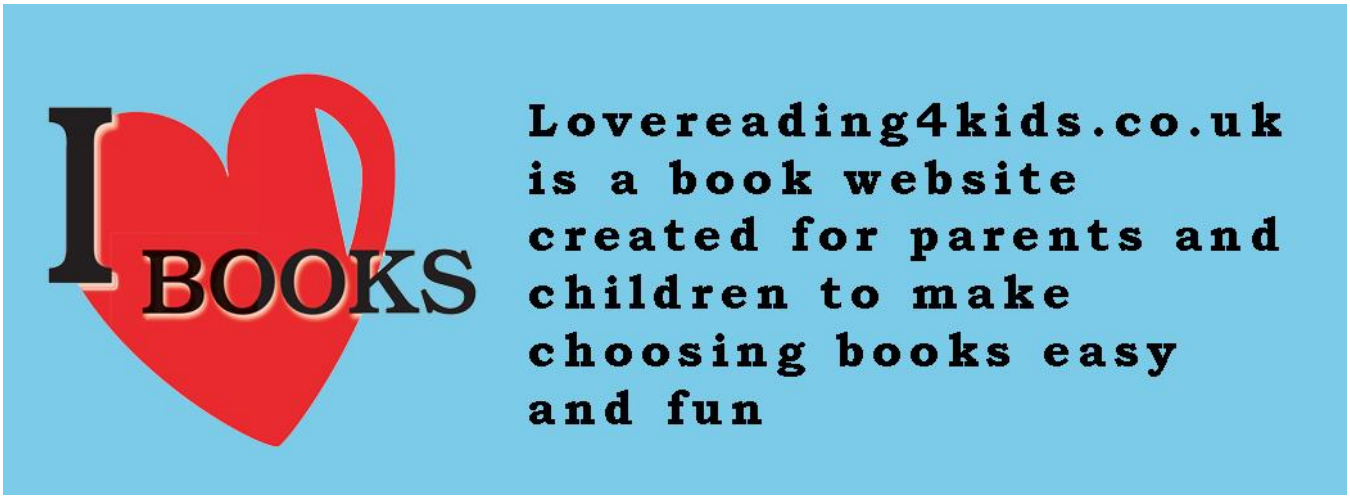


Opening extract from

The Christmas Star
A Festive Story

Written by

Eva Ibbotson

Illustrated by

Nick Maland

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Vicky and the Christmas Angel



It was mid-December and a night of snow. All day the thick, soft flakes had fallen quietly, covering the blank-faced nymphs and satyrs on Vienna's innumerable fountains; blanketing the bronze rumps of the rearing horses on which dead warriors of the Habsburg Empire rode forever; giving the trees along the Ringstrasse a spare, Siberian splendour.

Sounds in the snow were muffled. The sound of carriage wheels on the cobbles, the sound of street sellers crying their wares – even the sound

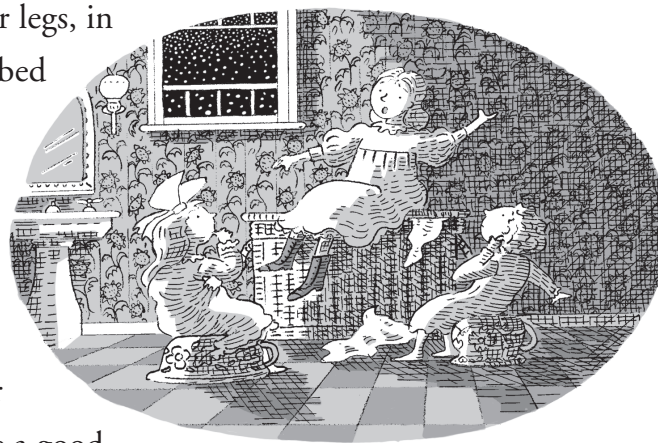
of church bells, so much a part of Vienna in those days before the First World War – came far more gently in the snow.

The gas-lamps threw rings of brightness into the squares, the smart shops along the Kärtner Strasse looked like stage sets. In the big apartment houses, those grand, slightly crumbling Viennese houses which look like Renaissance palaces but house simply doctors and lawyers and other self-respecting members of the bourgeoisie, the closed shutters were pierced by rays which the snow threw back in unaccustomed brightness.

