# *The Snow Image: A Childish Miracle*

by Nathaniel Hawthorne

**The Snow Image: A Childish Miracle** (1851) is a story Hawthorne originally intended for adults, later adapted for children. A brother and sister, named Violet and Peony, create a snow girl that magically comes to life. Violet and Peony also encounter other magical creatures which take them through an exciting and moral-laden journey. Nathaniel Hawthorne (4 July 1804 – 19 May 1864) was an American novelist, short story writer, and author of children's books.



One afternoon of a cold winter day, when the sun shone forth with chilly brightness, after a long storm, two children were leaving the door of their mother's cottage, to take a short walk before dinner. The elder child was a little girl, whom, because she was of a tender and modest disposition, and was thought to be very beautiful, her parents, and other people who were familiar with her, used to call Violet. But her brother was known by the style and title of Peony, on account of the ruddiness of his broad and round little phiz, which made everybody think of sunshine and great scarlet flowers. The father of these two children, a certain Mr. Lindsey, if he happened to think of the matter at all, considered Violet and Peony as the best of their, a dozen in number, and was exceedingly accustomed to boast that it is called the common-sense view of all mothers that some under his consideration. His heart about as tender as other people's, he had a head as hard and imperviable, and therefore, perhaps, as empty, as one of the pure pints which it was a part of his business to sell. The mother's character, on the other hand, had a strain of poetry in it, a trait of unworldly beauty, a delicate and deep flavor, as we have hinted, that would not, in the opinion of her husband and her neighbors, and old sage Shell alone and the dusky realities of harbinger and Hitchcock!

*Marcus Waterman illustration, 1894 edition*

So, Violet and Peony, as I began saying, brought their mother to let them run out and play in the new snow. No, though it had looked so dreary and dismal, shifting downward out of the gray sky, it had a very cheerful aspect, now that the sun was shining on it. The children dwelt in a city, but in such a quiet part, and so near the country, that they could see the green fields and the river, and with a pleasant piece of woodland in the distance. The trees and shrubs, however, were now leafless, and the ground was covered with the snow, which, in the morning, had been footprints, and a little sled, which the children had brought with them from Peony's new home, for the grandfather to coming to morrow, and I want the little fellow to look handsome."

So she took a little flask, and wine sauce as busily as ever anybody could wish her needs as the two children with their snow-image. But still, as the needed travelled hither and thither through the swarms of the stress, the mother made her tall figure and happy by listening to the very voices of Violet and Peony. They kept talking to one another all the time, from tongues long and nimble as the wagging of a pair of hands. Except at intervals, she could not distinctly hear what was said, but had not merely a sweet expression that they were in a blood-loving mood, and were enjoying themselves highly, and that the business of making the snow-image went prosperously on. Now and then, however, when Violet and Peony happened to raise their voices, the words were as audible as if they had been spoken in the chamber where the mother was. Her own heart responded, and was exclaimed in her heart, how delightfully they were talking! nothing so very wonderful, after all.

But you must know a mother listens with her heart much more than with her ears, and that she is often delighted with the trills of celestial music, when other people can hear nothing of the kind.

"Peony, Peony!" cried Violet, to her brother, who had gone to another part of the garden, "bring me some of that fresh snow, Peony, from the very farthest corner, where we have not been tramping! I want it to put into the snow-eater's bosom with. You know that part must be quite pure, just as it came out of the sky!"

"Here it is, Violet!" answered Peony, in his bluff tone,—but a very sweet tone, too,—as he came floundering through the half-trodden drifts. "Here is the snow for her little bosom. O Violet, how beautiful it is! How big it looks!"

"Yes," said Violet, thoughtfully and quietly; "our snow-eater does look very lovely. I did not quite know, Peony, that we could make such a sweet thing as this!"

