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The Snow Man was written by Hans Christian Andersen (1805-1875), and was translated from the Danish by M. R. James (1862-1936) as part of his *Hans Andersen Forty-Two Stories* (1930).

Title: Hans Andersen Forty-Two Stories — The Snow Man

Author: Andersen, Hans Christian (1805-1875)

Translator: James, Montague Rhodes (1862-1936)

Date of first publication: 1930

Place and date of edition used as base for this ebook: London: Faber and Faber, 1953

Date first posted: 23 December 2009

Date last updated: 17 June 2014

Faded Page ebook#20100104

This ebook was produced by: David T. Jones, Mark Akrigg & the Online Distributed Proofreading Team at <http://www.pgdpCanada.net>

The Snow Man

by

Hans Christian Andersen

(from *Hans Andersen Forty-Two Stories* [1930], translated by M. R. James)

"I'm crackling proper, it's so lovely cold," said the Snow Man, "the wind does really bite life into one, and how she does blaze, that blazer there!" It was the sun he meant, which was just going down. "She won't get me to wink. I shall hold on to my bits fast enough."

These were two big three-cornered bits of roof-tiles which he had for eyes; his mouth was a piece of an old rake, so he had some teeth.

He had been born amid the cheering of the boys and saluted by the tinkle of bells and cracking of whips from the sledges.

The sun went down and the full moon rose, round and big, bright and beautiful, in the blue sky.

"There we have her again from another direction," said the Snow Man. He thought it was the sun showing itself again. "I've taught her to leave off blazing! Now she's at liberty to hang there and light up, so that I can look at myself. I only wish I knew how people set about moving themselves. I would like to shift myself: if I could do that I'd go down and slide on the ice as I saw the boys do, but I don't know how to run."

"Off! Off!" barked the old watchdog; he was rather hoarse, and so he had been ever since he was a housedog and lay under the stove. "The sun will teach you to run all right. I saw that happen with the one before you last year, and with the one before him. Off! Off! Yes, they're all off."

"I don't understand you, mate," said the Snow Man. "Will that one up there teach me to run?" He meant the moon. "Why, she ran away right enough before, when I looked sharp at her, and now she comes creeping up from another direction."

"You don't know nothing," said the watchdog, "but then you've only just been put together. The one you see now is called the moon, the one that went off was the sun. She'll come up again tomorrow, and she'll teach you to run, down into the moat. We shall soon get a change of weather, I can feel that in my left hind leg, there's a twinge in it. The weather's on the change."

"I don't understand him," said the Snow Man, "but I do get the impression that it's something uncomfortable he's saying. The one that blazed and went down, that he calls the sun, she isn't a friend to me either, that I can feel in myself."

"Off! Off!" barked the watchdog, and turned himself round three times and then laid himself down in his kennel to sleep.

There did, in fact, come a change in the weather. A mist, all thick and damp, spread itself in the early morning far over the whole neighbourhood. At dawn a breeze sprang up: so icy was the wind that the frost took a tight hold, but what a sight was there to see when the sun rose! Every tree and bush was covered with rime-frost; it was like a whole forest of white coral. It was as if every branch was loaded with dazzling white flowers. Those infinitely many fine twigs, which in summer you cannot see for the leaves, now came to view, every single one of them. They formed a lace-work, so brilliantly white that a white radiance seemed to flow out from every bough. The weeping birch waved in the wind; there was life in it, as there is in the trees in summer time. It was matchlessly beautiful, and when the sun came fairly out, why, how it all sparkled, as if it were powdered with diamond dust! And all about over the earth's snow coverlet big diamonds shone out! Or you might fancy that numberless little lights were kindled, whiter than the white snow itself.

"It is incomparably beautiful," said a young girl, who with a young man came out into the garden; they stopped just by the Snow Man and looked at the glistening trees. "A lovelier sight one doesn't get in summer," said she, and her eyes shone.

"And such a chap as that one isn't to be seen either," said the young man, pointing to the Snow Man. "He's prime."

The girl laughed, and nodded to the Snow Man and danced off with her friend, away over the snow, which creaked under their feet as if they were walking on starch.

"Who were those two?" the Snow Man asked the watchdog. "You've been longer on the place than I. Do you know

them?"

"That I do," said the watchdog. "She's often patted me, and he's given me a bone. I don't bite them."

"But what's their business here?" the Snow Man inquired.

"Sweet-hear-r-r-ting," said the watchdog. "They're to move into another kennel and gnaw the same bone. Off! Off!"

"Do those two matter as much as you and me?" asked the Snow Man.

"Why, they belong to the quality!" said the watchdog. "On my word, it's precious little people know that were only born yesterday. I see that by you. I have age and experience. I know everybody about this place, and I have known the time when I didn't stand out here in the cold with a chain. Off! Off!"

