



Tonight's Bedtime Story

Fairy Tales for Sleepy Children

presents

Little Snowdrop

From "The Fairy Book" by Miss Mulock



Once upon a time, in the middle of winter, when the flakes of snow fell like feathers from the sky, a queen sat at a window set in an ebony frame, and sewed. While she was sewing and watching the snow fall, she pricked her finger with her needle, and three drops of blood dropped on the snow. And because the crimson looked so beautiful on the white snow, she thought, “Oh that I had a child as white as snow, as red as blood, and as black as the wood of this ebony frame!”

Soon afterwards she had a little daughter, who was as white as snow, as red as blood, and had hair as black as ebony. And when the child was born, the queen died.

After a year had gone by, the king took another wife. She was a handsome lady, but proud and haughty, and could not endure that any one should surpass her in beauty. She had a wonderful mirror, and whenever she walked up to it, and looked at herself in it, she said:

“Little glass upon the wall,
Who is fairest among us all?”

Then the mirror replied:

“Lady queen, so grand and tall,
Thou art the fairest of them all.”

And she was satisfied, for she knew the mirror always told the truth. But Snowdrop grew ever taller and fairer, and at seven years old was beautiful as the day, and more beautiful than the queen herself. So once, when the queen asked of her mirror:

“Little glass upon the wall,
Who is fairest among us all?”

it answered:

“Lady queen, you are grand and tall,
But Snowdrop is fairest of you all.”

Then the queen was startled, and turned yellow and green with envy. From that hour she so hated Snowdrop, that she burned with secret wrath whenever she saw the maiden. Pride and envy grew apace like weeds in her heart, till she had no rest day or night. So she called a huntsman and said, “Take the child out in the forest, for I will endure her no longer in my sight. Kill her, and bring me her lungs and liver as tokens that you have done it.”

The huntsman obeyed, and led the child away; but when he had drawn his hunting-knife, and was about to pierce Snowdrop’s innocent heart, she began to weep, and said, “Ah! dear

huntsman, spare my life, and I will run deep into the wild forest, and never more come home.”

The huntsman took pity on her, because she looked so lovely, and said, “Run away then, poor child!”—”The wild beasts will soon make an end of thee,” he thought; but it seemed as if a stone had been rolled from his heart, because he had avoided taking her life; and as a little bear came by just then, he killed it, took out its liver and lungs, and carried them as tokens to the queen. She made the cook dress them with salt, and then the wicked woman ate them, and thought she had eaten Snowdrop’s lungs and liver. The poor child was now all alone in the great forest, and she felt frightened as she looked at all the leafy trees, and knew not what to do. So she began to run, and ran over the sharp stones, and through the thorns; and the wild beasts passed close to her, but did her no harm. She ran as long as her feet could carry her, and when evening closed in, she saw a little house, and went into it to rest herself. Everything in the house was very small, but I cannot tell you how pretty and clean it was.

There stood a little table, covered with a white tablecloth, on which were seven little plates (each little plate with its own little spoon)—also seven little knives and forks, and seven little cups. Round the walls stood seven little beds close together, with sheets as white as snow. Snowdrop being so hungry and thirsty, ate a little of the vegetables and bread on each plate, and drank a drop of wine from every cup, for she did not like to empty one entirely.

Then, being very tired, she laid herself down in one of the beds, but could not make herself comfortable, for one was too long, and another too short. The seventh, luckily, was just right; so there she stayed, said her prayers, and fell asleep.

When it was grown quite dark, home came the masters of the house, seven dwarfs, who delved and mined for iron among the mountains. They lighted their seven candles, and as soon as there was a light in the kitchen, they saw that some one had been there, for it was not quite so orderly as they had left it.

The first said, “Who has been sitting on my stool?”

The second, “Who has eaten off my plate?”

The third, “Who has taken part of my loaf?”

The fourth, “Who has touched my vegetables?”

The fifth, “Who has used my fork?”

The sixth, “Who has cut with my knife?”

The seventh, “Who has drunk out of my little cup?”

Then the first dwarf looked about, and saw that there was a slight hollow in his bed, so he asked, “Who has been lying in my little bed?”

The others came running, and each called out, "Some one has also been lying in my bed."

But the seventh, when he looked in his bed, saw Snowdrop there, fast asleep. He called the others, who flocked round with cries of surprise, fetched their seven candles, and cast the light on Snowdrop.

"Oh, heaven!" they cried, "what a lovely child!" and were so pleased that they would not wake her, but let her sleep on in the little bed. The seventh dwarf slept with all his companions in turn, an hour with each, and so they spent the night. When it was morning, Snowdrop woke up, and was frightened when she saw the seven dwarfs. They were very friendly, however, and inquired her name.

