little meatball and apple pie and custard and ham and cheese and sausage and salad and a few mangy little sardines?’



Miss Black looked him straight in the eye.

‘No,’ she said deliberately. ‘There’s the liver paste as well.’

Midge couldn’t remember when food had tasted so good, and he and Karlson and Miss Black were having such a good time, the three of them, sitting there munch­ing. But all of a sudden Miss Black shrieked:

‘Gracious Heavens, Midge is supposed to be in quar­antine, and we’ve dragged that one in here!’

She pointed at Karlson.

‘No, we didn’t drag him in. He came in by himself,’ said Midge. But all the same, he was worried.

‘Oh Karlson, just think if you were to get scarlet fever now!’

‘Umm . . . umm . . said Karlson, whose mouth wasfull of apple pie. It was some time before he could speak.

‘Scarlet fever . . . Hey! Anyone who has had the worst bun-fever without being polished off, won’t catch any­thing else.’

‘So that’s no good either,’ said Miss Black with a sigh.

Karlson popped the last meatball into his mouth, licked his fingers and said:

‘The food in this house is a little meagre, I know, but otherwise I feel good. So perhaps I shall isolate myself here too.’

‘Gracious Heavens,’ said Miss Black.

She glared at Karlson and at the tray, which was now completely empty.

‘There’s not much left when you’ve passed by,’ she said.

Karlson got up from the edge of the bed and patted his stomach.

‘When I’ve eaten, I leave the table,’ he said. ‘But that’s the only thing I do leave!’

Then he turned his starter-button, the engine began to buzz and he flew heavily out through the open win­dow.

‘Heysan hoppsan!’ he shouted. ‘Now you will have to get on without me for a while, because I’m in a hurry!’

‘Heysan hoppsan, Karlson!’ said Midge. ‘Do you really have to go?’

‘So soon,’ said Miss Black bitterly.

‘Yes, I must hurry now,’ shouted Karlson. ‘Otherwise I’ll be too late for supper. Hey, hey!’

Then he had gone.

10

The proud maiden flies

through the air

The next day, Midge slept late. He was awakened by the telephone ringing and rushed out into the hall to answer it. It was Mummy.

‘Darling child . . . Oh, how awful!’

‘What is?’ asked Midge sleepily.

‘All that stuff you wrote in your letter. I got so worried.’

‘Why?’ asked Midge.

‘You know very well,’ said his mother. ‘Poor little boy . . . But I’m coming home tomorrow.’

Midge was cheerful and wide awake in a moment. But he couldn’t think why Mummy had called him ‘poor little boy’.

Scarcely had he replaced the receiver when there was another ring. It was his father, ringing up on long dis­tance.

‘How are you?’ said Daddy. ‘Are Bass and Barbie being nice?’

T shouldn’t think so,’ said Midge. ‘But I don’t know, because they’re in hospital.’

You could hear Daddy getting worried.

‘Hospital, what do you mean?’

And when Midge had explained what he meant, hisfather said just what Mummy had said:

‘Poor boy . . . I’m coming home tomorrow.’

That was the end of the conversation. But soon after­wards it rang again. This time it was Bass.

‘You can tell the Black Beetle and her old doctor, that whatever they think, it’s not scarlet fever. Barbie and I are coming home tomorrow.’

‘Haven’t you got scarlet fever then?’ asked Midge.

‘We certainly have not. We’ve drunk too much hot chocolate with buns, the doctor here says. You can get a rash from that if you’re over-sensitive.’

‘Then it’s a typical case of bun-fever,’ said Midge.

But Bass had already rung off.

When Midge had his clothes on, he went out to the kitchen to tell Miss Black that the isolation was over.

She had already begun to prepare lunch, the whole kitchen smelled strongly of spices.

‘I don’t mind,’ said Miss Black, when Midge told her that the whole family would be coming home. ‘It’s not a bad idea for me to stop before my nerves are completely shattered.’

She stirred vigorously at the saucepan which was standing on the stove. She had some kind of thick stew in there and she was spicing it strongly with salt and pepper and curry.

‘There we are,’ she said. ‘You have to salt and pepper and curry it properly, then it’s good!’

Then she looked anxiously at Midge.

‘You don’t think that awful Karlson will be coming here again today? It would be so nice if my last hours here could be a little more peaceful.’

