

SNOWDROP AND THE SEVEN LITTLE MEN.

ONCE, in the middle of winter, when the snowflakes were falling like feathers from the sky, a Queen sat by a window working at an embroidery frame of black ebony. As she worked and looked out at the flakes the needle pricked her finger and three drops of blood fell on the snow. And because the red blood and the white snow looked so pretty together she thought, "I wish I had a child as white as snow and as red as blood, with hair as black as this ebony frame."

Soon afterwards she had a little daughter whose complexion was as white as snow and as red as blood, and her hair as black as ebony, and she was nicknamed Little Snowdrop. Soon after the child was born the Queen died.

In about a year the King married again. His second wife was a beautiful woman, but haughty and vain, and could not bear that

any one should surpass her in beauty. She possessed a magic mirror, and when she stood before it and looked at herself she used to ask—

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

Then the mirror replied—

“Gracious Queen, so grand and tall,
Thou art fairest of them all.”

She was satisfied, for she knew the mirror spoke the truth.

But Little Snowdrop grew, and every day became lovelier, and when she was seven years old she was far fairer than the Queen herself. One day when the Queen asked her mirror the usual question—

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

The answer was—

“Gracious Queen, you’re grand and tall,
But Snowdrop is fairest of you all.”

At this the Queen was furious, and went yellow and green with envy. From that moment, whenever she looked at Snowdrop she hated the child. Day and night she could

not rest for the jealousy which grew up like a weed in her breast. Then she called a huntsman and said to him, "Here, take the child out in the forest and kill her. I can bear the sight of her no longer."

The huntsman obeyed and led the child away; but when he drew his knife to pierce her innocent little heart, Snowdrop wept and said beseechingly—

"Oh, dear huntsman, spare my life, and I will run far into the forest and never come back."

And because she was so beautiful the huntsman had pity.

"Run away then, little one," he said, and thought, "Wild beasts will eat her, so it is all the same."

Nevertheless, he felt as if a stone had rolled from his heart, he was so relieved not to have killed her.

So the poor child wandered desolate and alone in the wide forest, and was so full of fear that she peeped behind every tree to see who was there. At last she set off running, and went over sharp stones and through thorns and brambles. She passed many wild animals, but they took no notice of her.

When she had run all day she came at

evening to a tiny house and went in to rest. Inside everything was dainty and spotlessly clean. There was a wee table covered with a pure white cloth and set with seven small plates; each plate had its little spoon and knife and fork beside it, and there were seven little drinking cups. Seven little beds stood against the wall with white counterpanes.

Snowdrop, as she was so hungry and thirsty, ate a morsel of bread and meat from each plate and drank a little from each cup. For she did not wish to take all away from one. Afterwards, as she was so very tired, she lay down on one of the little beds. She tried them all, for some were too short and others too long, but when she came to the seventh it was exactly right. There she stayed, said her prayers, and fell asleep.

When it was dark the masters of the little house came home. They were seven dwarfs who went into the mountains to dig for metal. They lit their seven little candles, and as soon as there was light in the house saw that some one had been there and that their things were not as they had left them.

The first dwarf said, "Who has been sitting in my little chair?"

The seven dwarfs stood round the sleeper,
holding their candles over her to see her
better.



The second, "Who has been eating off my little plate?"

The third, "Who has crumbled my roll?"

The fourth, "Who has eaten some of my vegetables?"

The fifth, "Who has dirtied my fork?"

The sixth, "Who has been eating with my knife?"

The seventh, "Who has been drinking out of my cup?"

Then the first looked round and discovered a dent in his bed. "Some one has been lying on my bed," he exclaimed; and then all the others cried, "And some one has been lying in mine."

But the seventh dwarf, when he came to his bed, beheld Little Snowdrop peacefully asleep in it. He called the others and they stood round the sleeper, holding their candles over her to see her better.

"How lovely she is!" they cried. And in their delight they decided not to wake her, but to let her sleep on where she was. The seventh dwarf had to share each of his comrade's beds in turn, so they changed every hour till morning came.

At dawn Snowdrop woke, and felt much

alarmed when she saw the dwarfs. But they were kind and friendly and asked, "What is your name?"

"Snowdrop," she answered.

"And how did you come here?" they enquired.

So Snowdrop told them how her step-mother had ordered her to be killed and the huntsman had let her go, and how she had run the whole day till she came to their little house.