"Snowdrop," answered she.

"How have you found your way to our house?" further asked the dwarfs.

So she told them how her stepmother had tried to kill her, how the huntsman had spared her life, and how she had run the whole day through, till at last she had found their little house.

Then the dwarfs said, "If thou wilt keep our house, cook, make the beds, wash, sew and knit, and make all neat and clean, thou canst stay with us, and shalt want for nothing."

"I will, right willingly," said Snowdrop. So she dwelt with them, and kept their house in order. Every morning they went out among the mountains, to seek iron and gold, and came home ready for supper in the evening.

The maiden being left alone all day long, the good dwarfs warned her, saying, "Beware of thy wicked stepmother, who will soon find out that thou art here; take care that thou lettest nobody in."

The queen, however, after having, as she thought, eaten Snowdrop's lungs and liver, had no doubt that she was again the first and fairest woman in the world; so she walked up to her mirror, and said:

"Little glass upon the wall,

Who is fairest among us all?"

The mirror replied:

"Lady queen, so grand and tall,

Here, you are fairest of them all:

But over the hills, with the seven dwarfs old,

Lives Snowdrop, fairer a hundredfold.”

She trembled, knowing the mirror never told a falsehood; she felt sure that the huntsman had deceived her, and that Snowdrop was still alive. She pondered once more, late and early, early and late, how best to kill Snowdrop; for envy gave her no rest, day or night, while she herself was not the fairest lady in the land. When she had planned what to do, she painted her face, dressed herself like an old pedlar-woman, and altered her appearance so much, that no one could have known her. In this disguise she went over the seven hills, to where the seven dwarfs dwelt, knocked at the door, and cried, “Good wares, cheap! very cheap!”

Snowdrop looked out of the window and cried, “Good morning, good woman: what have you to sell?”

“Good wares, smart wares,” answered the queen—”bodice laces of all colours;” and drew out one which was woven of coloured silk.

“I may surely let this honest dame in!” thought Snowdrop; so she unfastened the door, and bought for herself the pretty lace.

“Child,” said the old woman, “what a figure thou art! Let me lace thee for once properly.” Snowdrop feared no harm, so stepped in front of her, and allowed her bodice to be fastened up with the new lace.

But the old woman laced so quick and laced so tight, that Snowdrop’s breath was stopped, and she fell down as if dead. “Now I am fairest at last,” said the old woman to herself, and sped away.

The seven dwarfs came home soon after, at eventide, but how alarmed were they to find their poor Snowdrop lifeless on the ground! They lifted her up, and, seeing that she was laced too tightly, cut the lace of her bodice; she began to breathe faintly, and slowly returned to life. When the dwarfs heard what had happened, they said, “The old pedlar-woman was none other than the wicked queen. Be careful of thyself, and open the door to no one if we are not at home.”

The cruel stepmother walked up to her mirror when she reached home, and said:

“Little glass upon the wall,

Who is fairest among us all?”

To which it answered, as usual:

“Lady queen, so grand and tall,

Here, you are fairest of them all;

But over the hills, with the seven dwarfs old,

Lives Snowdrop, fairer a hundredfold.”

When she heard this, she was so alarmed that all the blood rushed to her heart, for she saw plainly that Snowdrop was still alive.

“This time,” said she, “I will think of some means that shall destroy her utterly;” and with the help of witchcraft, in which she was skilful, she made a poisoned comb. Then she changed her dress and took the shape of another old woman.

Again she crossed the seven hills to the home of the seven dwarfs, knocked at the door, and cried, “Good wares, very cheap!”

Snowdrop looked out and said, “Go away—I dare let no one in.”

“You may surely be allowed to look!” answered the old woman, and she drew out the poisoned comb and held it up. The girl was so pleased with it that she let herself be cajoled, and opened the door.

When the bargain was struck, the dame said, “Now let me dress your hair properly for once.” Poor Snowdrop took no heed, and let the old woman begin; but the comb had scarcely touched her hair before the poison worked, and she fell down senseless.

“Paragon of beauty!” said the wicked woman, “all is over with thee now,” and went away.

Luckily, it was near evening, and the seven dwarfs soon came home. When they found Snowdrop lifeless on the ground, they at once distrusted her stepmother. They searched, and found the poisoned comb; and as soon as they had drawn it out, Snowdrop came to herself, and told them what had happened. Again they warned her to be careful, and open the door to no one.

The queen placed herself before the mirror at home and said:

“Little glass upon the wall,

Who is fairest among us all?”

But it again answered:

“Lady queen, so grand and tall,

Here you are fairest of them all;

But over the hills, with the seven dwarfs old,

Lives Snowdrop, fairer a thousandfold.”

