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Christmas Eve

It was Christmas Eve, and three people were climbing the steep, white mountainside, the moonlight throwing shadows behind them across the snow. The middle one was a woman in a long skirt with a dark cloak over her shoulders. Clinging to her hand was a black-haired boy of six, who talked all the time with his mouth full. Walking a little way away from them, with her eyes turned to the stars, was a girl of seven. Her hands were folded across her chest, and close to her heart she carried a golden gingerbread bear with eyes made 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 girl spitefully. "Mine was bigger than yours," he said.

The girl did not seem upset. "I would not change it," she replied calmly, without turning her head. Then she looked down again with eyes full of love at the beautiful bear in her

arms. How solid he looked, how delicious he smelled, 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 forever in memory of tonight, and whenever she looked at him she would remember Christmas Eve—the frosty blue sky, the warm glow of the lighted church, the tree decorated with 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 Mary and Joseph 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 started 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 forever and ever.” They had come to where the crumbly white path divided. A few hundred yards along the right fork stood a group of chalets with lights shining in their windows and dark barns standing 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 home alone,” answered Annette, “and thank you for taking me. Good night, Madame; good night, Lucien.”

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

She wanted to get away from Lucien's chatter and enjoy 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 supposed to have gone to the church on the sleigh with her parents. 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 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 and break the spell. She hesitated as she reached the steps leading up to the balcony and looked around. Just opposite loomed the cowshed; Annette could hear the beasts moving and munching from the manger.

An exciting 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 against the legs of the chestnut-colored cow and wormed her way into the hayrack. The cow was having supper, but Annette flung her arms around its neck and let it go on munching, just as the cows must have munched when Mary sat among them with her newborn baby in her arms.

She looked down at the manger and imagined Baby Jesus was lying in the straw with the cows, still and quiet, worshipping about Him. Through a hole in the roof she could see one bright star, and she remembered how a star had shone over Bethlehem and guided the wise men to the house where Jesus lay. She could imagine them padding up the valley on their swaying camels. And surely any moment now the door would open softly and the shepherds would come creeping in with little lambs in their arms and offer to cover the child with woolly fleeces. As she leaned further, a great feeling of pity came over her for the homeless baby who had had all the doors shut against him.

“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 Louise’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 if it had 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 quick, hurried voice.

She slipped down from the rack, dodged Louise'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 serious in the moonlight, and he took her hand and almost dragged her up the steps. "You should have come in at once, with your mother so ill. She has been asking for you for half an hour."

Annette suddenly felt very sorry, for somehow the Christmas tree had made her forget about everything else, and all the time her mother, whom she loved so much, was lying ill and wanting her. She had thought the doctor would have made her better. She took her hand out from her father's and ran up the wooden stairs and 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 almost silently. 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 around expectantly.

Her mother turned to the nurse. "Give it to her," she whispered. The nurse pulled back the blanket and lifted out a bundle wrapped in a white shawl. She came around 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 good night."

"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 covered in shawls and blankets.

She sat very still for a long time staring at the bump that was her little brother. The house was very still, and the Christmas star shone in through the windows as it had shone on that other Christmas baby in the stable at Bethlehem, with Mary sitting watching God's little Son, just as she was sitting by the stove watching her little brother.

She put out gentle fingers and 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 go 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 onto the floor.

It was here that her father found her an hour later, lying as peacefully asleep as her new baby brother, her bright head resting 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 in heaven.

Grandmother Arrives

So Daniel Burnier, age three hours, became the special property of Annette Burnier, age seven years.

Of course, the kind village nurse stayed for some time to bathe and feed him, and when she left, her father paid a woman from the village to come and nurse him. But Dani belonged to Annette, and nobody ever spoke of him as anything but Annette's baby.

For once the first great shock of losing her mother was over, Annette gathered up all the love of her sad, lonely little heart and poured it out on her little brother. She held his bottle while he sucked and sat quietly by his cradle in case he should wake and want her. It was Annette who ran to him in the night if he woke or whimpered, and who carried him out onto the balcony at midday so that the sun might shine on him. And with so much love and sunshine surrounding him, the baby grew strong, until there was no other baby of his age in the

valley who was as healthy and beautiful. He slept and woke and chuckled and fed and kicked and slept again. In fact, he never gave a moment's worry to anyone.

"He was born under a lucky star," exclaimed a woman from the village, gazing at him thoughtfully.

"He was born under a Christmas star," said Annette solemnly. "I think he will always be good and happy."

And how he grew! By the time the sun was beginning to melt the snow, and the crocuses were pushing up in the pale fields, Annette was having to think about new clothes. As soon as the cows had gone up the mountain, Dani cut his first tooth. As Annette knew nothing about first teeth, and expected no trouble, the baby himself forgot that it should have been a painful time, so instead of fretting and crying he just giggled and sucked his fists.

Soon Dani was moving around, and his cradle could hold him no longer. He wanted to explore everything from the stove to the balcony steps, and Annette spent an anxious few weeks keeping him out of danger. In the end she decided to tie him by one pink foot to the leg of the kitchen table and he explored in circles, and life became more peaceful.