One window, however, in one such apartment house, remained unshuttered so that its square of golden light went untrammelled into the dusk. It was a bathroom window and, surprisingly for a bathroom, it was occupied not by one person but by three.

The eldest of these was a girl of about eight. She sat enthroned – and literally so, for there was no doubt about her kingship – on a linen basket from

which her legs, in white ribbed stockings and kid boots, stuck out at an angle, for they were a good six inches off the floor.



Her subjects, twins about three years old, were arranged on either side of her on gigantic, upturned chamber-pots. Epically fat, seraphically golden-haired, they sat gazing upward at their sister. Only Tilda's half-swallowed thumb, Rudi's strangulated ear as he twisted a silken curl tighter and tighter round the lobe, revealed the strain they were undergoing: the strain – at that age – of totally *listening*.

Earlier in the year, listening had not been such anguish. 'Snow White,' 'Hansel and Gretel'

or Vicky's own creation – the mighty but gentle giant, 'Thunder Blunder,' whose ill-mannered stomach rumbles caused the thunder which, before they knew this, had so much frightened them . . . all these were so familiar they could be understood without this terrible concentration, this agonising immobility.

But what Vicky was telling them now was different. Somehow more important; more . . . true. It was about Christmas, which was coming ('Soon, now,' said Vicky, *'properly* soon'). Christmas, a concept so staggering that the twins could hardly grasp it, involving as it did everything they had ever warmed to: food and smiling people and presents – and, most mysterious of all, the *tree*.

'A *great* tree,' said Vicky. 'Mama will buy it at the Christmas Market. But it will be nothing. Just a fir tree. And then . . .'

And then . . . The twins sighed and swayed a little on their seats as Vicky told them the story that every child in Vienna knows: the story of

the Christ Child who comes on Christmas Night when the children sleep, to bring the presents and decorate the tree.

But because it was Vicky, in whom the flame of imagination burnt with an almost dangerous brightness, the fat and placid twins saw more than that. They saw the gentle, tiny babe in the manger turn, on Christmas Eve, into a great golden-winged angel who flew through the starry night bearing the glittering array of baubles for the tree; heard the beating of his wings as he steadied himself; felt the curtains stir as he flew in from the mighty heavens to make *their* tree wonderful, leave *their* presents in lovingly labelled heaps beneath its beauty.

'It's the *angel* does all that?' said Tilda, removing her thumb.

'Of course. The Christmas Angel.'

'Can he carry all the presents?' demanded Rudi. 'If I get a big engine can he carry that?'

'He can do everything,' said Vicky. '*Everything*.'



*

But the angel in the household of Herr Doktor and Frau Fischer had help. In the kitchen Katrina, fat and warm and Czech like all the best cooks in Vienna, produced an ever-growing pile of gingerbread hearts and vanilla crescents; of almond rings and chocolate *guglhupf.* Vicky's mother, pretty and frivolous and very loving, helped too, whispering and rustling behind mysteriously



closed doors. As for Vicky's father, erupting irately from the green baize door of his study shouting, 'Bills! Bills! Nothing but bills!', he possibly helped most of all.

A week before Christmas the Christmas visitors began to arrive. First came Vicky's cousin, Fritzl, just a year older than she was, with his mother Frau Zimmermann.

Frau Zimmermann, her father's sister, was something Vicky did not understand; something called a 'Free Thinker'. It meant having to go and speak to the servants when other people were saying their prayers, and taking Fritzl to see the skeletons in the Natural History Museum when everyone else was going to hear the Vienna choirboys. Since Vicky loved both the skeletons and the choirboys, she could never decide whether Free Thinking was a good thing or not.

It was the same with Fritzl. Mostly Fritzl was her friend – inventive and talented. After all, it

was Fritzl who had lowered a stuffed eel down the ventilation shaft into Frau Pollack's flat below. But at other times . . .

This time, particularly, the odd and restless side of Fritzl seemed to have got worse. He had hardly unpacked before he started telling her all sorts of things. Things which weren't actually very interesting because Kati, the washerwoman, who was her friend, had explained them to her already and anyway they were obvious enough to anyone who used their eyes. But Fritzl added other things which were to say the least of it unlikely because the Kaiser simply wouldn't have done them.