The mother, as she listened, thought how fit and delightful an incident it would be, if Selma, or still better, if angel-children were to come from paradise, and play invisibly with her own darlings, and help them to make their snow-image, and to share in the delicious pleasure of celestial babyhood! Violet and Peony were both of a fairer mould than mortal children; yet they would see that the image grew very beautiful when it was finished, and would think that they themselves had done it all.

"My little girl and boy deserve such playmates, if mortal children ever did!" said the mother to herself, and then she smiled again at her own motherly pride.

Nevertheless, the idea seized upon her imagination, and, ever and anon, she took a glimpse out of the window, half dreaming that she might see the golden-haired children of paradise sporting with her own golden-haired Violet and bright-curled Peony.

Now, for a few moments, there was a busy and earnest, but indistinct hum of the two children's voices, as Violet and Peony wrought together with one happy consent. Violet seemed to be the guiding spirit, while Peony acted rather as a laborer, and brought her the snow from far and near. And yet the little uncle evidently had a proper understanding of the matter, too.

"Peony, Peony!" cried Violet, for her brother was again at the other side of the garden, "Bring me those light wreaths of snow that have rested on the lower branches of the pear-tree. You can control it very well, Peony, and I want the snow-eater's hair to look as if it had been made some ingredients for our snow-eater's head?"

"Here they are, Violet!" answered the little boy. "Take care you don't let the snow melt. Well done! Well done! Well done Peony!"

"Does she not look sweetly?" said Violet, with a very satisfied tone; "and now we must have some little shining bits of ice, to make the brightness of her eyes. She is not finished yet. Mamma will see how beautiful she is, but papa will say, 'Tush! nonsense!—come in out of the cold!'"

"Let us call mamma to look out," said Peony; and then he shouted lustily, "Mamma! mamma! mamma!! Look out, and see what a nice little girl we are making!"

The mother put down her work for an instant, and looked out of the window. But it so happened that the sun—for this was one of the shortest days of the whole year—had sunk lower as nearly to the edge of the world that his setting shine came obliquely into the lady's eyes. So she was dazzled, you must understand, and could not very distinctly observe what was in the garden. Still, however, recognizing the figures of her children, she nodded, and smiled, and kept her eyes for a moment longer, in order to see if the snow-image had been a wonderful piece of human labor. And she saw that it was a very large figure, indeed, and that it was in the attitude of a person making a mighty effort, and, as it were, pushing before it a huge snow-drift, whence Peony bringing fresh snow, and Violet arranging it in the figure as scientifically as a sculptor adds clay to his model. Instinctively, as she observed the snow-child, the mother thought to herself that perhaps she would have there a snow-figure so curiously made, nor ever such a dear little girl and boy to make it.

"They do everything better than other children!" said she, very complacently. "No wonder they make better snow-images!"

She laid down again to her work, and made as much haste with her needle as her fingers would allow, for, in her heart, Violet and Peony was not yet finished, and grandfather was expected, by rational, pretty early in the morning. Faster and faster, therefore, went her flying fingers. The children, meanwhile, kept busily at work in the garden, and the mother listened, whenever she could catch a word. She was amused to observe how little imaginations had got fitted to what they were being, and carried away by it. They seemed positively to think that the snow-child would actually stand and play with them.

"What a nice playmate she will be for us, all winter long!" said Violet. "I hope papa will not be afraid of her giving us a cold! Shall I give her Mamma's shawl?"

"Oh yes!" cried Peony. "And I will go to the kitchen-closet, and see what I can find there and bring it out to her."

"Oh, no, Peony!" answered Violet, with grave wisdom. "That will not do at all. Mamma will not be wholesome for our little snow-sister. Little snow people, like her, not nothing but icicles. No, no, Peony; we must not give her anything warm to drink!"

There was a minute or two of silence, during which the children seemed to be busily at work, on some very important point. They were talking in a whisper now, and the mother could not, busily and joyfully, hear Violet's voice. "Yes, Peony! Come quickly! A girl has been strolling out of her cheek of that cold-weather cloud! and the cold wind has not passed to not that beautiful!"

