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Howl's MOVING CASTLE

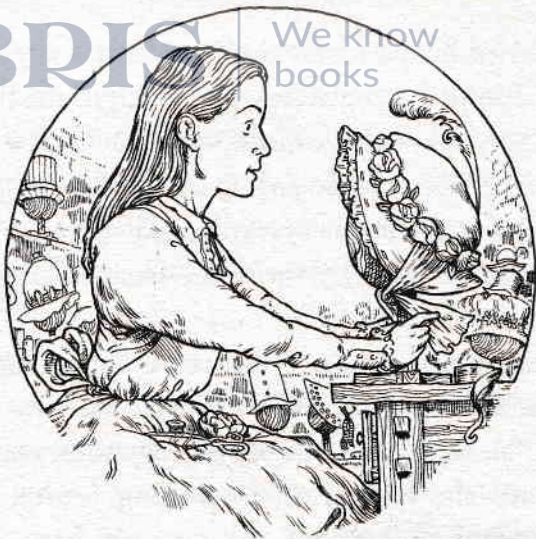
Illustrated by Tim Stevens



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CHAPTER ONE

In which Sophie talks to hats

In the land of Ingary, where such things as seven-league boots and cloaks of invisibility really exist, it is quite a misfortune to be born the eldest of three. Everyone knows you are the one who will fail first, and worst, if the three of you set out to seek your fortunes.

Sophie Hatter was the eldest of three sisters. She was not even the child of a poor woodcutter, which might have given her some chance of success. Her parents were well to do and kept a ladies' hat shop in the prosperous town of Market Chipping. True, her own mother died when Sophie was two years old and her sister Lettie was one year old, and their

father married his youngest shop assistant, a pretty blonde girl called Fanny. Fanny shortly gave birth to the third sister, Martha. This ought to have made Sophie and Lettie into Ugly Sisters, but in fact all three girls grew up very pretty indeed, though Lettie was the one everyone said was most beautiful. Fanny treated all three girls with the same kindness and did not favour Martha in the least.

Mr Hatter was proud of his three daughters and sent them all to the best school in town. Sophie was the most studious. She read a great deal, and very soon realised how little chance she had of an interesting future. It was a disappointment to her, but she was still happy enough, looking after her sisters and grooming Martha to seek her fortune when the time came. Since Fanny was always busy in the shop, Sophie was the one who looked after the younger two. There was a certain amount of screaming and hair-pulling between those younger two. Lettie was by no means resigned to being the one who, next to Sophie, was bound to be the least successful.

"It's not fair!" Lettie would shout. "Why should Martha have the best of it just because she was born the youngest? I shall marry a prince, so there!"

To which Martha always retorted that *she* would end up disgustingly rich without having to marry anybody.

Then Sophie would have to drag them apart and mend their clothes. She was very deft with her needle. As time went on, she made clothes for her sisters too. There was one deep rose outfit she made for Lettie, the May Day before this story really starts, which Fanny said looked as if

it had come from the most expensive shop in Kingsbury.

About this time everyone began talking of the Witch of the Waste again. It was said the Witch had threatened the life of the King's daughter and that the King had commanded his personal magician, Wizard Suliman, to go into the Waste and deal with the Witch. And it seemed that Wizard Suliman had not only failed to deal with the Witch: he had got himself killed by her.

So when, a few months after that, a tall black castle suddenly appeared on the hills above Market Chipping, blowing clouds of black smoke from its four tall, thin turrets, everybody was fairly sure that the Witch had moved out of the Waste again and was about to terrorise the country the way she used to fifty years ago. People got very scared indeed. Nobody went out alone, particularly at night. What made it all the scarier was that the castle did not stay in the same place. Sometimes it was a tall black smudge on the moors to the northwest, sometimes it reared above the rocks to the east, and sometimes it came right downhill to sit in the heather only just beyond the last farm to the north. You could see it actually moving sometimes, with smoke pouring out from the turrets in dirty grey gusts. For a while everyone was certain that the castle would come right down into the valley before long, and the Mayor talked of sending to the King for help.

