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She could remember it perfectly; Spencer clawing at the rock like a terrified spider.

The Snowman

By LORETTA BURROUGH

Her first husband lay at the bottom of a deep crevasse in a Swiss glacier—but why should a snow image in his likeness strike her with such eery terror?

PHILIP'S lodge was enchantingly complete, like a perfect little doll's house set down in a wilderness. Outside, a marching pile of snowy hills, dotted far away with pale roofs; inside, small warm polished rooms with everything ready to your hand.

Nancy, examining her face in the mirror above the bureau, reflected that she had looked thirty when she had married Phil a few days ago, but now she was her proper age, twenty. Three days of Philip's love had searched out and swept clean those dark desperate places in her where Spencer, her first husband, had left his spoiler's mark. For a moment, she looked into the

mirror almost as though she expected to see Spencer's lean olive face beside hers, faintly mocking, tasting a cruel pleasure. He had been much too old for her; there had been in him no kindness, no joy.

Shying violently away from thought of him, she went to the wide windows that cornered the bedroom. She could hear Philip downstairs in the living-room — a snatch of tune whistled sharply, thumps and rustles, as he unpacked the books they had brought with them this afternoon. She leaned upon the window-sill, peering out beyond the frosty panes to the violet-shadowed landscape.

Then suddenly, she called. "Philip! Oh, Phil!"

She must have been hugged as close in his thoughts as he had been in hers, because he answered at once, "Coming, Nancy."

"Philip," she said, when he walked into the room, "what is that odd thing up there on the hill? I'm sure I didn't notice it when we drove in this afternoon."

He came closer to her, gently taking her waist between his hands, and leaning across her shoulder.

"What odd thing? Oh, I see."

Whatever it was, it had the most curious air of inexact mystery about it, probably because it stood in the shadow of a snow-bowed larch, and the landscape was already half submerged in night.

All that Nancy could truly discern was a kind of gleaming through the dark, and an outstretched arm that seemed to point directly at the house. And the figure's brooding poise held something that plucked very faintly and lightly at memory. It was quite a distance from the house, almost at the very tip of the hill that seemed to be

delicately taking flight into the shadowy sky.

"Why, it's a snowman," Philip said. "Quite a good one, isn't it? Like a real man."

"Of course it's a snowman—how odd I didn't know that at once! I wonder who made it? I thought you said we hadn't any neighbors." Nancy remained at the window, attempting to disentangle that elusive skein of remembrance.

"No more we have, thank God. What's a honeymoon in the lap of neighbors? But I daresay some children walked a few miles for the excitement of trespassing." He looked at her closely. "Nancy, if you don't like it, I'll go out and kick it down."

Nancy was startled again by his nearness to her; he had read her thoughts, known at once that there was something about the distant white figure which she found displeasing. "Oh, no," she said. "It's really quite a pretty thing."

"It is clever. I think I'll go out and have a look at it. Want to come?"

"No, I believe I'll start dinner." Philip had wanted to bring a maid with them, but Nancy had preferred to have their perfect two weeks in his lodge, alone. It would be soon enough that they would have to go back to New York and begin a household and responsibilities.

She watched him when he was out of the house, taking the snowy hill in young nimble strides, his overcoat flapping open from his limber body. Her heart seemed to follow him up the white path, part of Philip. And knowing that being married to him had rescued her life, her sanity, she saw him approach the snowman; he was slapping his gloved hands together as though it was cold, and the steam of

his breathing wreathed his head. It was when she saw their meeting, the man of flesh and the man of snow, that she caught that half-vanished slippery memory that had troubled her before; now, as though full-bodied, it plunged violently into her hands.

She sat down suddenly in the cretonne-covered easy-chair, because the hinges of her knees had loosened. How many times had she seen *Spencer* stand just as the snowman stood, his weight thrown to one foot, his arm pointing out something at a distance to her, his head pointing too, perhaps to a distant blue-white peak, or to a chalet perched like a bird's nest on a Swiss mountainside? But that had been his clumsy curious way; whoever had made the snowman had caught it exactly, by some unhappy mischance, as though he had worked from a blueprint.

After a few minutes, she got up again and went downstairs, wanting the stability of familiar simple tasks. She would be an absurd little fool to be troubled by a child's fumbled statue, just because it happened to resemble in an accidental gesture, a dead man. Her thoughts worried and confused, she drew close the figured curtains in the living-room and began to prepare their simple meal. Philip, when he came in, was rosy, breathing out cold frozen air.

"He's an elegant snowman," he said. "With bits of coal for chest buttons, and a charming pipe—I'm half inclined to take it out of his mouth and use it myself."

"Oh, I wouldn't touch it," she said quickly. "After all, the children might come back and want it. You're cold, Philip."

"Not now." He had taken her into his arms. The fire on the hearth hissed softly, sleepily.

"Philip," she said, "you will always

love me? Nothing will ever turn you from me?"

"Does a man turn from himself?" he said, his eyes serious. "That is it now—you're part of me. Is something troubling you, Nancy? I think sometimes"—his voice sharpened—"that I can never free you from what he did to you—like someone who had recovered from a wound but will never lose the scars."