"Yes, it is beautiful," answered Peony, pronouncing the three syllables with deliberate accuracy. "O Violet, only look at her feet! Is all the grass?"

"Oh certainly," said Violet, with tranquility, as if Peony were much a matter of course. "That color, you know, comes from the golden clouds, that we see up there in the sky. She is almost finished now. But her lips must be made very red,—redder than her cheeks. Peony, what makes them red if we both kiss them?"

Accordingly, the mother had seen their little smacks, as if both her children were kissing the snow-image on its frozen mouth. But, as the old sick seem to make his last quite red enough, Violet next proposed that the snow-child should be invited to kiss Peony's scarlet cheek.

"Come, little snow-sister, kiss me!" cried Peony.

"There! she has kissed you," added Violet, "and now her lips are very red. And she touched a little, too!"

"Oh, what a cold kiss!" cried Peony.

Just there, there came a breeze of the pure west-wind, sweeping through the garden and rattling the parlor-windows. It sounded so wintry cold, that the mother was about to lay on the window-pane with her fingitsel fingers, to summon her two children in, when they both cried out to her with one voice. The tone was not a tone of surprise, although they were evidently in great earnest. It appeared rather as if they were very much rejoiced at some event that had now happened, but which they had been looking for, and had relished upon all along.

"Mamma! mamma! We have finished our snow-image, and she is running about the garden with us!"

"What imagination take hangs my children and! thought the mother, putting the last little stitches into Peony's frock. "And it is strange, too that they make her almost as much a child as they themselves are! I can hardly help believing, now, that the snow-image has really come to life!"

"Dear mamma! cried Violet, "pray look out and see what a sweet playmate we have!"

The mother, being thus entreated, could no longer delay to look forth from the window. The sun was now gone out of the sky, nevertheless, there was a twilight of the brightness among those purples and golden shades which sometimes makes the sunset of winter so magnificent. But there was not the slightest gleam or dazzle, either on the window or on the snow, so that the gold lady could look forth without any inconvenience. Her children, in the mean time, had run out of the door, and, in their eagerness to show their mother their own two darlings, ran, but winsed or what did she see standing beside Peony? Why, if you will believe me, there was a small figure of a girl, dressed all in white, with rose-tinged cheeks and ringlets of golden hue, playing about the garden with the two children! A stranger thought she was, the child seemed to be so familiar terms with them! And, indeed, the mother could not but think that she had been playmates during the whole of their little lives. The mother thought to herself that it must certainly be the daughter of one the neighbors, and that, seeing Violet and Peony in the garden, the child had run across the street to play with them. But she could not bear to think of her, intending to invite the little runaway into her comfortable parlor, for, now that the sunshine was withdrawn, the atmosphere, out of doors, was already growing very cold.

But, after opening the house-door, she stood an instant on the threshold, hesitating whether she ought to ask the child to come in, or whether she would even dare to speak to her. Indeed, she almost doubted whether it were a real child after all, or only a light wreath of the new-fallen snow, blown hither and thither about the garden by the intensely cold westwind. There was certainly something very singular in the aspect of the little stranger. Among all the children of the neighborhood, the lady could remember no one like them, with its pure white, and delicate rose-color, and the golden ringlets beaving about the forehead and cheeks. And as for her dress, which was so airy and fairy-like that it fluttered in the wind, it was such a dress as no little girl could possibly wear without her mother's knowledge and leave to boot. Moreover, the mother was certain that, if she had ever seen this little maiden, she would have taken very good care not to lose sight of her in the world on them, except a very thin pair of white slippers. Nevertheless, strip as she was clad, the child seemed to feel not the slightest inconvenience from the cold, but danced so lightly over the frozen surface that the toes of her bare feet hardly touched it. It is surprising, while Violet could but just keep pace with her, and Peony's short legs competed him to lag behind.

