

# In Her Words

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PATRICIA ST JOHN'S STORY

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# Contents

Foreword.....	1
1 Family Background.....	9
2 Early Years at Malvern .....	21
3 Swiss Interlude .....	33
4 School Days.....	43
5 War Time Experiences.....	55
6 Arrival in Tangier.....	77
7 Family Joys and Sorrows.....	87
8 Up to the Mountains.....	97
9 First Contacts .....	107
10 Fatima and her Friends.....	115
11 The Children Come .....	127
12 Out to the Villages .....	141
13 Endings and Beginnings.....	151
14 The Hospital at Tangier.....	161
15 My Life at the Hospital .....	181

CONVINCED BY SCRIPTURE

16	Nephews and Nieces .....	189
17	Questions People Ask .....	199
18	A Tribute to my Father .....	209
19	Rwanda.....	223
20	In the Steps of St Paul.....	239
21	The Grannies .....	259
22	Lebanon .....	269
23	Settling Down in England.....	279
24	The Refugee Camp .....	289
25	Global Care .....	301
26	Home on the Estate .....	311
	Epilogue .....	325
	The Pace Setter .....	329

# Foreword

Patricia St John was one of those very rare people whose writings, life and being all make the same impact. Not only was she what one might call a poet of forgiveness, someone in the great tradition of St Luke and of all those whose stories are interwoven with the one great story of Christ himself, as in St Luke's Gospel the great parables of Jesus are. She was also, as this lovely autobiography dearly demonstrates, what I can only call a redemptive person.

Indeed, I can testify to this, since I first encountered her years ago, when someone gave one of my children a copy of *Treasures of the Snow*. At a moment when I was meant to be doing something else, and with the excuse that I might read it aloud to the children, I took the book up. I can remember now, being moved to tears by the vividness, directness and clarity of the story.

Perhaps the very heart of it comes at the moment where Annette, sitting on one side of the stove in the house in Switzerland with her grandmother on the other, asks, 'If you *hated* someone you could not ask Jesus to come in (to your life), could you?'

‘If you hate someone,’ said Grandmother, ‘it just shows how badly you need to ask Him to come in. The darker the room, the more it needs the light.’

‘But I couldn’t stop hating Lucien,’ said Annette softly, fingering her long plaits thoughtfully.

‘No,’ said Grandmother. ‘You’re quite right. None of us can stop ourselves thinking wrong thoughts, and it isn’t much good trying. But Annette – when you come down in the morning and find this room dark with the shutters closed, do you say to yourself, “I must chase away the darkness and the shadows first, and then I will open the shutters and let in the sun?” Do you waste time trying to get rid of the dark?’

‘Of course not!’

‘Then how do you get rid of the dark?’

‘Well, I pull back the shutters, of course, and then the light comes in!’

‘But what happens to the dark?’

‘I don’t know; it just goes when the light comes!’

‘That is just what happens when you ask the Lord Jesus to come in,’ said Grandmother. ‘He is love and when love comes in, hatred and selfishness and unkindness will give way to it, just as the darkness gives way when you let in the sunshine. But to try to chase it out alone would be like trying to chase the shadows out of a dark room. It would be a waste of time.’

It was the reality of the way in which the love of Jesus casts out all distorted feelings including fear itself, in the end, and heals relationships which the story went on so



powerfully to describe. It has had the same effect that it had at that moment on me on countless readers.

But when I met personally with Patricia St John, here in Coventry, I found myself responding even more deeply to the same vivid energy and vitality, the same sense of a creative, and indeed redemptive acceptance and challenge which I had met with in the story. As one of her nephews was to say of her at her memorial service, 'A cup of tea and a sandwich with Auntie could be a celebration.'

It is for this reason that I could say to all those who have valued her stories and to many who have not yet read them, that this Autobiography will hold them and move them as much as the stories have or more, and will give them, in a new way, a sense of the same source out of which the stories well up and from which Patricia so obviously drew her own inspiration, the living grace of God in Christ.

Here is the rich soil from which her own writings sprang, including a vivid description of the time spent in Switzerland which provided the setting for *Treasures of the Snow*, itself.

From the moment when, as a twelve-year-old, Patricia, with her brother, organized a kind of 'Sunday School' in a garage for children from a nearby estate, an experience which some of them, as one testified, never forgot, through the days when as a young nurse in war-time London, she comforted air-raid victims and somehow by her touch drew back into life a young boy who was dying of meningitis, talking him through until his pulse grew

stronger, as a housemother at her aunt's school, later as a missionary nurse alongside her remarkable brother in his hospital and then on her own in a little town in the mountains, she lived and communicated the forgiving and healing power of God in such an utterly human way. People always responded to her vivid sympathy and sparkle of humour, and, without at first recognizing it, to the depths of her own growing and deepening relationship with God. The stories of that response amongst ordinary village people and children in the midst of North Africa comes through the pages of this book so grippingly, as through it all Patricia and the startlingly real and endearing characters amongst whom she finds herself seem to grow together into a fuller realization of the amazing truth of forgiveness.

