

Treasures of the Snow

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Contents

1	Christmas Eve	7
2	Grandmother Arrives	14
3	A Very Special Christmas Present	24
4	The Quarrel Begins	32
5	The Accident	40
6	The Rescue	49
7	Annette Plans Revenge	60
8	A Day of Escape	67
9	A Visit to the Hospital	76
10	Lucien Makes a Friend	84
11	A Trip to the High Pastures	94
12	Annette's Revenge	102
13	The Old Man's Story	110
14	The Handwork Competition	122
15	Christmas Again—and Gingerbread Bears	132
16	Klaus Goes Missing	140
17	An Open Door	147
18	Things Start to Come Right	154
19	Annette Wins a Battle	160
20	Lucien Has an Idea	169
21	An Unforgettable Night	179
22	Lucien Finds Monsieur Givet	188
23	Dani Meets the Doctor	198
24	Jesus' Love Makes All the Difference	209
25	Getting Better	215
26	A New Start	220

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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.