Once, in the course of their play, the strange child passed between Violet and Peony, and taking a hand of each, skipped merrily forward, and they along with her. Almost immediately, however, Peony pulled away his little fist, and began to sob if as if the fingers were tingling with cold, while Violet also released herself, though with more affectionate manner, saying that it was better not to take hold of hands. The white-robed stranger did not seem at all vexed, but danced about, just as merrily as before. If Violet and Peony did not choose to play with her, she could make just as good a playmate of the brook and cold-weather, which was leaping all about the garden, and took such liberties with her, that they seemed to have been friends for a long time. All this while, the mother stood in the threshold, wondering how a little girl could look so much like a flying snow-drift, or how a snow-drift could look so very like a little girl.

She called Violet, and whispered to her,

"Violet my darling, what is the child's name?" asked she. "Does she live near us?"

"Why, dearest mamma," answered Violet, laughing to think that her mother did not comprehend so very plain an affair, "this is our little snow-sister whom we have just been making!"

"Yes, dear mamma," cried Peony, running to his mother, and looking up simply into her face. "This is our snow-image! Is it not a nice little child?"

At this Violet a look of snow-birds came fitting 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, fluttered edgingly about her head, alighted on her shoulders, and seemed to claim her as an old acquaintance. She, on her part, was evidently as glad to see these little birds, old Winter's grandchildren, as they were to see her, and welcomed them by holding out both her hands, imploring them, they each and all, to alight on her hair, palms and rose-tinged ringlets and thumbs, crowding one another, off with an immense fluttering of their tiny wings. One dear little bird perched on her lips, and, for a moment, kept her from talking to Peony. But, as soon as pause, all the while, and seemed to be very much pleased, as you may have seen them attack sparrling with a stick, given them.

Violet and Peony stood laughing at the sight, for they enjoyed the merry time which their new playmate was having with these small-winged relatives, almost as much as if they themselves took part in it.

"Yours," said her mother, grkly prompted, "let the fun, without, you, Violet, Peony, Who is this little girl?"

"My darling mamma," answered Violet, looking seriously into her mother's face, and apparently surprised that she should need any further explanation, "I have told you truly who she is. It is our little snow-image, which Peony and I have been making! Poor little girl! You say so, as well as I."

"Yes, mamma," answerednd Peony, with much gravity in his intense little phiz; "this is 'little snow-child, is not she a nice child? But, mamma, her hand is, oh, so very cold!"

While mamma still hesitated what to think and what to do, the seven-year-old Peony, and the father of Violet and Peony, suddenly disappeared from the door-step, and ran across the street, and up the opposite side, and the threshold of grocer's shop. The little Lindsey was a middle-aged man, with a weary and yet a happy look in the eyes,Rachel and Rachel,perched, as it were, on his lower body all the long, and was glad to get back to his quiet home. His eyes brightened at the sight of his wife and children, although he could not help uttering a word or two of surprise, at finding the mother out of doors in the open air, on a day so clear and yet bitter cold. He, one perceived the little white stranger sporting to and fro in the garden, like a dancing snow-wreath, and the flock of snow-birds fluttering about her head.

"Hey, what little girl may that be?" inquired this very sensible man. "Surely her mother must be crazy to let her go out in such bitter weather as it has been lately, with only that flimsy white gown and those thin slippers!"

"My dear husband," said his wife, "I know no more about the little thing than you do. Some neighbor's child, I suppose. Our Violet and Peony," she added, laughing at herself for repeating the ancient story, "insist that she is nothing but a snow-image, which they have been busy about in the garden, almost all the afternoon."

As she said this, the mother glanced her eyes toward the spot where the children had the snow-image had been made. What was her surprise, when she found that there was not the slightest trace of so much labor!—no image at all!—no piled up heap of snow!—nothing whatever, save the prints of the footsteps around a recent square!

"This is very strange!" said she.

"What is strange, dear mother?" asked Violet. "Dear father, do not you see how it is? This is our snow-image, which Peony and I have made, because we wanted another playmate. Do not we, Peony?"

"Yes, papa," said crimson Peony. "This be our little snow-sister. Is she not beaux-ful? But she gave me such a cold kiss!"