But the castle stayed roving about the hills, and it was learned that it did not belong to the Witch but to Wizard Howl. Wizard Howl was bad enough. Though he did not seem to want to leave the hills, he was known to amuse

himself by collecting young girls and sucking the souls from them. Or some people said he ate their hearts. He was an utterly cold-blooded and heartless wizard and no young girl was safe from him if he caught her on her own. Sophie, Lettie and Martha, along with all the other girls in Market Chipping, were warned never to go out alone, which was a great annoyance to them. They wondered what use Wizard Howl found for all the souls he collected.

They had other things on their minds before long, however, for Mr Hatter died suddenly just as Sophie was old enough to leave school for good. It then appeared that Mr Hatter had been altogether too proud of his daughters. The school fees he had been paying had left the shop with quite heavy debts. When the funeral was over, Fanny sat down in the parlour in the house next door to the shop and explained the situation.

“You’ll all have to leave that school, I’m afraid,” she said. “I’ve been doing sums back and front and sideways, and the only way I can see to keep the business going *and* take care of the three of you is to see you all settled in a promising apprenticeship somewhere. It isn’t practical to have you all in the shop. I can’t afford it. So this is what I’ve decided. Lettie first—”

Lettie looked up, glowing with health and beauty which even sorrow and black clothes could not hide. “I want to go on learning,” she said.

“So you shall, love,” said Fanny. “I’ve arranged for you to be apprenticed to Cesari’s, the pastry cook in Market Square. They’ve a name for treating their learners like kings and

queens, and you should be very happy there, as well as learning a useful trade. Mrs Cesari's a good customer and a good friend, and she's agreed to squeeze you in as a favour."

Lettie laughed in the way that showed she was not at all pleased. "Well, thank you," she said. "Isn't it lucky that I like cooking?"

Fanny looked relieved. Lettie could be awkwardly strong-minded at times. "Now Martha," she said. "I know you're full young to go out to work, so I've thought round for something that would give you a long, quiet apprenticeship and go on being useful to you whatever you decide to do after that. You know my old school friend Annabel Fairfax?"

Martha, who was slender and fair, fixed her big grey eyes on Fanny almost as strong-mindedly as Lettie. "You mean the one who talks such a lot," she said. "Isn't she a witch?"

"Yes, with a lovely house and clients all over the Folding Valley," Fanny said eagerly. "She's a good woman, Martha. She'll teach you all she knows and very likely introduce you to grand people she knows in Kingsbury. You'll be all set up in life when she's done with you."

"She's a nice lady," Martha conceded. "All right."

Sophie, listening, felt that Fanny had worked everything out just as it should be. Lettie, as the second daughter, was never likely to come to much, so Fanny had put her where she might meet a handsome young apprentice and live happily ever after. Martha, who was bound to strike out and make her fortune, would have witchcraft and rich friends to help her. As for Sophie herself, Sophie had no doubt what

was coming. It did not surprise her when Fanny said, "Now, Sophie dear, it seems only right and just that you should inherit the hat shop when I retire, being the eldest as you are. So I've decided to take you on as apprentice myself, to give you a chance to learn the trade. How do you feel about that?"

Sophie could hardly say that she simply felt resigned to the hat trade. She thanked Fanny gratefully.

"So that's settled then!" Fanny said.

The next day Sophie helped Martha pack her clothes in a box, and the morning after that they all saw her off on the carrier's cart, looking small and upright and nervous. For the way to Upper Folding, where Mrs Fairfax lived, lay over the hills past Wizard Howl's moving castle. Martha was understandably scared.

"She'll be all right," said Lettie. Lettie refused all help with the packing. When the carrier's cart was out of sight, Lettie crammed all her possessions into a pillow case and paid the neighbour's boot-boy sixpence to wheel it in a wheelbarrow to Cesari's in Market Square.

Lettie marched behind the wheelbarrow looking much more cheerful than Sophie expected. Indeed, she had the air of shaking the dust of the hat shop off her feet.