Then the dwarfs said, "If you will keep our house for us, cook the dinner, make the beds, and do the washing, sewing, and mending, and keep everything clean and in order, you can stay with us, and you shall want for nothing."

"I will do all you tell me with all my heart," said Snowdrop.

So she stayed with the seven little men and kept house for them while they were away in the mountains digging for gold and copper. Every evening they came home and she served up their supper. But because the little girl was left alone all day the wise dwarfs said to her, "Beware of your step-mother. She will probably find out you are here. So let no one in."

The Queen, believing that she had got rid of Snowdrop, thought that now she was again the most beautiful on earth and went to her mirror with the usual question—

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

The mirror answered—

“Gracious Queen, so grand and tall,
Here you are fairest among them all;
But over the hills, with the seven dwarfs old,
Lives Snowdrop, fairer a hundred-fold.”

The Queen trembled with anger, for she knew the mirror never told a falsehood. She saw that the huntsman had deceived her and that Snowdrop was still alive. Now she began to ponder and ponder how she could put an end to her, for so long as she was not the most beautiful being on earth jealousy tormented her. At last she thought of a plan. Having stained her face and hands, she dressed herself like an old pedlar-woman, so that it was impossible to recognize her. In this disguise she walked over the mountains to the house of the seven dwarfs, knocked at the door and called out, “Who’ll buy my wares? Very cheap.”

Snowdrop peeped from behind the window-curtains and said, "Good-day, good woman, what have you to sell?"

"All sorts of pretty things," she answered. "Coloured stay-laces, look," and she held out one of bright floss silk.

"I may let in this good woman, surely," thought Snowdrop, so she unbolted the door and bought a pair of the pretty stay-laces.

"Child," said the pedlar-woman, "what a figure you have! Come here and let me lace you properly."

Snowdrop, fearing no harm, stood to have the new silk laces fastened. The woman laced so quick and so tight that soon Snowdrop was unable to breathe and fell down as if dead. "Now I am fairest at last," said the woman and hurried away.

When the dwarfs came home they were alarmed to find their dear little Snowdrop on the ground, not moving or speaking, as if she were dead. They lifted her and saw that she was too tightly laced. They cut the laces and at once she began to breathe again and by degrees was restored to life. When the dwarfs heard what had happened they said, "The old pedlar-woman was no other than the wicked

Queen. Be on your guard in future and let no one in while we are out."

The wicked Queen directly she got home went to her mirror and asked—

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

The glass answered as before—

"Gracious Queen, so grand and tall,
Here you are fairest among them all;
But over the hills, with the seven dwarfs old,
Lives Snowdrop, fairer a hundred-fold."

When she heard this all the blood rushed from her face and she was pale with fury, for she knew that Snowdrop was still alive.

"Never mind," she said, "I will think of a better plan this time." And, as she understood witchcraft, she made a poisonous comb. Then she dressed herself like another old woman, went over the mountains, and knocked at the door of the dwarfs' house.

"Who'll buy my goods? cheap goods," she cried.

Snowdrop looked out, but said, "Go away, I mustn't let any one in."

"Ah! but you are surely allowed to look.

Just see this pretty thing," said the old woman, holding the poisoned comb up to the window.

The girl admired the comb so much that she let herself be talked into buying it and opened the door.

"Come now," said the woman, "let me comb your hair properly." Poor Snowdrop suspected nothing and allowed the woman to do as she said, but hardly had the comb touched her hair before the poison acted and the girl fell to the ground senseless.

"You bundle of beauty," muttered the woman. "It's all up with you this time," and she took herself off.

Luckily, it was nearly evening and the seven dwarfs soon came home. When they found little Snowdrop senseless on the floor they at once suspected the step-mother had been again. Then they found the poisoned comb, and directly they took it out of her hair Snowdrop came to herself and told them what had happened. Her friends warned her once more never to open the door to any one in their absence.

Directly the Queen reached home she stood before her mirror and asked—

SNOWDROP.

203

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

The glass answered as before—

"Gracious Queen, so grand and tall,
Here you are fairest among them all;
But over the hills, with the seven dwarfs old,
Lives Snowdrop, fairer a hundred-fold."

As the mirror said this the Queen simply shook with wrath. "Snowdrop shall die," she cried, "even if it costs me my own life."

