

December Newsletter 2021

Hi All,

As Advent has now arrived I will take this opportunity to wish you all a very happy festive season, whichever and however you celebrate.

I had hoped that my vaccination work would be tailing off after Christmas, but in light of the latest news it sounds as though we will be busier than ever. Therefore, in between wielding needles, writing Christmas letters and wrapping presents, I am currently urgently reviewing the excellent proof-reader's work on *Fires of Hate* in order to keep on track for publication in March next year.

Given the time of year, I hope that this month you will forgive me a brief departure from crime. Next Saturday I am the guest children's storyteller at a local Christmas fair. One of the stories I shall tell is below. It is taken from another book of mine in a rather different style. *The Animals of White Cows Farm* tells the stories of the many animals, six, four and two-legged, that live on a livestock farm in Norfolk. What follows is a re-telling of an old myth.

I promise a return to crime fiction in the New Year!

A Christmas Story at White Cows Farm

Towards the end of December, when the schools had broken up for the winter holiday, Farmer Fred and Mrs Fred's granddaughter Liesl came for a visit. She had a great time walking round all her favourite places on the farm, admiring the new piglets, running away from Gertie Goose, and making the acquaintance of Marigold's new calf, Bluebell. On all her walks and visits she was, of course, accompanied by the loyal Scratchy Patch, bouncing along at her heels like a particularly animated shadow.

During the afternoon of Christmas Eve, Liesl hunted through her school bag, muttering to herself, then pulled an old battered book out of the bag with an air of triumph.

‘Got it!’ she said. Then looked at her Grandma, getting very stressed and hot as she rolled out pastry for more mince pies and added, ‘come on Patch. Let’s go to the barn.’

As they crossed the yard, they saw Farmer Fred hiding in the cowshed. He knew better than to hang around in the kitchen when Mrs Fred was making mince pies. He whistled a carol as he shook fresh straw in with the calves. They bounced around and barked with excitement as they butted the new bales and threw the straw about. He waved, as Liesl, with little help from Patch, pulled the big barn door open and went through. Inside it was warm, with scents of hay and the steamy breath of Marigold and Bluebell cuddling peacefully. Liesl pulled up a bale of straw and sat down. Patch turned round and round on the hay strewn floor, and then she sat down too.

‘Now Marigold, now Bluebell,’ said Liesl. ‘Please pay attention because I am going to read you a story.’ And she read an old, old story about all the animals in a stable long ago, and how they watched as a tiny baby boy was born, and how they kept him warm with their hay-scented breath as he lay asleep in their manger. She went on to explain how shepherds had brought their sheep to see the baby; and that later in the night, they had all been surprised by a visit from some very grandly-dressed men who had given the baby rich presents.

‘And,’ said Liesl as she concluded the story, ‘ever since that day, on Christmas night, farm animals all over the world still kneel in memory of the special baby and the special night.’

She closed the book with a snap and turned to Marigold and Bluebell. ‘I should like to see you tonight,’ she said to the two Jersey cows, ‘but I have to go home this afternoon. Happy Christmas to you both.’

After she had gone, Patch looked at Marigold. '**Do** you kneel on Christmas night?' she asked.

'Not that I know of,' said Marigold. 'I'm not exactly built for kneeling.' And she looked back along her comfortably rounded sides. 'It must have been a very special stable,' she said, 'and very crowded with all those sheep and big men in robes and crowns.'

That evening, the air was very still and cold. At midnight the moon was hidden below the horizon and just one star shone a clear white light down through the millions of miles of space to land at the doorway of the old barn. Marigold and Bluebell were standing together just inside the doorway, and the starlight silvered Marigold's horns. The old shire horse in his stable rattled his headcollar just as the bell from the church steeple rang across the frosted fields. It was midnight.

Marigold looked at Bluebell, and then at Old Ben, the shire horse. Everywhere was quiet, except for the church bell. Even the geese by the pond and the sheep on the hill were quiet. As the bell struck twelve sonorous notes, Marigold, Bluebell and Ben all bent their knees and sank to the ground, to honour the Christ child.

Merry Christmas to you all

