Helping your children choose books they will love

I reading

Lovereading4kids.co.uk is a book website created for parents and children to make choosing books easy and fun

opening extract from

The Thirteen Days of Christmas

written by

Jenny Overton

illustrated by

Shirley Hughes

published by

Oxford University Press

All Text is Copyright © of the Author / Illustrator

please print off and read at your leisure.

Lovereading4kids.co.uk

Acknowledgements

The carol *Susanni* was collated by Percy Dearmer and is No. 118 in *The Oxford Book of Carols* by Percy Dearmer, R. Vaughan Williams, and Martin Shaw, published in 1928 by the Oxford University Press. I am grateful for permission to reproduce four verses from it.

I have also used *The Oxford Book of Carols* as the source for my quotations, in whole or in part, from the following carols: *The Endris Night* (No. 39), *Lullay My Liking* (No. 182), the Coventry Carol (No. 22), the Wassail Song (Nos. 15 and 16), *My Dancing Day* (No. 71), and *Adam Lay Ybounden* (No. 180).

The ballad *St Stephen and Herod*, which I have altered slightly, appears in its fifteenth-century form as No. 22 in *English and Scottish Popular Ballads* edited by Helen Child Sargent and George Lyman Kittredge from the collection of Francis James Child and published in 1904 by George G. Harrap & Co. Ltd, and in a modernized form on page 37 of Part IV of *Young Pegasus*, an anthology of verse arranged by A. A. Le M. Simpson and published in 1936 by G. Bell & Sons Ltd.

My source for the carol *A Merry Christmas* was the BBC Radio booklet *Singing Together* published in the autumn of 1965 by the British Broadcasting Corporation.

I am grateful to all these publishers for their kindness and helpfulness.

J. M. M. O.

CALENDAR

December 6 — 1
St Nicholas's Day

December 24 — 12
Christmas Eve

The Thirteen Days of Christmas

December 25 — 23
Christmas Day

December 26 — 28
St Stephen's Day

December 27 — 43
St John the Evangelist's Day

December 28 — 49
Holy Innocents' Day

December 29 — 58
St Thomas of Canterbury's Day

December 30 65
Churching Day

December 31 76
New Year's Eve

January 1 86
New Year's Day

January 2 93
Dancing Day

January 3 102
Adam's Day

January 4 110
Eve's Day

January 5 119
Twelfth Night

January 6 126
The Feast of the Three Kings

1

St Nicholas's Day

When Prudence Kitson asked her father what he would like for Christmas, he sighed and said, 'A husband for your sister.' Her brothers, James and Christopher, agreed with him. Their elder sister, Annaple, had looked after the family ever since Mama had died. She was charming and pretty and well-meaning, but she was also a very bad cook. She forgot the pie in the oven or the stew on the fire so often that dinner was burnt five days out of seven. Sometimes she even forgot what she was making, and put sugar in the meat pasties, or stewed the pears in vinegar, or tied the cake mixture in a cloth and boiled it over the fire. But although she was hopelessly vague in the kitchen, she was very brisk everywhere else; much too brisk for the family's comfort. 'James, have you made your bed? Pru, have you mended your hem? Christopher, your hair needs cutting. Papa, give me your coat, I must let out the buttons, you're beginning to put on weight.'

'I do wish she'd get married,' Christopher said crossly, stamping into the parlour after Annaple had sat him in a kitchen chair and pruned his fringe till his forehead felt cold. 'She's pretty enough—isn't she? She's as pretty as the Verney girl who got married last week.'

'Francis *wants* to marry her. So he says.' James looked up from the model ship he was making. 'He says that if she marries him she'll never have to cook a meal again. He's got enough money to pay for a cook and a housekeeper and probably half a dozen serving maids as well.'

'I know. And she says she likes him. Well, why won't she marry him, then?'

Prudence said, 'She thinks he isn't romantic enough. Too unimaginative, she says. Too solemn.'