Before Midge could answer, they heard a cheerful voice outside the window, singing at full pitch:

‘Little sunshine looking in Through the window to my den . .

There was Karlson, on the window ledge.

‘Heysan, hoppsan, here comes your little sunshine, now we’ll have some fun!’

But Miss Black stretched both hands pleadingly to­wards him.

‘No, no . . . No, anything you like as long as we don’t have fun!’

‘Oh well, we must eat first of course,’ said Karlson, bouncing over to the kitchen table. Miss Black had laid the table for herself and Midge. Karlson sat down in one of the places and picked up the knife and fork.

‘Get going! Bring on the food!’

He nodded kindly at Miss Black.

‘You can sit down with us, get yourself a plate and come along!’

Then he twitched his nostrils.

‘What are we having?’

‘A good hiding,’ said Miss Black, stirring the stew still more violently. ‘That’s what you ought to have, but I’m so sore all over today, I’m afraid I can’t even run.’

And she ladled the stew into a dish and put it on the table.

‘You eat,’ she said, ‘I’ll wait till later, if you don’t mind. The doctor told me I must have peace and quiet when I eat.’

Karlson nodded.

‘Oh well, there must be a few scraps in some tin somewhere, which you can gobble up when we’ve finished this ... You just have a little slice of bread in peace and quiet, do that!’

He ladled a large helping enthusiastically into his dish, but Midge took only a little scrap. He was always afraid of food he didn’t know, and he had never seen a stew like this before.

Karlson began by making a mound of his stew, with a moat round it. While he was doing that Midge took a first, cautious mouthful . . . ‘Ow!’ he gasped, and his eyes filled with tears. His whole mouth was burning, like fire. But Miss Black stood there looking at him so expec­tantly that he swallowed and said nothing.



Karlson looked up from his building activities.

‘What’s the matter with you? Why are you crying?’

‘I . . . I just thought of something sad,’ stammered Midge.

‘I see,’ said Karlson, delving into his mound with new appetite. But as soon as he had swallowed the first mouthful he gave a yell, and his eyes filled with tears.

‘What is it?’ asked Miss Black.

‘Rat poison, I should think . . . you should know, you brewed it up,’ said Karlson. ‘Quick, fetch the big fire extinguisher, fire has broken out in my throat!’

He dried the tears from his eyes.

‘What are you crying for?’ asked Midge.

‘I just thought of something sad too,’ said Karlson.

‘What was it?’ asked Midge.

‘This stew,’ said Karlson.

But Miss Black didn’t like that at all.

‘You should be ashamed of yourselves, boys! There are thousands of children in this world who would give anything for a little stew like that.’

Karlson put his hand in his pocket and took out a notebook and pencil.

‘Would you give me the names and addresses of two of them?’ he said.

But Miss Black muttered and wouldn’t give him any addresses.

‘The whole lot of them must be little firemen’s chil­dren, I should think,’ said Karlson, ‘they’ve probably never eaten anything but fire and brimstone.’

Just then the front door-bell rang and Miss Black went out to open it.

‘Let’s go and see who it is,’ said Karlson. ‘I may be one of those firemen’s children who’d give us anything for her fiery stew, and we must make sure she doesn’t sell it too cheaply . . . Think of all that expensive rat­poison she’s been throwing in!’

He followed Miss Black out and so did Midge. They were standing close behind her in the hall when she opened the door and they heard the voice outside saying:

‘My name is Peck. I’ve come from the television com­pany.’

Midge felt cold all over. He peeped out warily from behind poor Miss Black’s skirt, and there stood a gentle­man, obviously one of those handsome, intelligent and reasonably stout men in their prime, of whom Miss Black had said there were so many on television.

‘Might you be Miss Hilda Black?’ said Mr Peck.

‘Yes, I am,’ said Miss Black. ‘But I’ve paid my radio *and* my TV licence, so don’t try anything on.’

Mr Peck gave her a friendly smile.

‘I haven’t come about the licence. No, it was the ghostly apparitions you wrote about ... We’d like to do a programme on that.’

Miss Black’s face turned bright red, but she didn’t say a word.

‘What is it?’ Mr Peck asked. ‘Don’t you feel well?’ ‘No,’ Miss Black said, ‘I don’t feel well. I think this is the worst moment in my whole life.’