The boot-boy brought back a scribbled note from Lettie, saying she had put her things in the girls' dormitory and Cesari's seemed great fun. A week later the carrier brought a letter from Martha to say that Martha had arrived safely and that Mrs Fairfax was "a great dear and uses honey with everything. She keeps bees." That was all Sophie heard

of her sisters for quite a while, because she started her own apprenticeship the day Martha and Lettie left.

Sophie of course knew the hat trade quite well already. Since she was a tiny child she had run in and out of the big workshed across the yard where the hats were damped and moulded on blocks, and flowers and fruit and other trimmings were made from wax and silk. She knew the people who worked there. Most of them had been there when her father was a boy. She knew Bessie, the only remaining shop assistant. She knew the customers who bought the hats and the man who drove the cart which fetched raw straw hats in from the country to be shaped on the blocks in the shed. She knew the other suppliers and how you made felt for winter hats. There was not really much that Fanny could teach her, except perhaps the best way to get a customer to buy a hat.

“You lead up to the right hat, love,” Fanny said. “Show them the ones that won’t quite do first, so they know the difference as soon as they put the right one on.”

In fact, Sophie did not sell hats very much. After a day or so observing in the workshed, and another day going round the clothier and the silk merchant’s with Fanny, Fanny set her to trimming hats. Sophie sat in a small alcove at the back of the shop, sewing roses to bonnets and veiling to velours, lining all of them with silk and arranging wax fruit and ribbons stylishly on the outsides. She was good at it. She quite liked doing it. But she felt isolated and a little dull. The workshop people were too old to be much fun and, besides, they treated her as someone apart who was

going to inherit the business someday. Bessie treated her the same way. Bessie's only talk anyway was about the farmer she was going to marry the week after May Day. Sophie rather envied Fanny, who could bustle off to bargain with the silk merchant whenever she wanted.

The most interesting thing was the talk from the customers. Nobody can buy a hat without gossiping. Sophie sat in her alcove and stitched and heard that the Mayor never would eat green vegetables, and that Wizard Howl's castle had moved round to the cliffs again, really that man, whisper, whisper, whisper... The voices always dropped low when they talked of Wizard Howl, but Sophie gathered that he had caught a girl down the valley last month. "Bluebeard!" said the whispers, and then became voices again to say that Jane Farrier was a perfect disgrace the way she did her hair. *That* was one who would never attract even Wizard Howl, let alone a respectable man. Then there would be a fleeting, fearful whisper about the Witch of the Waste. Sophie began to feel that Wizard Howl and the Witch of the Waste should get together.

"They seem to be made for one another. Someone ought to arrange a match," she remarked to the hat she was trimming at that moment.

But by the end of the month the gossip in the shop was suddenly all about Lettie. Cesari's, it seemed, was packed with gentlemen from morning to night, each one buying quantities of cakes and demanding to be served by Lettie. She had had ten proposals of marriage, ranging in quality from the Mayor's son to the lad who swept the streets, and

she had refused them all, saying she was too young to make up her mind yet.

"I call that sensible of her," Sophie said to a bonnet she was pleating silk into.

Fanny was pleased with this news. "I knew she'd be all right!" she said happily. It occurred to Sophie that Fanny was glad Lettie was no longer around.

"Lettie's bad for custom," she told the bonnet, pleating away at mushroom-coloured silk. "She would make even you look glamorous, you dowdy old thing. Other ladies look at Lettie and despair."

Sophie talked to hats more and more as weeks went by. There was no one else much to talk to. Fanny was out bargaining, or trying to whip up custom, much of the day, and Bessie was busy serving and telling everyone her wedding plans. Sophie got into the habit of putting each hat on its stand as she finished it, where it sat looking almost like a head without a body, and pausing while she told the hat what the body under it ought to be like. She flattered the hats a bit, because you should flatter customers.

"You have mysterious allure," she told one that was all veiling with hidden twinkles. To a wide, creamy hat with roses under the brim she said, "You are going to have to marry money!" and to a caterpillar-green straw with a curly green feather she said, "You are young as a spring leaf." She told pink bonnets they had dimpled charm and smart hats trimmed with velvet that they were witty. She told the mushroom-pleated bonnet, "You have a heart of gold and someone in a high position will see it and fall in love with