'*Romantic*,' Christopher said scornfully. Annaple's fanciful ways were a great nuisance to her family. She bought a harp and sat on the window sill twanging it, singing in a small flat voice and breaking her fingernails on the gilded strings. She sighed over pear blossom in the spring, ate strawberries even though they brought her out in a rash, cooed over babies, fussed about wearing gloves to church, and wasted time embroidering flowers on a useless strip of ivory silk which had taken her three years already. She plaited her hair like a goose-girl's, stuck wilting daisies in it, and talked about the simple pleasures of country life although she had never so much as milked a cow: 'Making butter in the dairy, picking lavender, herding the geese across the fields, feeding lambs, long evenings by the fire with your patchwork—'

'P'rhaps if Francis bought a farm—' Christopher began, remembering this.

'I don't believe that would help at all,' Prudence said. 'There's too much work and mud and compost on a real farm.'

'He ought to do something—well, fanciful,' James agreed. 'Like sending her an armful of pear blossom. Or buying a flute and coming to sing under her window one night.'

The doorbell rang and Christopher leant out of the window to see who it was. 'It *is* Francis.'

'Run down and let him in, Kit,' Prudence said.

'But it's Nan he's come to see.'

'I know, but perhaps we could give him some advice. After all, we do know what Nan is like—'

'Only too well,' Christopher said bitterly. 'I suppose he really does want to marry her?'

'He says he does,' Prudence said.

Christopher clattered downstairs, and in a few minutes reappeared with Francis Vere, who had brought

flowers for Annaple, as he did on every possible occasion, and pokes of sweets for the children. He began to talk about Annaple almost at once. 'She's so sweet-tempered. Not like Clarissa Verney.'

'She can be very finicky, you know,' James said cautiously. 'I suppose . . . I mean . . . you are quite sure you want to marry her?'

Christopher glared at him, thinking they shouldn't give Francis any let-out; but Francis said yes, he was quite sure.

'Where is she?' he asked, looking hopefully towards the door.

'In the kitchen. Throwing together a horrible St Nicholas Day cake. Listen. There's nothing we'd like more than to see Annaple get married—'

'Get married to you,' Prudence put in tactfully.

'—to you, so we thought perhaps we could give you some advice.'

'Advice?'

'Help.' Prudence looked at him, thinking of burnt beef and sagging cake and apples-in-caramel as hard as cannon balls. She said cautiously, 'You really can afford a cook, can't you?'

'A dozen cooks if she likes.'

'Well, actually it's you I was thinking of. I mean, Annaple never eats much—she thinks thin girls are more romantic—so it doesn't matter to her if things are all burnt up; but you don't want to starve—'

'If Annaple marries me, she need never even lift a

spoon again. I'll give her anything she likes,' Francis said earnestly.

'Anything at all?' Christopher asked, wanting to get it straight. 'Suppose she wanted a—a drum of her own? Or a sword? Or a trumpet? Or a *horse*?'

'Anything.'

'Including a piper?' James asked.

Francis was startled. 'Why a piper?'

'Because once she read a tale about Scotland—misty mountains and seals singing and dew on the heather—that was when she took to calling herself Annaple, all Scottish, instead of Annabel—'

'And before that it was Annick,' Christopher put in, 'because of French things being more romantic than English, and for a bit before that, it was Nancy. Could you get used to leaving, say, Nancy at breakfast and coming home to find Annette at supper? She was christened plain Anne, but it isn't fanciful enough for her.'

'And,' James said patiently, 'the girl in this tale—the Scottish tale, I mean—used to be woken at dawn by a piper playing a lament under her window. Annaple fancied that.'

'She may go on about the sunrise and the dew and the dawn chorus,' Christopher said, 'but I notice she stays in bed till past eight o'clock.'

Prudence said, 'Poor Francis won't want to hire a piper, not if he marries Annaple—*he'd* get woken up too.'

But Francis said he would provide a dozen pipers if Annaple wished. 'Only not the mountains, of course—

not unless we moved to Scotland or the Welsh border or somewhere in the North country.'

