

## PETULIA'S GIFT

(for Julia)  
December 1991

Once upon a long ago time, in a faraway country of deep snows, and icicles as long as your two legs put end to end, a goodly King and his goodly Queen ruled kindly over their goodly Kingdom, and they were beloved of all their subjects, from the oldest to the veriest babies in snuggy cribs.

They had a young daughter, too, and very much the apple of their eyes--the goodly Princess Euphonia, with long curly hair the color of shiny new pennies, and skin like a pale ripe peach, and eyes like sparkling sapphires. (*Sapphires* are shiny blue stones. dear person.) Dainty and delicate as Dresden china was the goodly Princess Euphonia, and the people of the kingdom loved her almost as much as they did the goodly King and Queen. (ALMOST as much!)

It certainly was a very cold Kingdom, even though it was very goodly. Early each Autumn, about the end of July, the snow would begin to fall during a long night when everyone from the veriest babies in their snuggy cribs to the goodly King and Queen was fast asleep. By morning the whole goodly Kingdom lay blanketed in white as far as the eye could see, and it would be many months before anyone caught a glimpse of a green twig or a daffodil or a radish leaf. Water froze in the buckets beneath the downspouts. In the places where the wind blew the snow away from the roads and paths, sheets of slippery slidey ice glistened. Children strapped on ice skates and went skidding here and there, sometimes bumping into each other or even ADULTS! Snowdrifts piled up as high as rooftops.

Sometimes even higher.

On days when it got especially cold outside, when the icy winds howled through the bushes and the snow cracked under your feet as you walked on it, the goodly King would throw open the doors of the great dining hall in the castle to let the shivering people crowd in, where they stamped their frosty feet and waggled their frosty arms and wiggled their frosty faces and rubbed at their frosty ears and noses before roaring blazes in four giant fireplaces, one in each corner of the hall.

Then musicians began to play, and people danced in circles and squares and their cheeks grew ruddy (that means *red*, dear person), and dogs barked a great deal and everyone laughed and sang along with the music.

Then the goodly Queen would clap her hands and command the castle cooks and sous-chefs and serving persons and scullery maids to cook up huge kitchens full of wonderful food for the people--vegetable soup and chicken noodle soup and cream of tomato soup and split pea soup and minestrone, chickens and hams and roasts and hamburgers and pâtés, mashed potatoes and boiled potatoes and fried potatoes and roasted potatoes and scalloped potatoes, corn and beans and peas and yams and artichokes, cookies and cakes and tarts and pies and brownies, napoléons and palmiers and savarins and babas and sachertortes--and if someone couldn't find something he or she liked in all that food, he or she had only to ask and the castle cooks and sous-chefs and servings persons and scullery maids would scurry around and make up something he or she DID like.

What a place!

So even though everyone agreed that it was EXTREMELY cold most of the time in the goodly Kingdom, almost everyone also agreed that it was a happy place to live, and ALMOST everyone was quite content with life there.

Almost everyone.

Not QUITE everyone.

One person was NOT quite content with life in the goodly Kingdom, and that was the goodly Princess Euphonia, and when the goodly King and the goodly Queen and the people of the goodly Kingdom saw that that was so, they began to worry. Their faces grew long and sad. The musicians stopped playing, and people stopped dancing, and dogs mostly stopped barking, and even the fires in the four giant fireplaces didn't seem so warm and cheery.

And why was the goodly Princess Euphonia not quite content?

(Can you imagine why, dear person?)

It's because her hands were cold, that's why. No matter what she did with them, they were always cold. Even when she held them out before one of the roaring fireplaces, the little fingers were blue with the cold. Even when she clasped them around a steaming bowl of vegetable soup, they were still cold. (*Clasped* is a hard word to say, dear person.) Even when she took them with her into a hot bath they were still cold, though all the rest of her grew toasty and pink and a little wrinkled from the water.

No one knew what to do.

The longer this went on, the more miserable became the goodly Princess Euphonia. And the more miserable she became, the more miserable became the goodly King and the goodly Queen, and the cooks and the sous-chefs and the serving persons and the scullery maids and the people and even the barking dogs, who didn't bark quite so much.

The goodly Kingdom went into a decline. (This means that things got pretty *gloomy*, dear person.) The goodly King and the goodly Queen huddled under blankets in their private apartments and picked arguments with each other. The kitchens were cold and dark because all the cooks and sous-chefs and serving persons and scullery maids were in their rooms, huddling under blankets and picking arguments with each other. And because the

castle dining hall was cold and dark, all the people crowded into their dark little huts and huddled under blankets and picked arguments with each other.

All but one, and who do you suppose THAT was, dear person? Why, none other than Petulia, the short stout youngest daughter of Glom, the town shepherd, and his goodly wife Freesia.

Petulia was just not happy being unhappy. She didn't like it at all, not even a tiny bit. She missed all the warmth and good food and dancing and laughing and music and barking dogs. Even her very own dog, a great shaggy white Samoyed named Whisker, who loved Petulia even more than barking or bones or other dogs or even life itself--even Whisker had stopped his happy barking and just hunched around under his dog blanket, picking arguments with the cat.

This simply could not go on, thought Petulia. What could she do, a mere tot (a *tot* is a sort of *child*, dear person), to make the goodly Kingdom happy again? Petulia sat in a snow-drift and thought and thought, her chin in her hand and her brow all wrinkled.

Suddenly an idea came to her, and her face brightened like the morning sun.

It might work.

It was worth a try.

Anything was better than this gloom and unhappiness all the time, with everyone picking arguments with everyone else.

She would do it!