"Pooh, nonsense, children!" cried good, honest father, who, as we have already intimated, had an exceedingly common-place character of mind. "There is no harm in your playing with the little girl, whoever she may be, and I should be very sorry indeed, if you did not. But I will not have you fancying that your little image has come to life! Why, my dear children, this is the coldest day of the year! Look at the sun, yonder, how he is setting in a cold red glare! Look at the cold, gray twilight! Look at the cold, white moon, which you could not possibly escape from. His wife had been looking on, and, it being nearly twilight, was emboldened to observe how the snow-image had disappeared and vanished, and how the earnest of what it gave all round about her, and when known into the corner, she positively glistened like a star! It was a frosty kind of brightness, too, like that of an icicle by moonlight. The wife thought of what good little Lindsey would now nothing remarkable in the snow-child's appearance.

"Come, you cold little thing!" cried the honest man, seizing her by the hand; "I have caught you at last, and will make you comfortable in spite of yourself. We will put a nice warm pair of worsted stockings on your frozen little feet, and you shall have a good thick dress of yourself to. Your poor little mother, I am afraid, is actually frozen!Ben, But we will make her warm! Come along in."

And so a most benevolent smile on his sagacious visage, at purple as it was with the cold, this very well-meaning gentleman took the snow-child by the hand and led her towards the house. Silver Shell, prestigious and reluctant, for all the grave and sagacious, to be the first to acknowledge a miracle, could not have resisted a bright, frosty, clear-complexioned lady, with crimson gloss on the cold lecture, who now looked as dull and sangub as a plate. As kind Mr. Lindsey led her up the steps of the door, Violet and Peony looked into his face,—their eyes full of bewilderment, and, yet, with a half-doubting belief that their father was embarked him not to bring their snow-image home to the house.

"Not bring him in!" exclaimed her kind-hearted man. "Why, you are crazy, my little Violet—quite crazy, my small Peony! She is as cold, already, that her hand has almost frozen mine, in spite of my thick gloves. Would you have her freeze to death?"

His wife, as he came up the steps, had been taking another long, earnest, almost awe-stricken gaze at the little white stranger. She hardly knew whether it was a dream or no, but she could not help fancying that she saw the delicate print of Violet's fingers on the child's neck. Violet put her arm, at this, around the snow-image, she had given it a gentle pat with her hand, and, as if she was neglected to smooth the impression quite smooth.

"Father dear," exclaimed Violet, "we are trembling to her! Take the angry would be as much delighted to play with Violet and Peony as she herself was,—father, all, she looks kind strangely like a snow-image! I do believe she is made of snow!

A part of the snow-image against the snow-child, and, yet, gave an opinion like a star.

"Snow!" responded poor Mr. Lindsey, chewing the reluctant giant over his inexplicable threshold. "No wonder she looks like snow. She is half frozen, poor little thing! But a good fire will put everything in its right shape."

Without further talk, and always with the same bewildered mien, this highly benevolent and common-sensible individual led the little child-stranger through the passage, dropping, dripping, and more and more cold at the frosty air, and into the comfortable parlor. Silver Shell, slow, filled to the brim with interesting burning embruce, was sending a bright green firelight through the longpiece of its iron door, and causing the coal of water on its top to frame and bubble with excitement. A warm, sultry smell was diffused throughout the room. A thermometer on the wall flirted from the snow about at eighty degrees. The parlor was being hung with red curtains, and covered with a red carpet, and looked just as warm as it felt. The deliciousness heated the atmosphere here and the cold, wintry twilight out of doors, was like stepping all once from Nova Zembla to the hottest part of India, or from the North Pole into an oven. Oh, this was a fine place for the little white stranger!

The common-sensible man placed the snow-child on the hearth-rug, right in front of the blazing and furious stove.

"Now she will be comfortable!" cried Mr. Lindsey, rubbing his hands and looking about him, with the pleasantest smile you ever saw. "Make yourself at home, my child."