It was just about this time that Annette, slipping down to the living room after tucking Dani up in his cradle, found her father sitting by the stove with his head in his hands, looking old and tired and grey. He had often looked old and tired since his wife died, but tonight he looked worse than usual. Annette, who tried hard to make up for her mother, climbed onto his knee and laid her soft cheek against his bony brown one.

“What is the matter, Papa?” she asked. “Are you very tired tonight? Shall I make you a cup of coffee?”

He looked down at her curiously for a minute or two. She was so small and light, like a golden-haired fairy, but how sensible and womanly she was! Somehow during the past year he had made a habit of telling her his troubles and even listening to her serious advice. So now he pulled her head against his shoulder and told her all about it.

“We shall have to sell some of the cows, little daughter,” he explained sadly. “We must have some more money or there will be no winter boots for you.”

Annette lifted her head and stared at him in horror. They only had ten cows, and each one was a personal friend. Any one of them would be missed terribly. She must think of a better way to earn money than that.

“You see,” her father went on, “other men have wives to look after their little ones. I have to pay a woman to nurse Dani, and it is expensive. Yet someone must look after him, poor little lad.”

Annette sat up very straight and tossed back her plaits. She knew exactly what to do, and all she had to do was make her father agree.

“Papa,” she said very slowly and distinctly, “you do not need Mademoiselle Mottier any longer. I am eight and a half now, and I can look after Dani as well as anyone. You will not have to pay me anything, and then we can keep the cows. Why, think, Papa, how unhappy they would be to leave us! I do believe Paquerette would cry!”

“But you must go to school,” said her father rather doubtfully. “It would not be right to keep you at home, and anyhow it is against the law. The schoolmaster would want to know why, and he would tell the mayor and we should get into trouble.”

“But it is much more important to look after Dani,” answered Annette, wrinkling her forehead, “and if you explained to the master, he would understand. He is a kind man, and he is a friend of yours. Let’s try it and see what happens. I will do my lessons here in the kitchen, Papa, every morning, and Dani can play on the floor. In any case, it’s only for four years. When Dani is five he will go to the infant school, and I can take him down and go to the big school.”

Her father continued to look at her thoughtfully. Although she was small, she was as clever as a woman in looking after the baby, and she was very handy about the house. But she could not do the cooking, or knit the stockings, or do the rough heavy work. And besides, she ought to have some schooling. He sat thinking in silence for a full five minutes. Then *he* had an idea.

“I wonder if your grandmother would come,” he said suddenly. “She is old and has rheumatics, and her sight is poor, but she could do the cooking and mending perhaps, and she could help you with your lessons in the evenings. It would be company for you, too, when I am up the mountain. You’re a little girl to be left alone all day long. If I write a letter to the schoolmaster telling him that Grandmother will give you a bit of teaching, maybe he will agree to keep quiet about it.”

Annette climbed off his knee, and fetched two sheets of paper and a pen and ink from the cupboard.

“Write to them both now,” she said, “and I will post them when I go for the bread. Then we shall get the answers nice and quickly.”

Both letters were answered that week. The first answer was Grandmother herself, who arrived by train, bent and arthritic, with a wooden box roped up very securely. Annette went down to meet her and watched the little electric train twisting its way up the valley between the hay fields like a caterpillar. It was rather late, the driver explained angrily, because a cow had strayed onto the line and the train had had to stop. He moved off so quickly that Grandmother hardly had time to get down, and her wooden box had to be thrown out after her while the train was moving away.

Grandmother, however, did not seem at all worried. She leaned on her stick and wanted to know how she was going to get up the hill. Annette, who knew nothing about rheumatism, suggested that they should walk, but Grandmother said, “Nonsense, child,” and in the end they got a lift in an empty farm cart that had brought cheeses down to the train and was now going back up the mountain.

The road was stony, the wheels wooden, and the mule uncertain, and Annette enjoyed the ride very much more than Grandmother did. But the old woman gritted her teeth and made no complaint. She only let out a tired sigh of relief when she found herself safely on the sofa by the stove, with a cushion

at her aching back and Annette bustling about getting her some tea.

Dani came out from under the table, getting along on his bottom. He stuck three fingers in his mouth and laughed at Grandmother, who put on her glasses to see him better. They sat for some moments staring at each other, her dim old eyes meeting his bright blue ones, and then Dani threw back his head and laughed again.

“That child will wear out his trousers,” said Grandmother, taking a piece of bread and butter and cherry jam. “He should be taught to crawl.”

She said no more until she had finished her tea, and then she flicked the crumbs from her black skirt and got up, leaning heavily on her stick.