Midge was standing close behind her and he felt more or less the same. Gracious Heavens, this really would be the end! At any second that Mr Peck was going to catch sight of Karlson, and when his parents came home tomorrow the house would be absolutely full of cables, and TV cameras, and reasonably stout men and no peace and quiet, Gracious Heavens, *how* could he get rid of Karlson?

Then he caught sight of the old wooden chest which was standing in the hall, the one Barbie kept all her dressing up stuff in. She and the other girls in her class had some sort of silly club, and sometimes they had meetings in Barbie’s room and dressed up and messed about pretending to be something quite different from what they really were — it was called play-acting and Midge thought it was really stupid. But oh, what a good thing the dressing-up chest was there just now! Midge lifted the lid and whispered nervously to Karlson:

‘Hurry up . . . hide inside this chest here!’

And although Karlson didn’t understand *why* he should hide, he wasn’t one to refuse to play tricks when necessary. He winked slyly at Midge and leaped into the chest. Midge quickly closed the lid and looked anxiously at the two in the doorway . . . Had they noticed any­thing?

They had not. Mr Peck and Miss Black were discuss­ing why Miss Black did not feel well.

‘There *were* no ghosts,’ said Miss Black, almost in tears. ‘It was all just a boyish prank.’

‘So there was no haunting?’ said Mr Peck.

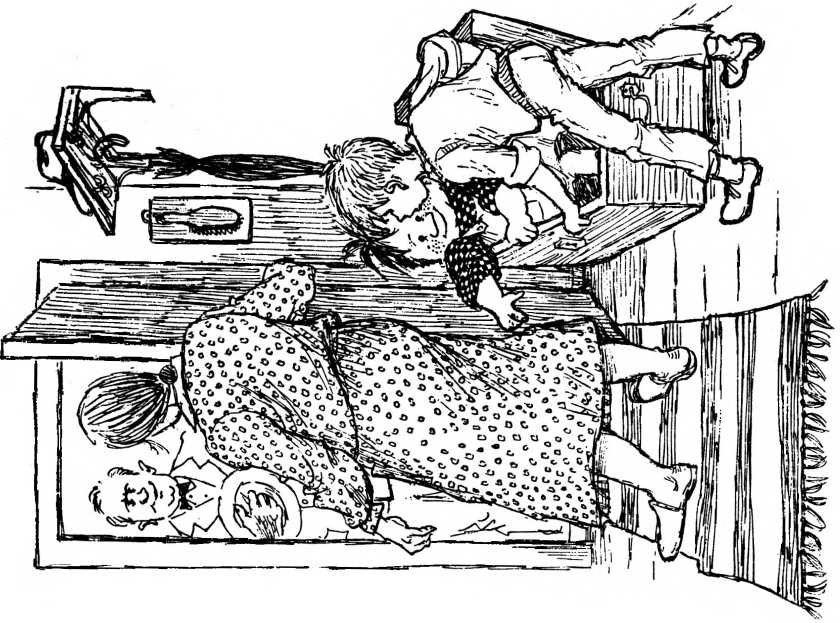
Now Miss Black was crying in earnest.

‘No, there was no haunting . . . and I’ll never be on TV . . . Only Freda!’

Mr Peck patted her consolingly on the arm.

‘Don’t take it so hard, my dear Miss Black. Perhaps you can appear in some other connection.’

‘No, I can’t,’ said Miss Black. She collapsed on to the dressing-up chest and buried her face in her hands. There she sat, weeping and weeping. Midge was very sorry for her and felt ashamed, as if it was all his fault.



Then a low rumbling came from the chest.

‘Oh, excuse me,’ said Miss Black. ‘It’s just because I’m so hungry.’

‘Yes, one often rumbles a little then,’ said Mr Peck kindly. ‘But your lunch must be ready, there’s such a good smell. What have you been cooking?’

‘Just a little stew,’ sniffed Miss Black. ‘It’s my own invention: “Hilda Black’s Good Currypot”, I’ve called it.’

‘It smells fantastically good,’ said Mr Peck. ‘It makes you feel really hungry.’

Miss Black got up from the chest.

‘Oh well, you could taste it, because those young scamps won’t be eating any.’

Mr Peck made a pretence of saying no, no, he really couldn’t, but it all ended up with him and Miss Black going off to the kitchen together.

Midge lifted the lid of the chest and looked at Karlson, who was lying there rumbling gently.

‘Stay there until he’s gone,’ said Midge, ‘otherwise you’ll be on TV.’