"The cold is lovely," said the Snow Man. "Tell us, tell us all about it, but you'll please not rattle your chain, for it makes me crackle."

"Off! Off!" barked the watchdog. "I was a puppy. 'Pretty little thing,' they said, when I lay on a velvet chair in there in the house, yes, lay in the lap of the best of the quality, was kissed on the mouth and had my paws wiped with a worked pocket handkerchief. I was called 'Sweetest' and 'Little Toddlekins'. But then I got too big for them, so they gave me to the housekeeper, and I went into the basement. You can see into it from where you stand, you can look down into the room where I used to be the quality; for that's what I was with the housekeeper. To be sure, it was a lower situation than upstairs, but it was comfortabler. I wasn't hustled and pulled about by children as I was upstairs. I had just as good food as before and lots more of it. I had my own cushion, and then there was a stove; at this time of the year that's the loveliest thing in the world. I used to creep right in under it so that I was clean out of sight. Oh, that stove! I dream of it still. Off! Off!"

"Is a stove so very beautiful to look at?" asked the Snow Man. "Is it like me?"

"Just the opposite of you. Coal black it is: has a long neck with a tin pipe. It eats fuel, and that makes flames come out of its mouth. You can put yourself by the side of it, close up, right underneath it—there's no end to the comfort of it. You can see it in there, through the window from where you stand."

And the Snow Man looked, and he did see a black polished object with a tin pipe and fire shining out underneath. The Snow Man felt very odd, he had a sensation he couldn't explain to himself; something came over him which he knew nothing of; but all human people know it if they are not Snow men.

"And why did you forsake her?" said the Snow Man. He felt that the stove must be a female. "How could you leave such a position as that?"

"I was obliged to," said the watchdog. "They pushed me out and put me here on a chain. I'd bitten the youngest of the young ones in the leg, because he kicked away the bone I was gnawing, and I thought, 'bone for bone'. But they took it ill, and from that time I've been chained up and lost my clear voice. Listen how hoarse I am. Off! Off! That was the end of it."

The Snow Man listened to him no more; he kept gazing into the housekeeper's basement, into her room, where the stove stood on the four iron legs, and appeared to be about as big as the Snow Man himself.

"A strange crackling there is inside me," he said. "Shall I never get in there? It's an innocent wish, and our innocent wishes may surely be granted. It's my highest, my only desire, and it would be almost unjust were it not appeased. I *must* get in there, I must nestle up against her, even if I have to break the window."

"You'll never get in," said the watchdog. "And if you do get to the stove you'll be off! off!"

"I am as good as off," said the Snow Man. "I'm breaking up, I think."

All day the Snow Man stood and looked in at the window. When dark came, the room became still more attractive: from the stove there shone a light so kindly as neither the moon gives nor yet the sun, nay, such as only a stove can give when there's something in it. When anybody opened the door the glow poured forth, that was its regular habit: it blushed a bright red on the Snow Man's white face, which shone red from his breast upwards.

"I can't stand it," he said. "How pretty she looks when she puts her tongue out!"

The night was very long, but not too long for the Snow Man; he stood absorbed in his own beautiful thoughts; and they froze so that they crackled again.

In the early hours the basement windows were frozen over; they bore the loveliest ice-flowers that any Snow Man could wish for, but they hid the stove. The panes would not thaw: he could not see her. It crackled, it crunched, it was just such frosty weather as might delight a Snow Man, but he was not delighted. He might and ought to have felt exceedingly happy, but he wasn't happy, he had stove-sickness.

"That's a bad complaint for a Snow Man," said the watchdog. "I've suffered from it too, but I got over it. Off! Off! Now the weather's on the change."

There was a change of weather. It turned to a thaw.

The thaw came on, the Snow Man went off. He said nothing, he didn't complain, and that is the plainest of symptoms.

One morning he tumbled down. Something like a broomstick remained sticking up where he had stood. The boys had built him up round it.

"Now I understand about that yearning of his," said the watchdog. "The Snow Man had a stove-shovel in his body! That's what stirred itself in him, but now it's past and over. Off! Off!"

And soon the winter was past and over too.

"Off! Off!" barked the watchdog, but the little girls at the house sang:

*Bloom, you woodruff fresh and stout!
Hang, you willow, your woolly gloves out!
Come, lark and cuckoo, come and sing.
February's here, we must have spring.
I'll sing with you, Cuckoo, twit! twit!
Come, dear sun, make haste with it.*

And there's nobody thinks about the Snow Man any more.

[End of *The Snow Man* by Hans Christian Andersen, from *Hans Andersen Forty-Two Stories*, translated by M. R. James]