When she heard the mirror speak thus, she quivered with rage. "Snowdrop shall die," she cried, "if it costs my own life!"

Then she went to a secret and lonely chamber, where no one ever disturbed her, and compounded an apple of deadly poison. Ripe and rosy cheeked, it was so beautiful to look upon, that all who saw it longed for it; but it brought death to any who should eat it. When the apple was ready, she painted her face, disguised herself as a peasant-woman, and journeyed over the seven hills to where the seven dwarfs dwelt. At the sound of the knock, Snowdrop put her head out of the window, and said, "I cannot open the door to anybody, for the seven dwarfs have forbidden me to do so."

"Very well," replied the peasant-woman; "I only want to be rid of my apples. Here, I will give you one of them!"

"No!" said Snowdrop, "I dare not take it."

"Art thou afraid of being poisoned?" asked the old woman. "Look here; I will cut the apple in two, and you shall eat the rosy side, and I the white."

Now the fruit was so cunningly made, that only the rosy side was poisoned. Snowdrop longed for the pretty apple; and when she saw the peasant-woman eating it, she could resist no longer, but stretched out her hand and took the poisoned half. She had scarcely tasted it, when she fell lifeless to the ground.

The queen, laughing loudly, watched her with a barbarous look, and cried, "O thou who art white as snow, red as blood, and black as ebony, the seven dwarfs cannot awaken thee this time!"

And when she asked the mirror at home,

"Little glass upon the wall,

Who is fairest among us all?"

the mirror at last replied,

"Lady queen, so grand and tall,

You are the fairest of them all."

So her envious heart had as much repose as an envious heart can ever know.

When the dwarfs came home in the evening, they found Snowdrop lying breathless and motionless on the ground. They lifted her up, searched whether she had anything poisonous about her, unlaced her, combed her hair, washed her with water and with wine; but all was useless, for they could not bring the darling back to life. They laid her on a bier, and all the seven placed themselves round it, and mourned for her three long days. Then they would

have buried her, but that she still looked so fresh and life-like, and had such lovely rosy cheeks. “We cannot lower her into the dark earth,” said they; and caused a transparent coffin of glass to be made, so that she could be seen on all sides, and laid her in it, writing her name outside in letters of gold, which told that she was the daughter of a king. Then they placed the coffin on the mountain above, and one of them always stayed by it and guarded it. But there was little need to guard it, for even the wild animals came and mourned for Snowdrop: the birds likewise—first an owl, and then a raven, and afterwards a dove.

Long, long years, did Snowdrop lie in her coffin unchanged, looking as though asleep, for she was still white as snow, red as blood, and her hair was black as ebony. At last the son of a king chanced to wander into the forest, and came to the dwarf’s house for a night’s shelter. He saw the coffin on the mountain with the beautiful Snowdrop in it, and read what was written there in letters of gold. Then he said to the dwarfs, “Let me have the coffin! I will give you whatever you like to ask for it.”

But the dwarfs answered, “We would not part with it for all the gold in the world.”

He said again, “Yet give it me; for I cannot live without seeing Snowdrop, and though she is dead, I will prize and honour her as my beloved.”

Then the good dwarfs took pity on him, and gave him the coffin. The prince had it borne away by his servants. They happened to stumble over a bush, and the shock forced the bit of poisoned apple which Snowdrop had tasted out of her throat. Immediately she opened her eyes, raised the coffin-lid, and sat up alive once more. “Oh, heaven!” cried she, “where am I?”

The prince answered joyfully, “Thou art with me,” and told her what had happened, saying, “I love thee more dearly than anything else in the world. Come with me to my father’s castle, and be my wife.”

Snowdrop, well pleased, went with him, and they were married with much state and grandeur.

The wicked stepmother was invited to the feast. Richly dressed, she stood before the mirror, and asked of it:

“Little glass upon the wall,

Who is fairest among us all?”

The mirror answered:

“Lady queen, so grand and tall,

Here, you are fairest among them all;

But the young queen over the mountains old,

Is fairer than you a thousandfold.”

The evil-hearted woman uttered a curse, and could scarcely endure her anguish. She first resolved not to attend the wedding, but curiosity would not allow her to rest. She determined to travel, and see who that young queen could be, who was the most beautiful in all the world. When she came, and found that it was Snowdrop alive again, she stood petrified with terror and despair. Then two iron shoes, heated burning hot, were drawn out of the fire with a pair of tongs, and laid before her feet. She was forced to put them on, and to go and dance at Snowdrop’s wedding—dancing, dancing on these red hot shoes till she fell down dead.

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