Here, too, is a marvellous evocation of the engaging personality of her brother and his wife and their children and of their extraordinary household and family life ('I have never been in a house where so many people of so many types and nationalities came in and out. Yet all the time I was there I never heard an irritable or impatient word. If that is Christianity, then I want it.') Patricia saw this as 'the heart and crux of all our work', the crucial quality of which was indeed forgiveness. She gives a portrait of a loving, forgiving community of people of all ages and backgrounds, of which she herself was clearly an essential part. Her parents and her wider family come to life so wonderfully through this story and she enables us to see the forces which shaped her own extraordinary

personality. We recognize in them and in her grandparents some of the characters reflected in her own stories. There, too, the redemptive theme is finally worked out. The other impressive variations on that theme emerge in her descriptions of her visit to Uganda and Rwanda tracing the central experiences of the East African revival with its profound expression of repentance and grace for the account of it which she later wrote. We see also, later in her life after she had moved to Coventry, the ways in which her continuing identification with the world mission scene through the Coventry charity 'Global Care' led to her visits to the Ethiopian Refugee Camps in the Sudan as well as to Romania. Earlier, her remarkable sister, Hazel, in Beirut in the Lebanon and on a journey back from Beirut to North Africa gave her the material for other stories.

Strangely and characteristically I believe that the supreme expression of her lifelong theme was worked out in her time of, physically, greater weakness, though undiminished vitality, in the final phase of her mission in a housing estate in Coventry.

There, as she mourned the loss of her brothers and looked back at times over her life and missionary experiences with what seems to us a surprising sense of regret and sorrow, with which nonetheless many active people of that kind could surely in their later years identify, she seems to arrive at the deepest core of her message.

We saw the influence of that delightful household in Canley on fellow Christians, on visiting family, and more

especially on the young children and teenagers who poured in and out from the housing estate round about and who responded to that magic touch of Patricia's as the young of all ages had always responded, all her life.

But she found herself, as she calls it, 'standing alone' and seeing 'the failures, the mistakes, the might-have-beens' and asking what had been achieved. It is there that she describes Christ coming and standing beside us and saying, 'Look with me', and reminding us of the words in Joel, 'I will restore the years that the locust has eaten' out of his ultimate redemptive power. So this astonishing record has its climax in the quite extraordinary poem which brings it to its close. This is a poem which speaks of that 'power in weakness' that final transfiguring, which we find in the gospel and experience of Christ as nowhere else.

She writes of the one who:

*'Stooping very low engraves with care  
His Name indelible upon our dust;  
And from the ashes of our self-despair.  
Kindles a flame of love and humble trust.  
He seeks no second site on which to build,  
But on the old foundation, stone by stone,  
Cementing sad experience with grace,  
Fashions a stronger temple of His own.'*

Here the theme rises to a fitting greatness at the climax,

FOREWORD

which expresses, the greatest surprise of all to me, the very same image of forgiveness as the cathedral of the city in which she had come to end her life: the image of a movement *through* the fragments and ruins of ourselves, our church and our society, *towards* that wholeness into which Christ draws us on.

This is surely the most essential message for people of our own time. It is what the gospel supremely has to offer to the world at this moment. It is the forgiveness which is all that we have. And it finds in this autobiography an expression which is all of a piece with Patricia's life and writings and person in a way which becomes a lasting testimony for us all.

*Simon Barrington-Ward,*  
Bishop of Coventry



# I

## Family Background

No two love stories are ever quite the same, but I doubt if there has ever been a more unusual courtship than that of my parents. When Harry, my father, was fifteen he attended a church service. Mr Swain was also there with his curly-haired daughter of three. Mr Swain got up to speak and Ella fell off her chair and made a considerable noise about it. It was disturbing to her father's sermon, to say the least of it, and Harry, who knew the family, offered to carry her home. On the way something happened to him; he left his small charge with her mother but he did not forget her. He determined there and then that little Ella Swain was the girl for him and he would wait for her.

He waited a long time. On his father's sudden death he was forced to leave school, turn his back on the academic career he had hoped for and look for work. He became a junior bank clerk in the Westminster Bank with good prospects of advancement, and remained there for twenty years, helping to support his widowed mother.

But again, when he was nineteen, something happened. The details are not clear for he never talked about that

night except to say that he met with God; but that meeting transformed him from a rather rebellious lad, thoroughly disappointed with life, into a man with a passionate purpose: to know Christ, to study his Bible and to tell others of what he had found. From then on, every spare moment was spent in learning, studying or preaching and gradually his life's ambition became to go and preach the gospel where it had never been heard before. South America was the place laid on his heart.

Meanwhile little Ella Swain was also growing and as Harry's older sister became her governess for a time, he often saw her. Her healthy, normal appearance, her quick intelligence and tremendous enjoyment of life rested and refreshed him. Unlike him, she was no ascetic; everything from the black gentleman singing love songs on the beach to the poems she learned at school, was delightful and golden. Her father, Mr Swain, was a Board of Education Inspector and believed in a broad, careful education for girls. He was also a scientist and he loved to introduce his small daughter to the wonders and beauties of the universe and she responded with eager enthusiasm – and not only to science; history and poetry captivated her, and while her future husband experienced spiritual raptures at the Communion service, she would sit entranced, reciting Tennyson's poems to herself.

Her father's work meant constant change of home so he asked Mrs St John if she would take Ella as a weekly boarder for a few months in order to enable her to finish her school year in London.