

PRISONERS IN THE SNOW

by Arthur Catherall

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Also by Arthur Catherall

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1. Airplane in Trouble

TWELVE-YEAR-OLD Toni Hoffman and his twin sister Trudi stopped for a rest. They had almost finished digging a path through the snow from the door of the farmhouse to the rough road which led down to the valley almost a thousand feet below. It was tiring work, and they were both breathing heavily. In the cold air their breath looked like white steam.

Leaning for a moment on his long-handled spade, Toni said thoughtfully, "Want to know what I'm going to do, Trudi, when I'm grown up and rich? I'm going to buy a big bulldozer. We wouldn't have any trouble then. It would clear the farmyard of snow in no time at all."

Trudi pushed a wisp of hair back under her woolen cap and laughed. "Remember that story we heard on the radio about two English boys who were always wishing it would snow in winter? They had a sled but there was no snow to play in."

"Yes." Toni laughed too. "And they were always talking about making snowmen. If they lived in Austria like us they'd surely get all the snow they wanted. Look at it," and he waved a hand toward the valley below.

Everything was white, except for a thin dark line along the valley. That was the road, swept clear for traffic by the snowplow just a little while before. A foot of snow had fallen during the night.

"The post bus down there looks like a tiny beetle crawling along," Trudi said. "It hardly seems to be moving."

"But you couldn't keep up with it, even on your skis," Toni said, smiling.

"Well, it seems to be going slowly," Trudi insisted.

"That's because we are so high up, silly," Toni said. "I wonder if there will be a letter from Aunt Ana?"

"Of course there will. She never forgets your birthday." Trudi sighed. "I wish we could have gone down to the village with Papa and Mama."

"Oh, well, another week or so and the snow will start to melt," Toni assured her. "Maybe last night's storm was the last big one of the winter. It won't be long now until spring. Look at the sun."

They turned to stare up the snow-covered mountainside. The sun was shining over the white-clad peaks, and for the first time in weeks the sky was brilliant blue. It did seem as if spring was really coming.

Picking up his spade, Toni said, "Back to work, or Grandfather will have something to say when we go in. I wonder if he had to shovel snow when he was a boy. If he . . ."

Toni stopped, for he had heard a faint hum, and it was gradually growing more distinct. Shading their eyes against the sun's glare, he and Trudi searched the blue sky.

Trudi saw the airplane first. "There it is, way over there, moving toward the Guldahorn," she exclaimed. "Do they always paint airplanes red?"

Toni did not reply. The sun was catching the plane wings, making them glitter a deep gold. It reminded him of a summer butterfly.

"I wish we had an airplane," he whispered. "Or better still, a helicopter. They're best because they can rise straight up off the ground. Just think, Trudi, if we had a helicopter, Papa and Mama wouldn't have to go to the village on skis. They could just sit in the helicopter, start the engine, and away they'd go. When I'm rich—"

Trudi interrupted him. "You're always wishing, and talking about what you'll do when you're rich. Suppose you never are?"

Toni turned away from her, a scowl on his face, and Trudi quickly said, "It would be nice to have a helicopter, though. No matter how deep the snow was we wouldn't have to stay up here all winter, would we?"

"No, we could go down to the village every day," Toni said enthusiastically. "And when they have the dances in the village we'd get there first, and sit in the front row."

"And everybody would be asking us for a ride." Trudi's eyes glistened at the thought. Then something else occurred to her: "But it would mean going to school every day. Perhaps it is better not having a helicopter."

They remained staring up at the airplane in the sky, and dreaming of helicopters and visits to the village during the long winters. They had scarcely left the farm since just before Christmas. Up here on the mountain slopes the snow was always very deep. None of the cattle had been able to go out for weeks. Sometimes no member of the family dared leave the house, for when the gales

howled over the mountains the snow swirled in blinding clouds, blotting out everything.

Today, with the sun shining from a cloudless sky, Mr. and Mrs. Hoffman had put on their skis, and with empty rucksacks on their backs, had swirled down the steep slopes to the village. There was no real shortage of food in the farmhouse, but Mrs. Hoffman had been patiently waiting for such a day so that she could visit the grocer's shop, and the post office.

Toni and Trudi would have loved to go with them, but someone had to stay behind with Grandfather Hoffman, who had a stiff leg and could not walk very well. Besides, there was work to do. The snow that had fallen during the night had to be cleared to make a path to the woodpile, and if they shoveled enough away, the cows and their one pony could be led out to stretch their legs.

The cows were always funny when they came out into the snow for the first time. They acted like calves, or like children just out of school. They kicked and pranced and galloped here and there, sometimes charging into the banked-up snow. Often their excited mooing came back across the valley as echoes.

But there would be no exercise for the animals today. The hum of the airplane's engine had grown louder, and there were echoes from it as the high peaks threw the sound backward and forward. Suddenly, however, the smooth purring sound was interrupted with a sharp, explosive crack.

Toni and Trudi stared intently upward, their eyes wide with astonishment and alarm. After the cracking noise, the hum of the airplane's engine stopped and it looked as if smoke was coming from the tiny machine. Then Trudi gasped.

"Somebody's fallen out," she cried. "Toni . . . I saw somebody fall out!"

"You couldn't have! Nobody falls out of . . ." Staring hard, Toni suddenly exclaimed, "You're right, Trudi! Something is falling!"

From where they were standing, it was no more than a speck, and if the slopes had not been covered with snow they might not have seen it at all. Living high in the mountains, both Toni and Trudi were accustomed to looking across great distances, and they possessed very good eyesight. Besides, the clear air enabled them to see better than people who lived in cities.