

THE SNOW PONY

Marietta wasn't feeling very well. She sneezed so violently in the kitchen that Teddy Bear, who was sitting on the table, nearly fell off in surprise. That made Marietta laugh, even though she had a slight head ache. She did a pretend sneeze to see if he would do it again. But this time he stayed still and just gave her a grumpy look. Marietta thought to herself Teddy can't be feeling very well, either, otherwise he would have laughed, too. His name was Toronto Ted and usually when he was feeling well he laughed at nearly everything. He even laughed when Marietta dropped him in her bathtub by mistake and he got very wet.

But today he wasn't feeling at all well. Nor was Marietta. Her head hurt and she kept feeling chilly.

T'ishoo...

She sneezed and looked at Teddy and said: 'Well, go on, Teddy, it's your turn to sneeze.

But Teddy didn't. He couldn't, because he didn't have a proper nose.

But Marietta had a proper nose and it was getting all blocked up with the cold.

And she sneezed again.

T'ishoo. And again. T'ishoo. And again T'ishoo.

Her Mummy gave her a peculiar look. She went to the kitchen drawer, took out a thermometer and asked Marietta to put it under her tongue. After a while, she examined it and said: 'Marietta, you're running a temperature. You must go to bed and stay there until you're better.'

Normally, Marietta would have protested, because it was only four o'clock in the afternoon. But today she was feeling so ill that she went meekly up to bed, carrying Teddy in her arms,

'Poor Teddy,' she said, as she tucked him in beside her. 'I think you must be feeling awful, because you're running a temperature as well.'

Her Mummy gave her an aspirin and soon she was fast asleep.

0 When she awoke next morning she was feeling better, but her Mummy said she must stay in bed, because she was still sneezing and had a slight temperature.

Marietta lived in the country and in the summer there was a beautiful view of a grassy meadow from her bedroom. But now only patches of grass showed through the thin layer of snow. The fir trees on the distant hills looked as though they were covered in white bandages. The sun shone that morning, but then the sky turned grey and snow flakes again started wheeling and swooping from the sky until everything was white. It was just as though a white curtain had descended from the heavens and blotted nearly everything out from view. Just outside the window the snow flakes danced to the music of the snow ballet, weaving pretty patterns. But after watching them for a while, Marietta lost interest. If only, she thought, I could go out and build a snow man. But she knew her Mummy wouldn't let her. She really wasn't well enough.

She sneezed and then pretended that Teddy had sneezed too. She said Bless You and wiped his nose. Teddy gave a grunt as though he was fast asleep and didn't want to be disturbed.

So Marietta slept as well..

When she woke up it was lunch time... Her Mummy gave her hot drinks and a sandwich, but she couldn't eat very much.

'When will I be able to get up?' she asked her mother.

'When you're feeling better,' her Mummy replied.

That night she asked her Daddy why people caught colds.

He said: 'I honestly don't know. It's just the way things are. 'Sometimes we catch nice things and sometimes we catch nasty things.'

'What nice things can we catch?' Marietta asked.

Her Daddy thought for a moment and said: 'Well, I suppose catching a pony would be very nice.'

That made Marietta laugh.

She woke up in the middle of the night. The moon was shining into her bedroom and snow was still falling, but not as heavily as during the day. There were little puffs of snow like cotton wool floating lazily downwards, as if they were wearing parachutes and had all the time in the world. Some of them glowed in the moonlight and looked as though they were going upwards to the clouds. Perhaps they don't like it down here, Marietta thought. Perhaps they are frightened of catching my cold. That made her laugh and she whispered the joke to Toronto Teddy. But he was fast asleep and couldn't hear.

More clouds came over the sky and blotted out the moon. The snow flakes grew bigger and some of them stuck to the window, forming patterns like the lids of envelopes. But Marietta could still see out of part of the window. And it was then she first saw the Snow Pony.

At first it was just a distant shape, moving over the meadow outside. Then she could make out the shape of its head and saw it tossing its mane as though it wanted to send her a message but didn't quite know how. It cantered too and fro across the meadow, making criss-cross patterns and Marietta thought she could hear a whinnying sound. It was quite the most beautiful pony she had ever seen. And it seemed much cleverer than Toronto Ted, who was sound asleep by her side. The pony could actually understand her thoughts and although it was quite a long way away, it seemed to be able to speak to her.

What it said was this:

Dearest Marietta,
I'm here to make you better.
If my reins you'll hold,
I'll take away your cold...
Just one ride among the trees
And you'll no longer sneeze."

Well, naturally, this sounded a marvellous idea to Marietta. Just then the moon came out again and the Snow Pony called out to her: "Why don't you slide down a moonbeam and jump on my back?"

Which was exactly what Marietta did. In no time she was cantering over the snow, hanging onto the Snow Pony's mane for dear life. The Snow Pony went faster and faster, leaping over the snow-covered fir trees, missing them, by inches, curving round the meadow, making beautiful shapes in the snow with its hooves. Marietta went wild with delight. She shouted with glee and the Snow Pony answered her with a kind of laughing neigh. But she understood he was telling her that this was a secret and they mustn't tell anyone about their nighttime ride in the snow. The strange thing was that even though she was only wearing her pyjamas she didn't feel at all cold. Long afterwards, remembering what had happened, she thought that the sheer excitement must have kept her warm. Finally, the Snow Pony looked round and said to her:

"Now, Marietta,
You're feeling much better,
Through holding my mane.
Next morning you'll be as right as rain."

And what he said was true! When she woke up in the morning, she was well again and able to go to school.

That day the teacher was telling the class that in the village where they lived there was a belief that when a child was ill a magic white pony called the Snow Pony would appear and if the child rode on its back he or she would get better very quickly.

Marietta was on the point of telling the teacher that she had ridden on the Snow Pony. But then she remembered that she had promised to keep it a secret.