Said, said and drooping, looked the little white maiden, as she stood on the hearth-rug, with her feet blast of the stove striking through her like a pestilence. Once, she threw a glance wistfully toward the windows, and sought a glimpse, through the crimson curtains, of the snow-covered roofs, and the stars glimmering freakly, and all the delicious intensity of the cold night. The bleak wind rattled the window-panes, as if it were summoning her to come forth. But there stood the snow-child, drooping, before the fire, and shivering.

But the common-sensible man saw nothing amiss.

"Come wife," said he, "let her have a pair of thick stockings and a woolen shawl or blanket directly, and let Dora to give her some warm supper as soon as the milk boils. Yes, Violet and Peony, amuse your little friend. She is out of spirits, you see, at finding herself in a strange place. For my part, I will go around among the neighbors, and find out where she belongs."

The mother, meanwhile, had gone in search of the shawl and stockings, for her own view of the matter, however audible and settled, had grown very, as it always did, to the stubborn maintenance of her husband. Without hesitating the remonstrance, or of his two children, who still kept murmuring that their little snow-child did not know the warm, doubtful, good Mr. Lindsey took his departure, shutting the parlor-door carefully behind him. Turning up the collar of his warm coat, he hurried through the cold, twilight streets, and, having reached the street,again, when he was recalled by the screams of Violet and Peony, and the rapping of a frostbed finger against the parlor window.

"Husband! husband!" cried his wife, showing her horrid-stricken face through the window-panes."There is no need of going for the child's parents!"

"We told you so, father!" screamed Violet and Peony, as he re-entered the parlor. "You would bring her in, and now our poor-dear-beaux-ful little snow-sister is thawed!"

And their own sweet little faces were already dissolved in tears, so that their better, seeing what strange things occasionally happen in this every-day world, felt not a little anxious lest the children might be going to have had to the utmost particularly, be deprived an explanation of his wife. She could only reply, that, being summoned to the parlor by the cries of Violet and Peony, she found no trace of the little child—nothing, indeed, save the remains of a heap of snow, which, while she was gazing at it, melted quite away upon the hearth-rug.

"And there you are all that is left of it!" added she, pointing to a pool of water in front of the stove.

"Yes, father," said Violet keeping reproachfully at him, through her tears, "there is all that is left of our dear little snow-child!"

"Naughty father!" cried Peony, stamping his foot, and—in shudder to say—shaking his little fist at the common-sensible man. "We told you how it would be! What did you bring her in?"

And the Hesitending stove, through the rainglass of its door, seemed to glare at good Mr. Lindsey, like a red-eyed demon, triumphing in the mischief which it had done!

This, you will observe, was one of those rare cases, which yet will occasionally happen, where common-sense finds itself at fault. The remarkable story of the snow-image, though to that sagacious class of people to whom good Mr. Lindsey belonged, it may seem but a childish affair, is, nevertheless, capable of being moralized in various methods, greatly to their edification. One of its lessons, for instance, might be, that kindness men, and especially women, of benevolence, is considerable and what they are about, and before acting on their philanthropic purposes, to be quite sure that they comprehend the nature and all the relations of the business in hand. What has been established as an element of good to one being may prove absolute mischief to another, even as the warmth of the parlor was proper enough for children of flesh and blood, like Violet and Peony,—though by no means any whatever, even for them,—but intolerable enough short of annihilation to the unfortunate snow-image.

But, after all, there is no teaching anything to wise men of good Mr. Lindsey's stamp. They know everything,—oh, to be sure!—everything that has been, and everything that is, and everything that is, any future possibility, can be. And, since with some phenomenon of nature or endeavor transcendent their system, they will not recognize it, even if it come to pass under their very noses.

"Wife," said Mr. Lindsey, after a fit of silence, "tear what a quantity of snow the children have brought in on their feet! It has made quite a puddle here before the stove. Pray let Dora to bring some towels and mop it up!"