‘Oh yes,’ said Karlson, ‘and I’ll be as squashed as I am in this chest, won’t I?’

So Midge left the lid a little ajar so that Karlson could breathe, and ran out to the kitchen. He wanted to see Mr Peck’s face when he had eaten some of Miss Black’s good currypot.

But there was Mr Peck, sitting stuffing himself and saying it was the best thing he had eaten in his whole life. There were no tears in his eyes at all, but there were in Miss Black’s. Not from her stew, of course. No, she was still crying about her ghost programme which had fallen through. It made no difference whether Mr Peck liked her fiery stew or not, she was still upset.

But then something incredible happened. Suddenly Mr Peck said, right out of the blue:

‘I’ve got it! You’ll be on tomorrow evening.’

Miss Black looked at him tearfully.

‘What shall I be on tomorrow evening?’ she asked gloomily.

‘TV, of course,’ said Mr Peck. ‘In our series “My Best Recipe”. You will show the whole country how to make “Hilda Black’s Good Currypot”.’

They heard a thump. Miss Black had fainted.

But she soon came round and scrambled up from the floor, her eyes shining.

‘Tomorrow evening . . . On TV? My currypot. You mean I’m going to stew it up on TV for the whole country? Gracious Heavens . . . And just think, Freda can’t cook at all. She calls my currypot chicken-food!’

Midge was listening with both ears, this was inter­esting. He had almost forgotten Karlson in the chest. But now, to his horror, he heard someone coming out into the hall. And sure enough ... it was Karlson! The door between the kitchen and the hall was open, and Midge could see him a long way off, before Miss Black or Mr Peck had noticed anything.

Yes ... it was Karlson! And yet it wasn’t Karlson. What *did* he look like, in Barbie’s old theatrical costume, with the long velvet skirt straggling round his legs and the net veils at front and back! He looked quite like a cheerful little girl. And the cheerful little girl was com­ing closer all the time. Midge made frantic signals to show Karlson that he mustn’t come. But Karlson didn’t seem to understand, he just waved back . . . and came.

‘The proud maiden steps into the Great Hall,’ said Karlson, and there he stood in the doorway, veils and all. Mr Peck stared at this sight in amazement.



‘Who in the world . . . What on earth is that funny little girl doing?’ he said.

But then Miss Black realised what was happening.

‘Funny little girl! No, the naughtiest rascal of a boy I’ve ever known. Go away, nasty boy!’

But Karlson wasn’t listening to her.

‘The Proud Maiden dances, so happy and gay,’ he said.

And then he began a dance, the like of which Midge

had never seen before, and apparently Mr Peck hadn’t either.

Karlson glided round the kitchen, bending his knees. From time to time he gave a little hop and waved his veils.

‘It looks quite mad,’ thought Midge. ‘But as long as he doesn’t begin to fly, it’s all right. Oh, I hope he doesn’t!’

Karlson was wearing so many veils that you could not see his propeller and Midge was grateful for that. But what if Karlson were suddenly to rise into the air? Mr Peck would fall into a faint and then come rushing back with his TV cameras as soon as he came to life again.

Mr Peck watched the extraordinary dance and laughed. He laughed more and more. Then Karlson began to giggle and wink at Mr Peck as he glided by, and waved at him with his veils.

‘A very amusing boy,’ said Mr Peck. ‘Perhaps we could have him on some children’s programme.’

He could not have said anything which annoyed Miss Black more.

‘Have *him* on TV? In that case I must ask you to excuse me! But, of course, if you want to have someone who turns the whole place upside down, you can’t do better than him.’

Midge nodded.

‘Yes, that’s right. And when he’s turned the place upside down, he’ll just say it’s a mere trifle, so you’d better watch out!’

Mr Peck did not insist.

‘Good heavens, it was only a suggestion! There are so many other little boys.’

Mr Peck was in a hurry now, in any case. There was a rehearsal he had to watch and he must be going. Then

Midge saw Karlson beginning to grope for the starter button and was terrified — was everything going to be ruined at the last minute after all?

‘No, Karlson . . . no, Karlson,’ Midge whispered anxiously.

But Karlson went on groping for the starter button. He had difficulty in reaching it because of all the veils.

Mr Peck was already at the door . . . when Karlson’s engine began to buzz.