But it was in the bathroom at story time that he worried her most. During 'Snow White', or 'Daniel in the Lion's Den', or 'Thunder Blunder', Fritzl listened well enough, sitting between Tilda and Rudi with his back against the bath. But when it came to the story which mattered more than any other because literal and actual and

true – then Fritzl made her nervous, fiddling with the loofah, tapping his feet on the tiled floor until Tilda, through her sucked thumb, said moistly and reproachfully, 'Shh, Fithl; she'th telling about the *angel*!' And even then he would sit with his dark, too-bright eyes boring into Vicky and make her go on too quickly, as though only by reaching the end of the story could she find safety. But safety from what?

The last of the Christmas visitors was Cousin Poldi.

Cousin Poldi arrived, as inevitable as the sunset, on the Friday before Christmas Eve, having travelled from Linz where she lived alone above the milliner's shop in which she worked.

Nothing, by then, could put a blight on the Christmas spirit, but Cousin Poldi usually achieved a kind of halt in the general ecstasy, making it necessary for Vicky and the twins, and even her parents, to recharge themselves so to speak after the impact of her arrival.



For Cousin Poldi was, in every way, most decidedly a 'Poor Relation'. Dressed in fusty, dusty black with button boots which looked as though the cat had spent the night on them, she wore a bracelet consisting of a sparse plait of grey hair which had been cut from the head of her mother after death. While there was nothing particularly tragic about the death of Cousin Poldi's mother, who had passed away peacefully in her bed aged eighty-six, the circumstances and the strange smell of preservative which clung to the bracelet made it an object of terror to Vicky, for whom kissing Cousin Poldi when she arrived was a minor kind of martyrdom.

And now, with everyone safely in position, the household of Herr Doktor Fischer could march forward to the great climax of Christmas Eve. A frenzied last-minute clean-up began, the maids gliding silently up and down the already gleaming parquet with huge brushes strapped to their feet. Carpets were thumped, feather-beds beaten, and

in the kitchen . . . But there are no words to describe what went on in a good Viennese kitchen just before Christmas in those far-off days before the First World War.

Bed-time prayers, for the children, became a laborious and time-consuming business. Vicky, obsessed by her angel, devised long entreaties for his safe conduct through the skies. The twins, on the other hand, produced an inventory which would not have disgraced the mail order catalogue of a good department store. And each and every night their mother got them out of bed again, all three, because they had forgotten to say: 'And God bless Cousin Poldi.'

Five days before Christmas, the thing happened which meant most of all to Vicky. The tree arrived. A huge tree, all but touching the ceiling of the enormous drawing room, and: 'It's the best tree we've ever had, the most beautiful,' said Vicky, as she had said last year and the year before and was to go on saying all her life.



She wanted presents, she wanted presents very *much,* but this transformation of the still, dark tree – beautiful, but just any tree – into the glittering, beckoning candle-lit vision that they saw when one by one (but always children first) they filed into the room on Christmas Eve . . . That to her, was the wonder of wonders, the magic that Christmas was all about.

And though no one could accuse the Christ Child of having favourites or anything like that, it did seem to Vicky that when He came down to earth He did the Fischers especially proud. There never did seem to be a tree as wonderful as theirs. The things that were on it, such unbelievably delicate things, could only have been made in Heaven: tiny shimmering angels, dolls as big as a thumb, golden-petalled flowers, sweets of course – oh, every kind of sweet. And candles – perhaps a thousand candles, thought Vicky. Candles which caused her father every year to say, 'You'll see if the house doesn't catch fire, you'll see!', and which

produced also a light whose softness and radiance had no equal in the world.

The twins grew less seraphic, less placid as the tension grew. 'Will the angel come tonight?' demanded Tilda at her prayers.

'No,' said Vicky. 'You've got to go to sleep for two more nights.'

'I want him to come *now*,' said Rudi, '*Now* . . .'

For the last two days, the time for the young ones passed with unbearable slowness. Even Vicky, clothed in her own mantle of imaginings, grew restless. Only Fritzl, who did not have to bless Cousin Poldi because he was not allowed to say his prayers, retained his cheerfulness.

But at last it was the twenty-third and on that night her mother turned the key in the huge double doors which led to the drawing room. And at this sound the chrysalis which had been growing inside Vicky all these days broke open and Christmas, in all its boundless and uncontrollable joy, broke out.

