

PATRICIA ST JOHN

TREASURES
* OF THE SNOW *



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Treasures of the Snow

A note from the author

When I was a child of 7, I went to live in Switzerland. My home was a chalet on the mountain, above the village where I have imagined Annette and Dani to live.

Like them, I went to the village school on a sledge by moonlight, and helped to make hay in summer. I followed the cows up the mountain, and slept in the hay. I went to church on Christmas Eve to see the tree covered with oranges and gingerbread bears. I was taken to visit the doctor in the town up the valley. Klaus was my own white kitten, given to me by a farmer, and my baby brothers rode in the milk cart behind the great St Bernard dog.

But all this was many years ago. Switzerland today is probably very different. I expect it would be impossible now for a child to miss school for any length of time, and no doubt the medical service has improved. Perhaps all little villages have their own doctors now.

But I do know that today, as all those years ago, the little school and the church still stand, the cowbells still tinkle in the valley, and the narcissi still scent the fields in May. And I hope that little children still sing carols under the tree at Christmas and love their gingerbread bears as much as I loved mine.

I have not given the village its proper name, because, for the sake of the story, I have added one or two things that are not really there. For instance, there is no town

near that could not be reached except by the Pass. But otherwise I have tried to keep it true to life. If ever you go to Switzerland and take an electric train up from Montreux, you will stop at a tiny station where hay fields surround the platform, and high green hills rise up behind, dotted with chalets. To the right of the railway the banks drop down into a foaming, rushing river, beyond which the mountains rise again. Between a long green mountain and a rocky, pointed mountain there lies a Pass. If, added to all this, you see a low white school building not far from the station and a wooden church spire rising from behind a hillock, you will know that that is the village where this story was born.

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It was Christmas Eve, and three figures were climbing the steep, white mountainside, the moonlight casting shadows behind them across the snow. The middle one was a woman in long petticoats and a dark cloak over her shoulders. Clinging to her hand was a black-haired boy of 6, who talked all the time with his mouth full. Walking apart, with her eyes turned to the stars, was a little girl of 7. Her hands were folded across her chest, and close against her heart she carried a golden gingerbread bear with eyes of white icing.

The little boy had also had a gingerbread bear, but he had eaten it all except the back legs. He looked at the little girl spitefully. "Mine was bigger than yours," he announced.

The girl seemed unconcerned. "I would not change," she replied calmly, without turning her head. Then she looked down again with eyes full of love at the beautiful creature in her arms. How solid he looked, how delicious he smelt, and how brightly he gleamed in the starlight. She would never eat him, never! Eighty little village children had been given gingerbread bears, but hers had surely been by far the most beautiful.

Yes, she would keep him for ever in memory of tonight. Whenever she looked at him she would remember Christmas Eve – the frosty blue sky, the warm glow of the lighted church, the tree decked with the silver stars, the carols, the crib, and the sweet, sad story of Christmas. It made her want to cry when she thought about the inn where there was no room. She would have opened her door wide and welcomed them in.

Lucien, the boy, was annoyed by her silence. "I have nearly finished mine," he remarked, scowling. "Let me taste yours, Annette. You have not begun it."

But Annette shook her head and held her bear a little closer. "I am never going to eat him," she replied. "I am going to keep him for ever and ever."

They had come to a parting of the ways. The crumbly white path lined with the sleigh tracks divided. A little way along the right fork stood a group of chalets with lights shining in their windows and dark barns massed behind them. Annette was nearly home.

Madame Morel hesitated. "Are you all right to run home alone, Annette?" she asked doubtfully, "or shall we take you to the door?"

"Oh, I would much rather go alone," answered Annette, "and thank you for taking me. Goodnight, Madame. Goodnight, Lucien."

She turned and fled, in case Madame should change her mind and insist on seeing her to the door, when she so badly wanted to be alone.

She wanted to get away from Lucien's chatter and wrap herself round with the silence of the night. How could she think, and look at the stars, when she was having to make polite replies to Madame Morel and Lucien?

She had never been out alone at night before, and even this was a sort of accident. She was to have gone to the church on the sleigh with Father and Mother; they had all been thinking about it and planning it for weeks. But that morning her mother had been taken ill and her father had gone off on the midday train to fetch the doctor from the town up the valley. The doctor had arrived about teatime, but he could not cure her in time to get up and go to church as Annette had hoped he would. So, to her great

disappointment, she had had to go instead with Madame Morel from the chalet up the hill. But when she had reached the church it had been so beautiful that she had forgotten everything but the tree and the magic of Christmas, so it had not mattered so much after all.

