

* THE *
SECRET
~ OF THE FOURTH ~
CANDLE

PATRICIA ST JOHN

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This edition first published in Great Britain in 2025

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-83728-073-5

Designed and typeset by Pete Barnsley (CreativeHoot.com)

Printed in China

10Publishing, a division of 10ofthose.com
Unit C, Tomlinson Road, Leyland, PR25 2DY, England

info@10ofthose.com
www.10ofthose.com

1 3 5 7 10 8 6 4 2

CONTENTS

The Secret of the Four Candles	1
The Cloak.....	39
The Guest	79

THE SECRET OF THE

FOUR

CANDLES

CHAPTER 1

THE FIRST CANDLE

It was still early morning and Aisha stood in the doorway of her home watching the bright winter day break over the sea. The air was cold but very, very clear – so clear that she could even see the Rock of Gibraltar couched like an old lion at the headland. The rising sun threw a silver path of light, so that it looked to Aisha as though she could run across to it and spring on its back. Then her gaze wandered homewards, past the white sails of the fishing boats and the sparkling waters of the harbour, past the tall buildings round the bay, and came to rest on the house in the middle of the town where her mother went to work four days a week.

She had heard so much about that house that it was difficult to believe she had never been inside it, and still more difficult to believe that she had never met the fair-haired child with the strange foreign name who lived there. Aisha knew so much about her; she knew just what time she got up in the morning, what she had for

breakfast and the colours of the many little dresses she wore. She knew that this entrancing little girl went to school with her nurse every day and came back about the hour of the afternoon prayer call, and played in a room full of sunshine and books and toys. Her mother, who cleaned the nursery on the nursery-maid's day off, told her about it nearly every day and Aisha never, never got tired of hearing.

So when Aisha wasn't kneading the bread, or sweeping the house, or fetching water from the well, or chasing the goat, or grinding the flour, or washing the clothes, or pulling the babies out of mischief, she liked to stand in the doorway and gaze at the white house far off in the city and dream about the little girl. But just at this time of the year she could not see it very clearly, because the mimosa tree at the bottom of the garden was in flower, and partly hid it.

Yet, through the golden sun-kissed quivering mass of blossoms, she could still just see the white walls.

'Aisha,' called her mother's voice quite calmly, as though she was saying something perfectly ordinary, 'you had better come and help me today, and Safea must look after the little ones as best she can. It is Sunday, and on Sunday they have visitors and there is much cleaning and so many plates to wash up that I just can't manage alone; although why they can't all eat out of one dish like we do, instead of having three plates each and making all that work, I don't know!'

Aisha turned quickly, her cheeks bright pink, her eyes sparkling, and her heart as golden and dancing as the mimosa tree. For months past she had begged her mother to let her go with her and her mother had always said, 'No, you must stay and look after the other children.'

Now her dream was coming true all by itself and she hadn't even asked! Too happy to speak, she ran to the bucket and scrubbed her face and hands till they shone, smoothed down her thick black hair and put a clean scarf over her head.

She wished she had a clean cotton gown to match, but there wasn't one.

Now she was ready, dancing first on one foot and then on the other, while her mother gave final instructions to poor little Safea who was only seven years old and small for her age. '... and don't let the baby fall into the well,' said her mother, 'and don't let the goat get through the fence and don't let the cat drink the milk.'

'Come on, mother, we shall be late,' shouted Aisha, and danced off down the hill, brushing the sweeping boughs of the mimosa tree and covering her nose with pollen. She did not wish her baby to fall into the well, but the goat and the cat could do what they liked. Nothing mattered today; she was going to fairyland. Her mother caught her up and boxed her ears for behaving in such a wild unruly fashion, and she nine years old! She didn't really mind, because her mother boxed her ears most days, but never very hard. She merely dodged

out of reach and skipped happily on, across the common where the donkeys grazed and the wild broom flamed in summer, on to the white road that wound between eucalyptus trees; through a dip in the hills the sea sparkled blue and silver, and the exciting noises of the town began to grow nearer.

They pushed their way through the native quarter and reached the broad Boulevard with its big shops all shut because it was Sunday. The white house where the little girl lived was at the far end of the Boulevard up a flight of marble steps. Aisha suddenly felt rather frightened and walked sedately.

Her mother knocked at the front door, which was opened by another servant, and Aisha with a beating heart stepped over the threshold of her palace of dreams. It was a little bit disappointing; just a rather dark hall with a staircase leading upwards; she only had time to glance at it, before she was hustled into the kitchen and told, without further ceremony, to scrub the floor.

But she was not really disappointed, because, although the kitchen floor was very large to scrub, and Fatima the cook very cross, and her breakfast of the scantiest because she wasn't really supposed to be there, she had seen the staircase; and at the top of the staircase lived the child with the golden hair and one day Aisha would tiptoe up very softly and see her, and they would smile shyly at each other, because, after all, they were both little girls. She forgot all about her aching back and gazed rapturously into the scrubbing

bucket until recalled by Fatima who yelled at her not to dawdle.

The winter day sped by; Aisha wiped the dishes and trembled at the terrible judgments which Fatima vowed would fall on her if she broke one. Then she scoured the pans and cleaned the dustbins and scrubbed the scullery, and by that time dusk was falling; the street lamps burned on the Boulevards and the lights from the ships zigzagged in the purple waters of the harbour. Aisha, standing alone in the kitchen, her work finished, stretched her tired body and stood listening. Her mother was cleaning some back yard and Fatima was comfortably asleep by the fire. She was quite alone; she tiptoed to the kitchen door, out into the passage, and stood, with her hands tightly clasped and her face lifted, at the bottom of the staircase.

It was a long staircase, but at the top of it there was a door half-open and a light shone out into the passage. It was a soft friendly welcoming light, and Aisha suddenly forgot to be afraid.

She scuttled up the staircase towards it on silent bare feet, and peeped into the room.

A little golden-haired girl was standing by a table. And on the table was a wreath of twined evergreens with four white candles. Three of the candles had not been lit, but the fourth burned with a pure light, reflected in the starry eyes of the little girl.

It was the prettiest sight Aisha had ever seen in her life. For one moment she stood breathless, gazing, and

then her mother's voice in the kitchen recalled her. She scuttled down the staircase as swiftly and noiselessly as she had scuttled up it and stood meekly waiting in the passage.

And her mother never knew that she had been to fairyland! She thought she had been standing in the passage all the time, and together they left the house and made their way up the lighted Boulevard, her mother grumbling at the lateness of the hour, the little girl seeing one pure white candle burning alone in every street lamp, and the starry eyes of the child reflecting the light.