The Little Daughter of the Snow

Arthur Ransome

There were once an old man, as old as I am, perhaps, and an old woman, his wife, and they lived together in a hut, in a village on the edge of the forest. There were many people in the village; quite a town it was--eight huts at least, thirty or forty souls, good company to be had for crossing the road. But the old man and the old woman were unhappy, in spite of living like that in the very middle of the world. And why do you think they were unhappy? They were unhappy because they had no little Vanya and no little Maroosia. Think of that. Some would say they were better off without them.

"Would you say that, grandfather?" asked Maroosia.

"You are a stupid little pigeon," said old Peter, and he went on.

Well, these two were very unhappy. All the other huts had babies in them--yes, and little ones playing about in the road outside, and having to be shouted at when any one came driving by. But there were no babies in their hut, and the old woman never had to go to the door to see where her little one had strayed to, because she had no little one.

And these two, the old man and the old woman, used to stand whole hours, just peeping through their window to watch the children playing outside. They had dogs and a cat, and cocks and hens, but none of these made up for having no children. These two would just stand and watch the children of the other huts. The dogs would bark, but they took no notice; and the cat would curl up against them, but they never felt her; and as for the cocks and hens, well, they were fed, but that was all. The old people did not care for them, and spent all their time in watching the Vanyas and Maroosias who belonged to the other huts.

In the winter the children in their little sheepskin coats....

"Like ours?" said Vanya and Maroosia together.

"Like yours," said old Peter.

In their little sheepskin coats, he went on, played in the crisp snow. They pelted each other with snowballs, and shouted and laughed, and then they rolled the snow together and made a snow woman--a regular snow Baba Yaga, a snow witch; such an old fright!

And the old man, watching from the window, saw this, and he says to the old woman,--

"Wife, let us go into the yard behind and make a little snow girl; and perhaps she will come alive, and be a little daughter to us."

"Husband," says the old woman, "there's no knowing what may be. Let us go into the yard and make a little snow girl."

So the two old people put on their big coats and their fur hats, and went out into the yard, where nobody could see them.

And they rolled up the snow, and began to make a little snow girl. Very, very tenderly they rolled up the snow to make her little arms and legs. The good God helped the old people, and their little snow girl was more beautiful than ever you could imagine. She was lovelier than a birch tree in spring.

Well, towards evening she was finished--a little girl, all snow, with blind white eyes, and a little mouth, with snow lips tightly closed.

"Oh, speak to us," says the old man.

"Won't you run about like the others, little white pigeon?" says the old woman.

And she did, you know, she really did.

Suddenly, in the twilight, they saw her eyes shining blue like the sky on a clear day. And her lips flushed and opened, and she smiled. And there were her little white teeth. And look, she had black hair, and it stirred in the wind.

She began dancing in the snow, like a little white spirit, tossing her long hair, and laughing softly to herself.

Wildly she danced, like snowflakes whirled in the wind. Her eyes shone, and her hair flew round her, and she sang, while the old people watched and wondered, and thanked God.

This is what she sang:--

"No warm blood in me doth glow,
Water in my veins doth flow;
Yet I'll laugh and sing and play
By frosty night and frosty day--
Little daughter of the Snow.

"But whenever I do know
That you love me little, then

I shall melt away again.
Back into the sky I'll go--
Little daughter of the Snow."

"God of mine, isn't she beautiful!" said the old man. "Run, wife, and fetch a blanket to wrap her in while you make clothes for her."

The old woman fetched a blanket, and put it round the shoulders of the little snow girl. And the old man picked her up, and she put her little cold arms round his neck.

"You must not keep me too warm," she said.

Well, they took her into the hut, and she lay on a bench in the corner farthest from the stove, while the old woman made her a little coat.

The old man went out to buy a fur hat and boots from a neighbour for the little girl. The neighbour laughed at the old man; but a rouble is a rouble everywhere, and no one turns it from the door, and so he sold the old man a little fur hat, and a pair of little red boots with fur round the tops.

Then they dressed the little snow girl.

"Too hot, too hot," said the little snow girl. "I must go out into the cool night."

"But you must go to sleep now," said the old woman.

"By frosty night and frosty day," sang the little girl. "No; I will play by myself in the yard all night, and in the morning I'll play in the road with the children."

Nothing the old people said could change her mind.

"I am the little daughter of the Snow," she replied to everything, and she ran out into the yard into the snow.

How she danced and ran about in the moonlight on the white frozen snow!

The old people watched her and watched her. At last they went to bed; but more than once the old man got up in the night to make sure she was still there. And there she was, running about in the yard, chasing her shadow in the moonlight and throwing snowballs at the stars.

In the morning she came in, laughing, to have breakfast with the old people. She showed them how to make porridge for her, and that was very simple. They had only to take a piece of ice and crush it up in a little wooden bowl.

Then after breakfast she ran out in the road, to join the other children. And the old people watched her. Oh, proud they were, I can tell you, to see a little girl of their own out there playing in the road! They fairly longed for a sledge to come driving by, so that they could run out into the road and call to the little snow girl to be careful.

And the little snow girl played in the snow with the other children. How she played! She could run faster than any of them. Her little red boots flashed as she ran about. Not one of the other children was a match for her at snowballing. And when the children began making a snow woman, a Baba Yaga, you would have thought the little daughter of the Snow would have died of laughing. She laughed and laughed, like ringing peals on little glass bells. But she helped in the making of the snow woman, only laughing all the time.

When it was done, all the children threw snowballs at it, till it fell to pieces. And the little snow girl laughed and laughed, and was so quick she threw more snowballs than any of them.

The old man and the old woman watched her, and were very proud.

"She is all our own," said the old woman.

"Our little white pigeon," said the old man.