‘I didn’t know there was this much traffic here­abouts,’ said Mr Peck. ‘It really should be cut down in a residential area, I think. Goodbye, Miss Black, see you tomorrow.’ And he left. But up to the ceiling went Karlson, circling merrily round the light and waving his veils at Miss Black.

‘The Proud Maiden flies round the Hall, hey, hey!’ he said.

II

Handsome and intelligent

and reasonably stout . . .

All that afternoon Midge was up in Karlson’s house on the roof. He had explained to Karlson why they must leave Miss Black in peace.

‘She’s got to make cream cakes, you see, because Mummy and Daddy and Bass and Barbie are coming home tomorrow.’

That was something Karlson understood.

‘If she’s going to make cream cakes, I agree, she must be left in peace. It’s dangerous to tirritate black beetles just when they’re making cream cakes, because it turns the cream sour . . . and the black beetles too, for that matter!’

So Miss Black’s last hours with the Sanderson family were quite peaceful after all, just as she had wished.

Midge and Karlson had a nice peaceful time as well, in front of the fire up in Karlson’s house. Karlson had taken a trip to the market and bought apples.

‘And paid for them honestly, with a 5p piece,’ he said. ‘I didn’t want the greengrocer to make a loss, because I’m the World’s Most Honest Person.’

‘Did the greengrocer think 5p was enough?’ asked Midge.

‘I couldn’t ask,’ said Karlson, ‘he was out having a cup of tea just then.’



Karlson stuck the apples on a skewer and roasted them over the fire.

‘The World’s Best Apple Roaster, guess who that is,’ said Karlson.

‘You, Karlson,’ said Midge.

And they sprinkled sugar on their apples and sat in front of the fire and ate as dusk fell. It was nice to have a fire, Midge thought, because the weather was beginning to turn cooler. They were beginning to notice it was autumn.

‘Soon I shall have to take a flight into the country and buy myself a little more wood from some farmer,’ said Karlson. ‘Although they’re real meanies at keeping their eyes open, and heaven knows when they stop for a cup of tea!’

He added a couple of big beechlogs to the fire.

‘But I like to have it nice and warm in winter, other­wise I won’t stay. They’d better watch out, those far­mers!’

When the fire had burned low, it was dark in Karlson’s little house. He lighted the paraffin lamp which hung from the ceiling over the work-bench. It shed a warm, comfortable light over the room and all the things Karlson had put together on the work-bench. Midge wondered if they could play a little with Karlson’s things, and Karlson agreed to that.

‘But you must ask me if you can borrow them. Sometimes I say yes and sometimes I say no . . . I usually say no, because after all, they’re my things, and I want them, otherwise I won’t stay!’

And when Midge had asked often enough, he was allowed to borrow a battered old alarm-clock which he unscrewed and put together again. That was fun, Midge couldn’t think of a better plaything.

But then Karlson wanted them to do some carpentry instead.

‘That’s the most fun of all, and you can make so many nice things,’ said Karlson. ‘At least, I can.’

He threw all the things off the work-bench and got out boards and nails which were under the sofa. And then Karlson and Midge both sawed and hammered and nailed until the place was ringing with the noise.

Midge nailed two pieces of wood together and made a steamboat. He put a nail on top as a chimney. It really was a very fine boat.

Karlson said he was going to make himself a bird-box and put it up outside the house for birds to live in. But no bird-box appeared. Something else did appear, but it was difficult to see what.

‘What’s that?’ asked Midge.

Karlson put his head on one side and looked at what he had made.

‘It’s a . . . a thing,’ he said. ‘A wonderfully fine thing, guess who’s the world’s best thing-maker?’

‘You, Karlson,’ said Midge.

Now it was really evening. Midge had to go home and sleep. He had to leave Karlson and his little room, which was so comfortable, with all his things and his work­bench and his glowing paraffin lamp and his bits of wood and his open hearth, where the glow from the fire was warm and bright. It was difficult to drag himself away, but after all, he knew he could come again. Oh, how glad he was that Karlson had his house on *their* roof and nowhere else!

They came out on to the porch, Karlson and Midge together, with the starry sky above them. Midge had never seen the stars so big, so numerous and so close. No, of course they were not close, they were thousands of miles away, he knew that, but still . . . Oh, what a starry roof Karlson had over his house, near and far away at the same time.



‘What are you staring at?’ said Karlson. ‘I’m freezing!

