

Winter Short Stories

The Snow Image

One afternoon of a cold winter's day, two children asked leave of their mother to run out and play in the new-fallen snow. The older child was a little girl, so tender and modest that every one called her Violet. The boy was called Peony because of his fat, round face which made everybody think of sunshine and scarlet flowers.

The children lived in the city and had no wider play place than a little garden before the house, divided from the street by a white fence. The pear and plum trees, and the rose bushes in front of the parlor window were covered with white, with here and there an icicle for the fruit. It was a pleasant place to play. Their mother bundled them up in woolen jackets and wadded sacks, and a pair of striped gaiters on each little pair of legs, and worsted mittens on their hands. Out they ran, with a hop-skip-and-jump, into the heart of a huge snowdrift. When they had frosted one another all over with handfuls of snow, Violet had a new idea.

"Let us make an image out of snow," she said. "It shall be our little sister and shall run about and play with us all winter long!"

"Oh, yes!" cried Peony. "And mother shall see it."

"Yes," Violet answered. "Mother shall see the new little girl. But she must not make her come into the warm parlor, for our little snow sister will not love the warmth." So the children began this great business of making a snow image that should run about. Violet told Peony what to do, while with her own careful fingers she shaped all the nicer parts of

the snow figure. It seemed, in fact, not so much to be made by the children as to grow up under their hands as they were playing and talking about it. Their mother, who was sitting at the window, watched them. The longer she looked, the more and more surprised she grew.

"What remarkable children mine are!" she said to herself. "What other children could have made anything so like a little girl's figure out of snow at the first trial?"

"Peony, Peony!" cried Violet to her brother, "bring me some of that fresh snow from the farthest corner where we have not been trampling. I want to make our little snow sister's dress with it. You know it must be white, just as it came out of the sky."

"Here it is, Violet!" Peony said as he came floundering through the drifts. "Here is the snow for her dress. Oh, Violet, how beautiful she begins to look!"

"Yes," Violet said thoughtfully and quietly, "our snow sister does look very lovely. I did not know, Peony, that we could make such a sweet little girl as this. Now bring me those light wreaths of snow from the lower branches of the pear tree. You can climb up on a snowdrift and reach them. I must have them to make some curls for our little snow sister's head."

"Here they are, Violet," answered the little boy. "Take care you do not break them. Oh, how pretty!"

"We must have some shining little bits of ice to make the brightness of her eyes. She is not finished yet," Violet went on.

"Here they are," cried Peony. "Mother, mother! Look out and

see what a nice little girl we have made!"

Their mother put down her work for an instant and looked out of the window. She was dazzled by the sun that had sunk almost to the edge of the world so she could not see the garden very distinctly. Still, through all the brightness of the sun and the snow, she saw a strange, small white figure in the garden. Peony was bringing fresh snow, and Violet was moulding it as a sculptor adds clay to his model.

"They do everything better than other children," their mother thought. "No wonder they make better snow images."

She sat down again to her work, and Violet and Peony talked about what a nice playmate their little snow sister would be for them all winter. Suddenly Violet called out joyfully:

"Look, Peony! Come quickly! A light has been shining on her cheek from that rose-colored cloud, and the color does not go away."

"And look, Violet!" Peony answered. "Oh, look at her hair! It is all like gold."

"Oh, of course," Violet said. "That color, you know, comes from the golden clouds. She is almost finished now. But her lips must be very red. Let us kiss them, Peony!"

Just then there came a breeze of the pure west wind blowing through the garden. It sounded so wintry cold that the mother was about to tap on the window pane to call the children in, when they both cried out to her with one voice:

"Mother, mother! We have finished our little snow sister and she is running about the garden with us!"

"They make me almost as much of a child as they," the mother said. "I can almost believe now that the snow image has really come to life." She went to the door and looked all over the garden. There was no gleam or dazzle now on it and she could see very well. What do you think she saw there? Why, if you will believe me, there was a small figure of a girl dressed all in white, with rosy cheeks and golden curls, playing with Violet and Peony. She was none of the neighboring children. Not one had so sweet a face. Her dress fluttered in the breeze; she danced about in tiny white slippers. She was like a flying snowdrift.