“So,” she remarked, “I have come. What I can I will do; what I cannot you must do for me. Now, Annette, turn that baby the right way up and come and show me around the kitchen.” And from that moment Grandmother did what she could, Annette did the rest, and the household ran like clockwork. All except for Dani, who continued to move round and round the table legs on his bottom in spite of Grandmother. So after a few days Annette was sent to the village to buy a yard of thick, black felt, and Grandmother sewed round patches onto the seats of all Dani’s trousers. He did look rather odd in them, but they served their purpose very well indeed, and after all they were hardly ever seen because they were nearly always underneath him.

The second answer arrived in the shape of the old village schoolmaster, who walked wearily up from the valley late on Saturday afternoon to call on Monsieur Burnier. He was milking cows and saw him coming out the cowshed window. He did not want to argue with the schoolmaster because he was afraid of getting the worst of it, so he ran out the back door and hid in the hayloft. Annette, who was also looking out of the living room window, saw her father's legs disappear up the ladder just as the schoolmaster came around the corner, and she understood perfectly what was expected of her.

She opened the door and invited the master in, offering him most politely the best chair with a smart red seat. He was very fond of Annette, and Annette was very fond of him, but today they were a little bit shy of each other. Grandmother folded her hands and sat up straight like an old warhorse ready for battle.

"I have come to see your father," began the schoolmaster, coughing nervously, "to discuss his letter about you being away from school. I cannot say that I think it right for a little girl of your age. Besides, it is against the law of the State."

"The State will know nothing about it unless you choose to mention her," said Grandmother. "Besides, I will teach the child myself. I do not think it right for a little boy of Dani's age to be left without his sister to look after him."

"But can't you look after him?" suggested the schoolmaster gently.

"Certainly not," snapped Grandmother. "My sight is so poor that I cannot see where he is going, and my arms are so

rheumaticky that I cannot pick him up if he falls. Besides, he moves like an express train, and I am nearly eighty. You do not know what you are talking about.”

The schoolmaster gazed at Dani, who was face-downwards in the woodpile eating shavings. There was nothing much to be seen of him but the black felt patches and his dimpled brown legs. The master realized Grandmother would not be able to manage him.

The schoolmaster didn't know what to do. Perhaps his old friend Monsieur Burnier would be more reasonable. He turned to Annette. “When will your father be in, Annette?” he asked.

“I don't know. He has gone out and he may not be back for some time. It is not worth your while to wait, monsieur,” replied Annette steadily, knowing perfectly well that her father would return just as soon as the master disappeared down the valley.

The schoolmaster sat thinking. He was a good man, and really cared about Annette and his duty toward her. Yet he did not want to give up his old friend into the hands of the law, especially when it was quite clear that the child was needed at home. At last he had an idea. He did not think that it was a very good one, but it was better than nothing.

“I will let the matter rest,” he said at last, “on one condition only. And that is that every Saturday morning, when Annette comes down for the bread, she shall visit me in my house and I will test her. If I find she is making progress I will say no

more, but if I find she is learning nothing then I shall feel it my duty to insist that she attends school like other children.”

He tried to speak sternly, but Annette beamed at him, and Dani, sensing a family victory, suddenly turned himself the right way up and crowed like a cock. The schoolmaster looked at the two fair, motherless children for a moment, smiled very tenderly, and said goodbye. As soon as he had disappeared into the pine wood Annette ran to the door and called to her father to come down from the hay loft, and she told him the good news.

So it was that every Saturday morning Annette rapped at the front door of the tall, white house where the schoolmaster lived, with her bread basket on her back and her tattered exercise book in her hand, and the schoolmaster joyfully let her in. In the winter they sat by the stove, ate spiced fruit tart, and drank hot chocolate, and in the summer they sat on the veranda and ate cherries and drank apple juice. After that the tests would begin.

They always started with arithmetic, but Annette was not good at arithmetic. As she never knew the answers, the schoolmaster would feel, after a few minutes, that it was a waste of time to ask any more questions, so they would pass on to history, and here Annette never needed any questions. She would lean forward, clasping her knees, and relate how William Tell had won the freedom of Switzerland, and how the brave little son had stood still while the apple on his head was split by the whizzing arrow. Annette knew all about the

brave Swiss heroes, and she and the schoolmaster would look at each other with shining eyes, for they both loved courage. After this they would turn to the Bible, which Annette was beginning to know quite well, for she read it aloud to Grandmother every evening.

By this time the schoolmaster would have forgotten to tell Annette off because she couldn't do her sums, and instead he would give her fresh books to read and would fill the gaps in her bread basket with spiced gingerbread hearts and knobbly chocolate sticks wrapped in silver paper. Then they would say goodbye to one another, and he would stand at the door and watch her until she reached the edge of the pine wood, because here she always turned around to wave.

Years ago the schoolmaster had loved a golden-haired girl who lived high up in the mountain, and he had bought this white house and made it beautiful for her. But she went out to pick soldanellas and was killed by a treacherous fall of late snow. So the schoolmaster really lived alone. But in his dreams she was always there, and also a little daughter with corn-colored plaits and eyes like blue gentians who sat on a stool close to his knees. And on Saturday mornings that part of the schoolmaster's dream came true.

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