In the evening she had another bowl of ice-porridge, and then she went off again to play by herself in the yard.

"You'll be tired, my dear," says the old man.

"You'll sleep in the hut to-night, won't you, my love," says the old woman, "after running about all day long?"

But the little daughter of the Snow only laughed. "By frosty night and frosty day," she sang, and ran out of the door, laughing back at them with shining eyes.

And so it went on all through the winter. The little daughter of the Snow was singing and laughing and dancing all the time. She always ran out into the night and played by herself till dawn. Then she'd come in and have her ice-porridge. Then she'd play with the children. Then she'd have ice-porridge again, and off she would go, out into the night.

She was very good. She did everything the old woman told her. Only she would never sleep indoors. All the children of the village loved her. They did not know how they had ever played without her.

It went on so till just about this time of year. Perhaps it was a little earlier. Anyhow the snow was melting, and you could get about the paths. Often the children went together a little way into the forest in the sunny part of the day. The little snow girl went with them. It would have been no fun without her.

And then one day they went too far into the wood, and when they said they were going to turn back, little snow girl tossed her head under her little fur hat, and ran on laughing among the trees. The other children were afraid to follow her. It was getting dark. They waited as long as they dared, and then they ran home, holding each other's hands.

And there was the little daughter of the Snow out in the forest alone.

She looked back for the others, and could not see them. She climbed up into a tree; but the other trees were thick round her, and she could not see farther than when she was on the ground.

She called out from the tree,--

"Ai, ai, little friends, have pity on the little snow girl."

An old brown bear heard her, and came shambling up on his heavy paws.

"What are you crying about, little daughter of the Snow?"

"O big bear," says the little snow girl, "how can I help crying? I have lost my way, and dusk is falling, and all my little friends are gone."

"I will take you home," says the old brown bear.

"O big bear," says the little snow girl, "I am afraid of you. I think you would eat me. I would rather go home with some one else."

So the bear shambled away and left her.

An old gray wolf heard her, and came galloping up on his swift feet. He stood under the tree and asked,--

"What are you crying about, little daughter of the Snow?"

"O gray wolf," says the little snow girl, "how can I help crying? I have lost my way, and it is getting dark, and all my little friends are gone."

"I will take you home," says the old gray wolf.

"O gray wolf," says the little snow girl, "I am afraid of you. I think you would eat me. I would rather go home with some one else."

So the wolf galloped away and left her.

An old red fox heard her, and came running up to the tree on his little pads. He called out cheerfully,--

"What are you crying about, little daughter of the Snow?"

"O red fox," says the little snow girl, "how can I help crying? I have lost my way, and it is quite dark, and all my little friends are gone."

"I will take you home," says the old red fox.

"O red fox," says the little snow girl, "I am not afraid of you. I do not think you will eat me. I will go home with you, if you will take me."

So she scrambled down from the tree, and she held the fox by the hair of his back, and they ran together through the dark forest. Presently they saw the lights in the windows of the huts, and in a few minutes they were at the door of the hut that belonged to the old man and the old woman.

And there were the old man and the old woman, crying and lamenting.

"Oh, what has become of our little snow girl?"

"Oh, where is our little white pigeon?"

"Here I am," says the little snow girl. "The kind red fox has brought me home. You must shut up the dogs."

The old man shut up the dogs.

"We are very grateful to you," says he to the fox.

"Are you really?" says the old red fox; "for I am very hungry."

"Here is a nice crust for you," says the old woman.

"Oh," says the fox, "but what I would like would be a nice plump hen. After all, your little snow girl is worth a nice plump hen."

"Very well," says the old woman, but she grumbles to her husband.

"Husband," says she, "we have our little girl again."

"We have," says he; "thanks be for that."

"It seems waste to give away a good plump hen."

"It does," says he.

"Well, I was thinking," says the old woman, and then she tells him what she meant to do. And he went off and got two sacks.

In one sack they put a fine plump hen, and in the other they put the fiercest of the dogs. They took the bags outside and called to the fox. The old red fox came up to them, licking his lips, because he was so hungry.

They opened one sack, and out the hen fluttered. The old red fox was just going to seize her, when they opened the other sack, and out jumped the fierce dog. The poor fox saw his eyes flashing in the dark, and was so frightened that he ran all the way back into the deep forest, and never had the hen at all.

"That was well done," said the old man and the old woman. "We have got our little snow girl, and not had to give away our plump hen."

Then they heard the little snow girl singing in the hut. This is what she sang:--

"Old ones, old ones, now I know
Less you love me than a hen,
I shall go away again.
Good-bye, ancient ones, good-bye,
Back I go across the sky;
To my motherkin I go--
Little daughter of the Snow."

They ran into the house. There were a little pool of water in front of the stove, and a fur hat, and a little coat, and little red boots were lying in it. And yet it seemed to the old man and the old woman that they saw the little snow girl, with her bright eyes and her long hair, dancing in the room.

"Do not go! do not go!" they begged, and already they could hardly see the little dancing girl.

But they heard her laughing, and they heard her song:--

"Old ones, old ones, now I know
Less you love me than a hen,
I shall melt away again.
To my motherkin I go--
Little daughter of the Snow."

And just then the door blew open from the yard, and a cold wind filled the room, and the little daughter of the Snow was gone.

"You always used to say something else, grandfather," said Maroosia.

Old Peter patted her head, and went on.

"I haven't forgotten. The little snow girl leapt into the arms of Frost her father and Snow her mother, and they carried her away over the stars to the far north, and there she plays all through the summer on the frozen seas. In winter she comes back to Russia, and some day, you know, when you are making a snow woman, you may find the little daughter of the Snow standing there instead."

"Wouldn't that be lovely!" said Maroosia.

Vanya thought for a minute, and then he said,--

"I'd love her much more than a hen."

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