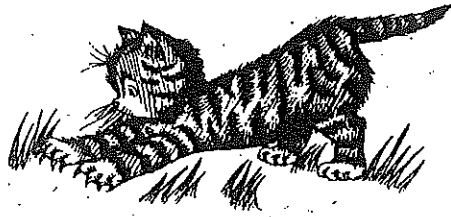


## CHAPTER EIGHT



**I**T was very gloomy in the forest, and Mildred felt slightly uneasy, surrounded by dark trees which grew so thickly together that no light fell between them. When she was almost at the bottom of the mountain, she sat down to rest, leaning her back against a tree, and the kitten climbed out of the bag to stretch itself on the grass.

It was very quiet except for a few birds singing, and a rather strange noise, a sort of low humming, almost like a lot of people talking at once. In fact, the more Mildred listened, the more it did sound

like voices. She looked in the direction of the noise and thought she saw something moving along the trees.

'Let's go and have a look, Tabby,' she whispered.

They left the bag and broomstick leaning against the tree, and crept through the tangled undergrowth. The noise grew louder.

'Why, it *is* people talking,' said Mildred. 'Look, Tabby, over there, through the branches.'

Sitting in a clearing in the gloom were about twenty witches, all crowded together, muttering and talking in low voices. Mildred crept nearer and listened. She didn't recognize any of them. A tall, grey-haired witch got to her feet.

'Listen, everyone,' said the grey-haired witch. 'Will you all be quiet for a few moments? Thank you. Now, what I should like to know is, are we quite sure

that they will all be sleeping, or at least in their rooms?'

She sat down, and another witch got up to reply. She was a small, plump witch with green horn-rimmed glasses. For a horrible moment Mildred thought it was Miss Cackle, but her voice was different when she spoke.

'Of course we are sure,' this witch replied. 'The morning after Hallowe'en celebrations the entire school sleeps until midday. It is a rule, and the school is very strict about rules, so no one will be up until five minutes to twelve at the very earliest. If we fly over the wall into the back part of the yard, we will be as far away from the bedrooms as we can be, and no one will possibly hear us. Added to this, we shall all be invisible, so we shall be extremely well protected. Then all that remains to be done is to split up, sneak into each room and turn them all into

frogs. They won't be able to see us even if they *are* awake. Remember to take one of these boxes with you for the frogs.' She pointed to a neat pile of small cardboard boxes. 'We can't have even one of them escaping. Once this is done, the entire school and everyone in it will be under our control.'

'Is the invisibility potion ready yet?' she continued, turning to a young witch who was stirring a cauldron over a fire. It was the same potion that the two Ms had made during the laughter potion test.

'Another few minutes,' replied the young witch, dropping a handful of bats' whiskers into the mixture. 'It needs to simmer for a bit.'

Mildred was horrified. She sneaked back to where she had left her bag, and then into the shadows so that she couldn't be seen.

'What on earth can we do, Tab?' she



whispered to the kitten, imagining Maud hopping about turned into a frog. 'We can't let them take over the school.'

She rummaged through the bag and took out the two books she had brought with her. One was the Witches' Code and the other was her spell book. Mildred flicked through the spell book and stopped at the page about turning people into animals. There was only one example given, and that was snails.

'Dare I?' thought Mildred. 'Dare I turn the whole lot of them into snails?' The kitten looked at her, encouragingly.

'I know it's against the Witches' Code, Tabby,' she said, 'but *they* don't seem to follow any rules. They were planning to change us into frogs while we were *asleep*, so I don't see why we shouldn't do the same to them in self-defence.'

She sneaked back to the clearing, clutching her spell book.



'Here goes!' she thought desperately.

The invisibility potion was being poured out into cups, so Mildred had to work quickly. She waved her arms in a circle towards the crowd of witches (this part of spell-making can be very awkward when you don't want to draw attention to yourself) and muttered the spell under her breath. For a second, nothing happened, and the witches milling round the cauldron continued to chatter and bustle

about. Mildred closed her eyes in despair, but when she opened them again everyone had vanished and on the ground was a group of snails of all different shapes and sizes.

'Tabby!' shrieked Mildred. 'I've done it! Look!'

Tabby came bounding out of the undergrowth and stared at the snails, who were all moving away as fast as they could, which wasn't very fast. Mildred took one of the cardboard boxes and put the snails into it, gently picking them up one by one.

'I suppose we'll have to take them back to school and tell Miss Cackle, Tab,' she said, suddenly remembering her interview to come at noon. 'Still, we'll have to go back. We can't just leave this lot here, can we?'

So they set off up the mountainside, Mildred carrying the box in her arms,

while the broomstick flew alongside with the bag hanging from it and Tabby riding inside the bag.