The magic stayed with her. And now, as she stood alone among snow and stars, it seemed a pity to go in just yet. She hesitated as she reached the steps leading up to the balcony, and looked round. Just opposite loomed the cowshed; Annette could hear the animals moving and munching from the manger. A glorious idea struck her. She made up her mind in a moment, darted across the sleigh tracks and lifted the latch of the door. The warm smell of cattle and milk and hay greeted her as she slipped inside. She wriggled between the legs of the chestnut cow and wormed her way into the hayrack. The cow was having supper, but Annette flung her arms around her neck and let her go on munching. Surely the cows must have munched when Mary sat among them with her newborn baby in her arms, she thought to herself.

She looked down at the manger and imagined baby Jesus lying in the straw. Through a hole in the roof she could see one bright star. She remembered how a star had shone over Bethlehem and guided the wise men to the house where Jesus was. She could imagine them padding up the valley on their lurching camels. And surely any moment now the door would open softly, and the shepherds would come stealing in with little lambs in their arms. Perhaps they would offer to cover the child with woolly fleeces. As she leaned further over a great wave of pity swept over her for the homeless baby, against whom all doors had been shut.

“There would have been plenty of room in our chalet,” she whispered, “and yet perhaps after all this is the nicest

place. The hay is sweet and clean and Paquerette's breath is warm and pleasant. Maybe God chose the best cradle for his baby after all."

She might have stayed there dreaming all night had it not been for the gleam of a lantern through the half-open door of the shed, and the sound of firm, crunchy footsteps in the snow. Then she heard her father call her in a hurried, anxious voice.

She slipped down from the rack, dodged Paquerette's tail, and ran out to him with wide open arms.

"I went in to wish the cows a happy Christmas," she said, laughing. "Did you come out to find me?"

"Yes, I did," he replied, but he was not laughing. His face was pale and grave in the moonlight. He took her hand and almost dragged her up the steps. "You should have come in at once when your mother is so ill. She has been asking for you this last half hour."

Annette felt terrible about that. Somehow the Christmas tree had driven everything else out of her mind, and all the time her mother, whom she loved so much, was lying ill and wanting her. Annette had thought the doctor would have made her well. She took her hand from her father's and ran up the wooden stairs. She slipped into her mother's bedroom.

Neither the doctor nor the village nurse saw her until she had crept up to the bed, for she was a small, slim child who moved noiselessly as a shadow. But her mother saw her, and half held out her arms. Annette, without a word, ran into them and hid her face on her mother's shoulder. She began to cry quietly, for her mother's face was almost as white as the pillow and it frightened her. Besides, she felt sorry for having been away so long.

"Annette," whispered her mother, "stop crying; I have a present for you."

Annette stopped at once. A present? Of course, it was Christmas. She had quite forgotten. Her mother always gave her a present, but she usually had it on New Year's Day. Wherever could it be? She looked round expectantly.

Her mother turned to the nurse. "Give him to her," she whispered. And the nurse drew back the blanket and produced a bundle wrapped in a white shawl. She came round to Annette and held it out to her.

"Your little brother," the nurse explained. "Let us go down by the fire and you shall rock his cradle. We must leave your mother to sleep. Kiss her goodnight."

"Your little brother," echoed her mother's weak voice. "He is yours, Annette. Bring him up and love him and look after him for me. I give him to you."

Her voice trailed away and she closed her eyes. Annette, too dazed to speak, allowed herself to be led downstairs by the nurse. She sat down on a stool by the stove to rock the wooden cradle where her Christmas present lay smothered in shawls and blankets.

She sat very still for a long time, staring at her little brother. The snow cast a strange light on the walls, and the glow of the stove burned rosy on the ceiling. The house was very, very still, and the Christmas star shone in through the unshuttered windows. Annette remembered that a star had once shone on the other Christmas baby in Bethlehem. And she thought that Mary must have sat and watched God's little Son, just as she, Annette, was sitting by the stove watching her little brother.

She gently touched the top of his downy head, which was all she could see of him. Then with a tired sigh she leaned her head against the cradle and let her imagination roam where it would. Stars, shepherds, little new babies, shut doors, wise men and gingerbread bears... They all

became muddled up in her mind, and she slid gradually on to the floor.

It was here that her father found her an hour later, lying as peacefully asleep as her baby brother, her bright head pillowed on the cradle rocker.

“Poor little motherless creatures,” he said as he stooped to pick her up. “How shall I ever bring them up without her?”

For Annette’s mother had gone to spend Christmas with the angels.