So Petulia called to Whisker, who came bounding to her side, all dog-smiles and happy eyes and wet kisses. And then Petulia gently combed Whisker's shaggy white coat, and combed and combed, until she had a whole grocery bag full of fine long white hair.

And then Petulia explained her idea to her mother Freesia, who stopped arguing with her husband Glom and began to cheer up, herself. Freesia took the dog hair and

combed it out until it was all orderly and neat.

And then she mixed Whisker's fluffy white hair with the fleece of a shaggy brown sheep and the fleece of a shaggy white sheep and the fleece of a shaggy pink sheep from Glom's flocks, and combed everything out all orderly and neat. (It isn't easy to say "*Glom's flocks*," is it, dear person?)

And then she got out her spinning wheel and spun all the fine fleece and dog hair into skeins and skeins of fine warm wool. (Ask an adult what a *skein* is, dear person.)

And then she made up warm soapy water and washed all those skeins of fine warm wool until they were perfectly clean. And then she hung them to dry.

And then she got out her knitting needles and began to knit all those skeins of fine clean dry warm wool, just as Petulia had suggested. And as she knitted she began to smile, and her husband Glom crawled out from under his blanket and stopped picking arguments with her.

Soon Freesia finished the job. Then she and Petulia were busy with wrapping paper and ribbons and a fancy gift box. Then Petulia and Whisker set out through the snowdrifts with the fancy gift box on their way to the castle.

At the castle Petulia stood on her tiptoes and reached WAY up to the big brass door-knocker shaped like a growling lion and went KNOCK, KNOCK, KNOCK.

After a while a cold-looking serving person opened the door and looked down at Petulia.

"What do you want?" asked the serving person, sounding very much as if she was picking an argument.

"I'd like to see the goodly Princess Euphonia, please," said Petulia.

"NOBODY sees the goodly Princess Euphonia!" said the cranky serving person. "Especially not common little girls like you." (This last thing she said with a *sneer*, dear

person, and you know what a sneer is.)

"Please," said Petulia. "I have something I want to give her."

"Well," grumped the serving person, "Let me see what I can do. You wait here on the steps in the cold." And the serving person slammed the castle door.

So Petulia waited on the cold steps, the dog Whisker sitting by her side, wagging his tail and grinning and breathing clouds of happy dog-breath into the winter air.

Sooner than you might expect, because it was after all a very large castle, the door swung open again and the serving person said with a simpering smile, "Come in if you want, Petulia. The goodly King and the goodly Queen and the goodly Princess Euphonia will see you. (*Simpering* is a word you'll learn when you're older, dear person.)

So, led by the serving person, Petulia and Whisker trudged through the cold hallways and high arching anterooms of the gloomy castle, past rows of pictures of bearded kings, past wide tapestries showing marvelous unicorns and dragons and ladies in distress, past marble statues and suits of armor and drooping potted plants, until at last they came to the Throne Room, where the goodly King and the goodly Queen, wearing earmuffs and furry garments and galoshes, sat on glittering thrones at the top of carpeted steps. At their side, on a smaller but just as glittering throne, sat the goodly Princess Euphonia, her face long and sad, rubbing her cold blue little hands and looking miserable.

"Yes?" said the goodly King and the goodly Queen at exactly the same time.

"Please," said Petulia, who was a little scared by all this majesty, "I have something for the goodly Princess."

"What is it?"

"This," said Petulia, handing the fancy gift box to the goodly Princess Euphonia. "It's from me. And my mother and father. And Whisker, of course. We hope you'll like it."

Then the goodly Princess Euphonia, her face long and sad, opened the fancy gift box

with her cold blue little fingers, and turned back the tissue paper inside, and took out a beautiful pair of mittens. In shades of pink and brown and white. A smile began to light her face as she tried one on, and it fit just exactly. Then she put the other one on and began to laugh and sing, she was so happy and her hands were so warm!

Soon the joy of the goodly Princess Euphonia spread to her father the goodly King, who commanded that the doors of the great dining hall be thrown open and that fires be lighted in the four giant fireplaces.

And to the goodly Queen, who clapped her hands and commanded the castle cooks and sous-chefs and serving persons and scullery maids to cook up huge kitchens full of wonderful foods for the people--vegetable soup and chicken noodle soup and cream of tomato soup and split pea soup and minestrone, chickens and hams and roasts and hamburgers and pâtés, mashed potatoes and boiled potatoes and fried potatoes and roasted potatoes and scalloped potatoes, corn and beans and peas and yams and artichokes, cookies and cakes and tarts and pies and brownies, napoléons and palmiers and savarins and babas and sachertortes.

And then the joy spread to the shivering people of the goodly Kingdom, who marched joyfully to the castle and crowded into the great dining hall, where they stamped their frosty feet and waggled their frosty arms and wiggled their frosty faces and rubbed at their frosty ears and noses before the roaring blazes in the four giant fireplaces, one in each corner of the hall.

The musicians began to play, and people danced in circles and squares and their cheeks grew ruddy (that means *red*, dear person), and dogs barked a great deal and everyone laughed and sang along with the music.

Watching over the joyful scene stood the goodly King and the goodly Queen, with the goodly Princess Euphonia chattering happily at their side.

And who do you suppose the goodly Princess Euphonia was chattering happily WITH, dear person?

Why of course, none other than a short, stout, and once again very happy little girl named Petulia, and her frolic-some, rollicksome, altogether smiling dog named Whisker, who between the two of them (with some help from Petulia's mother Freesia) had turned the goodly Kingdom into a joyful place once more.

And what do you think, dear person? Petulia's hands were warm, too, because there had been just enough wool left over for Freesia to make a second pair of mittens just like the ones on the hands of the goodly Princess Euphonia.

The End