'That's a good idea,' Christopher said, feeling that even if by some miracle Annaple agreed to marry Francis, she might quite easily take time off to walk round to Lee Street each day and check on the family.

'If Annaple marries me,' Francis said firmly, 'she can have an army of pipers and a rockery full of heather plants, a row of silk dresses, flowers for her hair, a gold ring for her finger—'

'Five gold rings,' Christopher said, 'because both of Papa's brothers are clergymen, and so are three of Mama's, and they'd all want to be the one that did the marrying.'

'Five gold rings,' Francis said obediently. 'Why doesn't Annaple want to marry me?'

There was a pause.

Christopher said, 'It's a pity you're not a woodcutter or something like that. She goes on for ever about life in the greenwood—partridges for pets, you know, a handful of herbs for dinner, the sky for a roof, herding geese through the dewy grass—all that nonsense.'

'Or if you were the seventh son of a seventh son,' James said. 'Annaple's nutty on fairytales. Or a soldier, perhaps—haven't you ever heard her babbling about how romantic it would be to marry a soldier and follow the drum? She's been going on about that ever since Papa took us to watch the summer review in St Stephen's Fields.'

'She does like you, truly,' Prudence said. 'Very much. Only perhaps she'd like you a bit more if you were—well, more light-hearted. Imaginative.'

'Yes. Look. Are you going to give Annaple a Christmas present?' James asked.

'Of course. Anything she wa—'

'Well, couldn't you give her something imaginative? Original?'

'Anything—'

'What would she like, do you think?' Prudence asked her brothers.

'A trumpet,' Christopher said hopefully.

'If you can't be sensible, Kit—'

'What about a spinning wheel?' James said. 'That's very fairytale-ish. She said her favourite story was that one with the idiotish girl who couldn't guess Rumpelstiltskin's name.'

'It wasn't,' Christopher said. 'You're getting muddled. It was the one with the princess who had to make shirts out of nettles to bewitch her brothers back from being swans.'

'Whichever one it was,' Prudence said, 'don't you think a spinning wheel would be a nuisance? She'd be forever breaking the thread or pricking herself. That wretched embroidery's bad enough. And even if she did manage to spin some thread, we'd have to spend hours winding it. And then she'd knit scratchy stockings for us to wear. Don't you think a musical box would be better?'

'I don't know, Pru. We have trouble enough with that screeching harp. P'rhaps something French—'

'A cookery book,' Christopher said bitterly. 'A cookery book, an outsize egg timer, and an alarm clock.'

Francis was thinking. 'Yes, I see—' he said. 'Yes, I *do* see. A change from flowers. Yes, all right, I'll think something up.'

* * *

When Francis left, Prudence walked with him down Lee Street to the Market Place. It was choir practice night and the church door was open. 'Listen,' Prudence said suddenly. 'I thought—yes, it is, it's the opening bit of the Advent carol.'

Francis and she stood in the doorway to listen. The pipes and fiddles were playing the introduction. A boy's solitary voice lifted in the Advent carol for the coming of Christmas.

'Sheep like stones
In silent fold,
Snow like ash
Settling cold.

Walk a world
Bereft as dream,
Birdless wood,
Standing stream.

Bethlehem:
The children whine;
Travellers
Wait in line.

Tired men ring
The courtyard fire,
Tethered mules
Crowd the byre.

Stumble through
The cattle-pens;
Overhead
Roosting hens.

Spread with bales
The reeking floor;
Birthing bed:
Sacks and straw.

Trim the lamp;
Bemused and numb,
Watch and wait:
Soon, a son.'

Prudence said, 'I wonder if Nan's remembered to order the Christmas candle.'

Francis wasn't listening. 'Something imaginative,' he said. 'Something original. I must think this over.'

'Well, don't take too long,' Prudence said. 'It will be Christmas in no time at all now. I can never really believe it till I hear them singing the waiting carol.'