Helping your children choose books they will love



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 and/or Illustrator

Please print off and read at your leisure.

Lovereading4kids.co.uk

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Great Clarendon Street, Oxford OX2 6DP
Oxford University Press is a department of the University of Oxford.
It furthers the University's objective of excellence in research, scholarship,
and education by publishing worldwide in

Oxford New York

Auckland Cape Town Dar es Salaam Hong Kong Karachi
Kuala Lumpur Madrid Melbourne Mexico City Nairobi
New Delhi Shanghai Taipei Toronto

With offices in

Argentina Austria Brazil Chile Czech Republic France Greece
Guatemala Hungary Italy Japan Poland Portugal Singapore
South Korea Switzerland Thailand Turkey Ukraine Vietnam

Oxford is a registered trade mark of Oxford University Press
in the UK and in certain other countries

Copyright © Jenny Overton 1972
Illustrated by Shirley Hughes
The moral rights of the author have been asserted

Database right Oxford University Press (maker)

First published by Faber and Faber Ltd 1972
First published by Oxford University Press 2002
First published in this edition 2013

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced,
stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means,
without the prior permission in writing of Oxford University Press,
or as expressly permitted by law, or under terms agreed with the appropriate
reprographics rights organization. Enquiries concerning reproduction
outside the scope of the above should be sent to the Rights Department,
Oxford University Press, at the address above

You must not circulate this book in any other binding or cover
and you must impose this same condition on any acquirer

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Data available

ISBN: 978-0-19-273543-0

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Printed in Great Britain
Paper used in the production of this book is a natural,
recyclable product made from wood grown in sustainable forests
The manufacturing process conforms to the environmental
regulations of the country of origin

Note

Some of the Christmas customs which the Kitsons keep in the story are still kept today. Some used to be kept but have now been abandoned. And some were kept only in this one town, on this one Christmas.



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.'