



The Snow-Child

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Russian

Easy
8 min read

In a certain village lived a peasant named Ivan, and his wife Mary. They were very fond of each other, and had lived happily together for many years, but unfortunately they had no children. The poor people were sad on that account. Their hearts, however, were gladdened at the sight of their neighbours' children. What could be done? It was evidently the will of Heaven; and in this world, Heaven's will be done!

One day, in winter, after a great quantity of snow had fallen on the ground, the children of the village where Ivan and Mary lived ran into the fields to play. The old couple looked at them from the window. The children ran about, played all sorts of frolics together, and at last began to make a snow-man. Ivan and Mary sat down quietly watching them. Suddenly Ivan smiled and said,—

“I say, wife, let us go out and make a snow-man too.”

Mary was also in a merry mood.

“Yes,” she answered; “let us go out and play, though we are old. But why should we make a snow-man? Better to make a snow-child, since Heaven will not grant us a live one.”

“Very good,” said Ivan.

He put on his cap, and went with his wife into the garden.

They really set about making a baby of snow. They made the body; then arms and legs; then put on the top a ball of snow for a head.

“Heaven help you!” cried one who passed by,

“Many thanks,” replied Ivan.

“Heaven’s help is always acceptable,” added Mary.

“What are you doing?” continued the stranger.

“What you yourself see,” answered Ivan.

“We are making a Snyegurka!” cried Mary, laughing.

Then they made a little nose and a chin, two little holes for eyes, and as soon as Ivan had finished—oh, wonderful!—a sweet breath came out of its mouth! Ivan lifted up his arms and stared. The little holes were no longer holes; in their place were two bright blue eyes, and the tiny lips smiled lovingly upon him.

“Mercy on us! What is this?” cried Ivan, devoutly crossing himself.

The snow-child turned its head towards him—it was really alive! It moved its arms and legs inside the snow, like an infant in swaddling clothes.

“Oh, Ivan,” cried Mary, trembling with joy, “Heaven has at last given us a baby!” and she seized the child in her arms.

The snow fell off “Snyegurka,” as Mary called her, like the shell from a chicken. Mary, delighted beyond measure, held in her arms a beautiful, living girl.

“Oh, my love! my love! My darling Snyegurka!” cried the kind-hearted woman, tenderly embracing her long-wished for, and now unexpectedly granted child. Then she rushed into the hut with the infant in her arms. Ivan was astounded at this wonderful event; as to Mary, she was beside herself with joy.

Snyegurka grew every hour; each day she looked more beautiful than before. Ivan and Mary were delighted with her, and their hut, once so quiet and lonely, was now full of life and merriment. The girls of the village visited them constantly; dressed and played with Snyegurka as if she were a doll; talked to to her; sang songs to

her; joined her with them in all their games, and taught her all they knew themselves. Snyegurka was very clever, and quickly learnt everything she was told. During the winter she grew up as tall as a girl of thirteen years old; she understood and could talk about most things around her, and had such a sweet voice that one would never tire of listening to it. Besides this, she was kind, obedient, and affectionate. Her flesh was as white as snow; her eyes looked like two forget-me-nots; and her hair was of a light flaxen colour. Her cheeks only had no rosy hue in them, because there was no blood in her veins. In spite of this she was so beautiful, that, having once seen her, you would wish to see her again and again. It would have done your heart good to see how she enjoyed herself, and how happy she was when at play. Everybody loved her; she was idolised by Mary, who would often say to her husband, "Heaven has granted us joy in our old age; sorrow has left my heart!"

Ivan would answer, "Heaven be praised! But in this world happiness is seldom lasting, and sorrow is good for us all."

The long winter had gradually glided away. The glorious sun again shone in the sky, and warmed the cold earth. Where the snow melted, green grass appeared, and the skylark poured forth its sweet notes. The girls of the village collected together, and welcomed the spring with a song:—

"Beautiful Spring! How did you come to us? How did you make your journey? On a plough or on a harrow?"

From a gay, sprightly girl, Snyegurka suddenly became sad.

"What is the matter with you, my dearest child?" Mary would often ask, drawing Snyegurka nearer to her heart. "Are you ill? You are not so happy as you used to be. Perhaps an evil eye has glanced at you?"

Snyegurka would simply answer, "I am well; mother."

The snow had now completely melted away, and the genial spring appeared with its warm and sunny days. The meadows and gardens began to be covered with radiant and sweet-scented flowers. The nightingale and other songsters of the woods and fields resumed their beautiful melodies. In a word, all nature became brighter and more charming.

Snyegurka alone grew sadder and sadder. She began to shun her playfellows, and to hide herself from the rays of the sun like the May-flower under the tree. She would only play near a well of spring water—splashing and dabbling in it with her hand—beneath the shade of a green willow. She grew daily fonder of the shade, the cool

air, and the rain shower. During rain, and in the evening, she would become more gay. When the sky became overcast with dark clouds, and a thick shower of hail came pouring down, Snyegurka was as pleased as any other girl would have been at the sight of a pearl necklace. When the hail melted and disappeared beneath the warm rays of the sun, Snyegurka cried bitterly, as if she herself would melt into tears; as an affectionate sister might weep over a lost brother.

The spring now ended, the summer came, and the Feast of St. John was close at hand. All the girls from the village went into the wood to play. Several of them came to the hut, and asked Mistress Mary to allow Snyegurka to go with them. Mary was at first afraid to let Snyegurka go, and the girl herself did not care about it, but they could not very well refuse the invitation. Then Mary thought it would perhaps amuse Snyegurka. She therefore kissed her tenderly, saying,—

“Go, my dear child; go and enjoy yourself. And you, my good girls, take care of my Snyegurka. You know she is as dear to me as my very sight.”

“All right! we’ll take care!” cried the girls; and they caught hold of Snyegurka by the arms, and ran away together to the forest.

There they made garlands and bouquets of flowers, and sang songs, while Snyegurka took part in their play.

After sunset the girls piled up a small heap of dry grass and brushwood, lighted it, and, with garlands on their heads, stood in a line, one close upon the other. They put Snyegurka at the end, and said, “When you see us running, you run after us.” Then they began to sing, and to jump over the fire.

Suddenly they heard a painful cry. They turned round quickly, but could see nothing. Greatly surprised, they looked at each other, and then noticed that Snyegurka was missing. “Oh, the mischievous puss!” cried the girls; “she has hidden herself.”

They ran in every direction in search of her, but all in vain. They called her by her name, “Snyegurka!” but there was no answer.

“Perhaps she has gone home,” cried some of the girls. They all ran back to the village—Snyegurka was not there!

They searched for her the whole night, the following, and the third day; they examined the forest,—every tree, every bush; but all to no purpose, Snyegurka was gone!

Old Ivan and Mary were almost broken-hearted at the loss of their beloved Snyegurka. Every day Mary went to the forest to look for her lost child. Poor woman! like a tender mother full of grief and yearning for her young one, she cried aloud,—

“Ah, me! my Snyegurka! Ah, me! my darling dove! Where art thou?”

She often fancied she could hear her dear Snyegurka’s painful cry when she disappeared. Alas! alas! Snyegurka was nowhere to be found.

Where had Snyegurka gone? Had some wild beast seized and dragged her into his lair? or a bird of prey carried her across the dark blue sea to its nest? No; neither bird nor beast had carried the girl away. When Snyegurka, following her companions, sprang over the fire, she melted away and changed in an instant into a beautiful white cloud, rose up, and disappeared in the sky for ever!

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