Are you going or not?’

‘Yes, I am,’ said Midge.

And the next day . . . What a day that was! First Bass and Barbie arrived, then Daddy, and last, and best of all, came Mummy. Midge threw himself into her arms and hugged her. He was never going to let her go away again. They all stood round her, their father and Bass and Barbie and Midge and Miss Black and Bimbo.

‘Aren’t you over-tired any more?’ asked Midge. ‘How could you get rid of it so quickly?’

‘It went as soon as I got your letter,’ said his mother. ‘When I heard how ill and miserable you all were, I felt that I would be seriously ill as well if I couldn’t come home.’

Miss Black shook her head.

‘That wasn’t really very sensible. But still, I can come and help you now and then, Mrs Sanderson, if neces­sary. But now,’ said Miss Black, ‘now I must go at once, because I’m going to be on TV tonight.’

That caused a sensation for Mummy and Daddy and Bass and Barbie. ‘Really?’ said Midge’s father. ‘This we must see! We certainly must!’

Miss Black tossed her head proudly.

‘Yes, I hope so. I hope the whole country will see me.’

Then she was in a hurry.

‘I must go and do my hair and bath and have my face done and a manicure, and then I’m going to try out my new foot-supports. You have to look nice when you’re going to appear on television.’

Barbie laughed.

‘Foot-supports . . . surely *they* won’t show on TV?’ Miss Black gave her a disapproving look.

‘Did I say that? I need new ones in any case . . . and you feel safer when you know that you’re perfect all over. Of course, ordinary people don’t understand that, but us, people who are on TV, we know!’

Then she said goodbye hastily and rushed off.

‘There goes the Black Beetle,’ said Bass, when the door closed behind her. Midge nodded thoughtfully.

‘I quite liked her,’ he said.

And she had made an excellent cream cake, too, big and billowy, with pineapple chunks in it.

‘We’ll take that into the living-room this evening and eat it while we watch Miss Black on TV,’ said Midge’s Mother.

And they did. As the thrilling hour approached, Midge rang up to Karlson. He tugged the cord behind the curtain, a single tug which meant ‘Come here at once!’

Karlson came. Most of the family was already sitting in front of the TV, the coffee tray was laid and the cream pie was on the table.

‘Here come Karlson and me,’ said Midge, as they surged into the living-room.

‘Hère I come,’ said Karlson, throwing himself into the best armchair. ‘Aha, at last a little bit of cream pie has arrived in this house, it was high time. Could I have a bit straight away . . . or rather, a lot!’

‘Smallest last,’ said Mummy. ‘And, by the way, that’s my chair. You can sit on the floor in front of the set, you and Midge, I’ll give you your pie there.’

Karlson turned to Midge.

‘Did you hear? Does she always carry on like that with you, poor child?’

Then he beamed happily.

‘It’s quite all right for her to carry on like that with me too, because things have to be fair, or I’m not stay­ing!’

So they sat on the floor in front of the TV, Karlson and Midge, and ate a lot of pie while they waited for Miss Black.



‘She’s coming now,’ said Father.

Right, there she was! And Mr Peck too. He was the programme presenter.

‘A black beetle, large as life,’ said Karlson, ‘hey, hey, now we’ll have fun!’

Miss Black jumped. She looked almost as if she had heard Karlson, or else she was nervous, after all, stand­ing in front of the whole country, showing them how to make ‘Hilda Black’s Good Currypot’.

‘Look here,’ said Mr Peck, ‘can’t you tell us how you hit on the idea of making this particular hotpot?’

‘Look here,’ said Miss Black, ‘when you’ve got a sis­ter who can’t cook to save her life . . .’

She got no further, because Karlson put out a pudgy hand and switched off the television.

‘The Black Beetle comes and goes just as I like,’ he said. But Mother said:

‘Switch it on again at once! And don’t do that again, or you’ll be out!’

Karlson nudged Midge in the ribs and whispered.

‘Aren’t you allowed to do anything in this house any more?’

‘Shhh, we want to see Miss Black,’ said Midge.

‘You have to use plenty of salt and pepper and spice to make it taste good,’ said Miss Black.

She salted and peppered and spiced for all she was worth, and when the currypot was ready she looked roguishly out of the TV screen and said:

‘Would you like a taste?’

‘Thanks, not for me,’ said Karlson. ‘But if you give me the names and addresses, I’ll get you one or two of those firemen’s children.’