Then she went and shut herself up in an out-of-the-way attic, where no one ever came, and made an apple that was deadly poison. Outwardly it looked so beautiful and tempting that every one who saw it must long to taste, but whoever put the smallest morsel in his mouth was bound to die. When the apple was ready she painted her face and got herself up to look like a farmer's wife. She walked over the mountains and came to the dwelling of the seven dwarfs. When she knocked Snowdrop stretched her head out of the window and said:

"I mustn't let any one in; the seven dwarfs have forbidden it."

"Never mind," said the farmer's wife, "I

want to get rid of my apples. See, I will make you a present of one."

"No, thank you," said Snowdrop, "I mustn't take it."

"Are you afraid of poison?" said the woman. "See, I will cut it in halves; you shall have the red side and I will eat the white."

The apple was so skilfully made that only the rosy half was poisoned. Snowdrop longed to taste the pretty apple, and when she saw the farmer's wife eating it, she could not resist the temptation, but held out her hand and took the poisoned half. One bite and she fell dead to the ground. Then the Queen looked at her with cruel eyes, and, laughing loudly, said—

"White as snow, red as blood, black as ebony! Ha, ha! This time the dwarfs won't wake you." At home she went and stood before the mirror, and when she asked—

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

The mirror answered at last—

"Thou art fairest of them all."



The wicked woman laced her so tightly that soon Snowdrop was unable to breathe' and fell down as if dead.

Then the Queen's jealous heart was pacified, so far as a jealous heart can be.

The dwarfs, on coming home that evening, found Snowdrop on the floor not breathing and quite dead. They lifted her, looked everywhere for traces of poison, unlaced her, combed her hair, sprinkled her with water, poured some down her throat, but all in vain—the beloved child was dead and not all their efforts could restore her to life. They laid her on a bier and all seven knelt round it and wept and mourned for her three days. Then they would have buried her, but she still looked so fresh and life-like, and still had such pretty red cheeks that they said, "We cannot put anything so fair in the black earth. Let us make a coffin of glass, so that she can be seen from every side, and we will inscribe on the lid, in letters of gold, her name and that she was a King's daughter. Then we will place the coffin on the mountain, and one of us will always stay by and guard it."

This they did, and the birds came to weep for Snowdrop; first an owl; then a raven; then a pigeon; and then the rabbits and other wild animals.

For a long, long time Snowdrop lay in

the coffin and did not change. She only appeared to be asleep and was still as white as snow, as red as blood, and as black-haired as ebony.

Then it happened that a Prince wandered into the wood and sought shelter for the night in the dwarfs' house. He saw the coffin on the mountain, with beautiful Snowdrop lying within, and read the inscription in letters of gold. Then he said to the dwarfs, "Let me have the coffin. I will give for it any sum you like to name."

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

"Then give it to me for nothing," said the Prince. "I cannot live without looking at Snowdrop. I promise you I will honour and treasure her as my dearest on earth."

He spoke so earnestly that the good little dwarfs took compassion on him and made him a present of the glass coffin. The Prince had it borne away on the shoulders of his servants.

Now it happened that as they walked they stumbled over a furze-bush, and in so doing shook the poisoned piece of apple she had bitten from Snowdrop's throat. A minute

The Prince saw the glass coffin on the mountain
with beautiful Snowdrop lying within.



afterwards she opened her eyes, raised the lid of the coffin, sat up quite alive and exclaimed, "Oh, dear, where am I?"

The Prince, full of joy, answered, "You are with me," and told her how the dwarfs had given him the coffin. "I love you," he went on, "better than anything in the world. Come to my father's castle and be my wife."

Snowdrop was willing to go with him, and they were married with great pomp and rejoicing.

Snowdrop's step-mother was invited to the wedding, though she did not know who was to be the bride. When she was dressed in her beautiful new wedding garments and jewels she went to her mirror and said—

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

The mirror answered—

"Gracious 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 thousand-fold."

At this the wicked woman uttered a curse, and was so annoyed that she could scarcely contain herself. At first she said she would

not go to the wedding at all; then she was seized with a great curiosity to see this young Queen who outshone her in beauty. So she went, and the moment she entered the castle recognized Snowdrop. She stood rooted to the spot with surprise and terror, and so great was the shock that she died soon afterwards.