"Who is this child?" the mother asked. "Does she live near us?"

Violet laughed that her mother could not understand so clear a matter. "This is our little snow sister," she said, "whom we have just been making."

At that instant a flock of snowbirds came flitting through the air. As was very natural, they avoided Violet and Peony. But - and this looked strange - they flew at once to the white-robed child, lighted on her shoulder, and seemed to claim her as their friend.

The little snow image was as glad to see these birds, old Winter's grandchildren, as they were to see her, and she welcomed them by holding out both of her hands. They tried to all alight on her ten small fingers and thumbs, crowding one another with a great fluttering of wings. One snowbird nestled close to her heart and another put its bill to her lips.

Just then the garden gate was thrown open and the children's father came in. A fur cap was drawn down over his ears and the thickest of gloves covered his hands. He had

been working all day and was glad to get home. He smiled as he saw the children and their mother. His heart was tender, but his head was as hard and impenetrable as one of the iron pots that he sold in his hardware shop. At once, though, he perceived the little white stranger, playing in the garden, like a dancing snow wraith with the flock of snowbirds fluttering around her head.

"What little girl is that," he asked, "out in such bitter weather in a flimsy white gown and those thin slippers?"

"I don't know," the mother said. "The children say she is nothing but a snow image that they have been making this afternoon."

As she said this, the mother glanced toward the spot where the children's snow image had been made. There was no trace of it—no piled-up heap of snow - nothing save the prints of little footsteps around a vacant space!

"Nonsense!" said the father in his kind, matter-of-fact way. "This little stranger must be brought in out of the snow. We will take her into the parlor, and you shall give her a supper of warm bread and milk and make her as comfortable as you can." But Violet and Peony seized their father by the hand.

"No," they cried. "This is our little snow girl, and she needs the cold west wind to breathe."

Their mother spoke, too. "There is something very strange about this," she said. "Could it be a miracle come to the children through their faith in their play?"

The father laughed. "You are as much a child as Violet and Peony," he said. Then he reached out his hand to draw the

snow child into the house.

As he approached the snowbirds took to flight. He followed the snow child into a corner where she could not possibly escape. It was wonderful how she gleamed and sparkled and seemed to shed a glow all around her. She glistened like a star, or like an icicle in the moonlight.

"Come, you odd little thing," cried the honest man, seizing the snow child by her hand. "I have caught you at last and will make you comfortable in spite of yourself. We will put a nice new pair of stockings on your feet and you shall have a warm shawl to wrap yourself in. Your poor little nose, I am afraid, is frost bitten. But we will make it all right. Come along in."

So he led the snow child toward the house. She followed him, drooping and reluctant. All the glow and sparkle were gone from her.

"After all," said the mother, "she does look as if she were made of snow."

A puff of the west wind blew against the snow child; she sparkled again like a star.

"That is because she is half frozen, poor little thing!" said the father. "Here we are where it is warm!"

Sad and drooping looked the little white maiden as she stood on the hearth rug. The heat of the stove struck her like a pestilence. She looked wistfully toward the windows and caught a glimpse, through its red curtains, of the snow-covered roofs, the frosty stars and the delicious intensity of the cold night.

The mother had gone in search of the shawl and stockings, and Violet and Peony looked with terror at their little snow sister.

"I am going to find her parents," said the father, but he had scarcely reached the gate when he heard the children scream. He saw their mother's white face at the window.

"There is no need of going for the child's parents," she said.

There was no trace of the little white maiden, unless it were a heap of snow which, while they were gazing at it, melted quite away upon the hearth rug.

"What a quantity of snow the children brought in on their feet," their father said at last. "It has made quite a puddle here before the stove."

The stove, through the glass of its door, seemed to grin like a red-eyed demon at the mischief which it had done, for the story of the snow image is one of those rare cases where common sense finds itself at fault.