Then Mr Peck thanked Miss Black for coming and showing them how to make her good currypot, and the show was apparently over. But Miss Black said:

‘Just a minute, can I say something to my sister at home?’

Mr Peck looked doubtful.

‘Oh, all right . . . just as long as you’re quick.’

So Miss Black waved from {he TV screen and said:

‘Hallo, Freda, how are you? I hope you haven’t fallen off your chair!’

‘I hope so too,’ said Karlson. ‘We’ve had enough earthquakes in the North.’

‘What do you mean by that?’ said Midge. ‘After all, you don’t know if Freda is as huge as Miss Black.’

‘Of course I know,’ said Karlson, ‘I’ve been down where they live, doing some haunting from time to time.’

Then Karlson and Midge ate still more cream pie, and watched a juggler on television who could keep five plates in the air at once, without dropping a single one. Midge really thought the juggler was rather boring, but Karlson sat there with sparkling eyes, and that made Midge happy. Everything was nice just now, and it was wonderful to have everyone there, Mummy and Daddy and Bass and Barbie and Bimbo . . . and Karlson.

When the pie was finished, Karlson picked up the elegant pie-dish and licked it clean. Then he threw it up into the air just as the juggler had done with his dishes.

‘After all,’ he said, ‘that fellow in the box wasn’t so great. Guess who’s the World’s Best Dish-thrower?’

He flung the pie-dish into the air so that it almost hit the ceiling and Midge got worried.

‘No, Karlson . . . stop that!’

Mummy and the others were watching a dancer on television and didn’t notice what Karlson was up to. And Midge saying ‘stop that’ didn’t help at all. Karlson went on throwing cheerfully.

‘This is a really beautiful pie-dish you’ve got,’ said Karlson, flinging it up to the ceiling again. ‘You *had,* rather,’ he said, stooping to pick up the pieces. ‘Ah well, it’s a mere trifle . . .’

But Midge’s mother had heard the crash when the plate smashed to bits. She gave Karlson a firm smack on the behind and said:

‘That was my best pie-dish and it was *not* a mere trifle.’

Midge didn’t think that was the way to behave to the World’s Best Dish-thrower, but he did realise that his mother was upset about her dish and he hastened to comfort her.

‘I’ll take some money out of my piggy bank and buy you a new one.’

But Karlson proudly put his hand in his pocket and took out 5p which he gave to Midge’s mother.

‘7 pay for what I break. Here! There you are! Buy a dish and keep the change.’

‘Thank you very much, Karlson,’ said Mummy.

Karlson nodded happily.

‘Or buy a few cheap vases for it, then you can throw them at me, if I just happen to come here and you just happen to be cross.’

Midge sidled up to his mother.

‘You’re not cross with Karlson, are you, Mummy?’

Mummy patted Karlson and Midge on the head and said she wasn’t.

Then Karlson said goodbye.

‘Heysan hoppsan, I must go home now or I’ll be too late for supper.’

‘What are you going to have for supper?’ asked Midge.

‘Karlson on the Roofs Good Currypot,’ said Karlson. ‘Not rat-poison like the Black Beetle’s, I can tell you. Guess who’s the World’s Best Currypot Cooker?’

‘You, Karlson,’ said Midge.

A little later Midge was in bed, with Bimbo in the basket beside him. They had all been in to say good­night, Mummy and Daddy and Bass and Barbie. Now Midge was beginning to feel sleepy, but he lay there thinking of Karlson and wondering what Karlson was doing just then. Perhaps he was making something, a bird-box or something like that.

‘Tomorrow, when I come home from school,’ thought

Midge, ‘I shall ring up Karlson and ask if I can come up and make something too.’

It was a good thing that Karlson had made them a telephone line, Midge thought.

‘I can ring him up now if I like,’ he thought and suddenly that seemed a wonderful idea.

He jumped out of bed and ran on bare feet to the window and tugged the cord. One, two, three. That was the signal which meant: ‘Isn’t it wonderful that there’s someone in the world as handsome and intelligent and reasonably stout and brave and good in every way as you, Karlson!’

Midge went on standing by the window, not because he was expecting an answer, he just stood there.

And suddenly, there was Karlson.

‘Yes, isn’t it!’ he said.

He didn’t say anything else. He just flew back to his little green house on the roof.