"Oh, foolish—" she said, feeling the darkness and the cold retreating from about her. She was safe now; she must always remember that. "You've almost cured me, darling. Give me just a little longer to forget entirely."

THEY climbed up the hard-frozen path together in the darkness, Philip's gloved hand snug about hers. Ahead of them, the solitary light they had left in the house beckoned warmly. They had been dining with friends of Philip's in New York, amusing nice friends, but it seemed good to Nancy for them to be coming home together now. Philip's spotlight laid a neat round circle on the frost-touched ruts in the path.

"Snow coming," he said quietly, his voice floating back to her.

She thought that she too could smell in the air the smoky wet sweetness that meant snow. "How nice!" she said, ending it in a soft yawn. That would mean tomorrow just she and Philip shut in together, no callers, only themselves, enough for a whole world. She fumbled in the depths of her bag for the keys she could hear tinkling there as their feet rang upon the cold stones before the door. Philip was idly swishing the pale nub of light about on the hillside, picking forth tree and bush and snow-crusted rock that looked unfamiliar in the faint illumination.

"Hello," he said suddenly. "The sculptors have been at work again! They've moved their snowman."

Her glance followed the direction of his up the slope. "So they have," she cried, her voice odd.

The snowman was fully ten feet nearer the house, standing boldly on a small knoll, its frozen coat aglitter from the dark. It seemed to Nancy, brought forward into prominence as it was, its skinny arm pointing straight at the house, to have achieved a curious air of menace. And she was again disturbed by its haunting resemblance.

She turned quickly to Philip. "Why *should* they have moved it—it seems such a stupid thing to do. And why do they pick *our* back yard to play in, when they have a whole world of snow?"

She could feel Philip looking at her. "Curiosity, I suppose. If it bothers you, I'll watch tomorrow and chase them, little pests."

"It doesn't bother me exactly—but it's queer. Let's see if it's moved in the morning—it's on that knoll now, right beside the pine."

"It couldn't have moved in the morning," he said gently. "That's a little fanciful, Nancy darling."

His hand caught up hers, and they went into the house together. But the edge of its welcome had been taken off for her. Somewhere in her mind was a thought she did not care to recognize, that there was something very queer about the snowman. And whether it gave it undue importance or not, she resolved that she would have Philip kick the thing down tomorrow, and rescue her from its unblinking patient regard.

IN THE night Nancy awakened to hear snow hissing softly among the bare branches about the house, and

tapping on the window panes. It seemed to her drowsy and sleep-filled mind an intolerably lonely and desolate sound, and she huddled closer to Philip's warm unconscious body, her eyes for a little while wide open and fixed upon the darkness of the cold room.

When morning came, their bedroom bloomed with the pale light of the snow, a tumult of flakes riding the wind. When they kissed each other, the very taste of the snow in the air was soft on their lips. They dressed quickly and went to the windows together.

"It will keep up all day," Philip said, his hands spread wide on the sill. "Lovely! No callers to congratulate the newly wed."

Her eyes followed the dark outline of his face, that face which the first time she had seen it had seemed to call her clearly as though he had said her name. "Yes, darling," she said contentedly, and then looked out again at the near slate sky faintly visible above the falling flakes, and at the deep-piled white hillside.

Suddenly, her fingers caught hold of his warm wrist. "There were, surely," she said, her tongue clumsy, "*no* children here last night, between two o'clock and now!" She left it there between them, unanswerable, for Philip to explain. "There are no footprints around it, Philip. Last night when we came in, it was on the knoll beside the pine. Oh, Philip!"

"Hush, darling," he said, his eyes searching the snowman, a puzzled frown hatched across his forehead.

It was so close that she could see the bits of coal that made the buttons on its bulbous chest. Fully twenty feet above loomed the empty knoll where it had stood last night, the pine's snow-crested branches leaning heavily. The

figure was freshly touched with snow; the pointing arm had thickened all along its length, and on the pipe clamped tight in the white mouth, a little disfiguring hat of snow had formed.

"It's some mischief," Philip said quietly at last. "Somebody's idea of a good joke. What else could it be?" He looked at her, taking her shoulders between his hands. "Supernatural? You know, darling, that's utterly absurd!"

Even looking back into Philip's clean sane eyes, her fears did not shrivel; they only hid behind her words. "Of course," she said weakly. "An isolated farming community like this—must have its quota of halfwits. It's somebody's idea of fun." But she got no feeling of fun from the empty hillside dominated by the queer misshapen figure. Only thirty feet or so from the house, it still maintained its intolerable resemblance. So many times had she seen Spencer stand in just that fashion, pipe pinched tight between his jaws, weight thrown to one side, head also to one side!

"Philip," she said, looking away from the drifting snow, "will you go out and kick it down? I'm sick of it." Before—she hardly phrased it to herself—it could come any closer.

"I think that's really giving it too much importance," he said quietly, "but if you want——"

"I do want." She wanted more than anything else, to see an innocent hillside again. "Perhaps you had better take an ax. It's probably frozen quite hard."

"All right then," he said, with a sudden effort at lightness, as though he were worried about her and did not want to show it. "This will be a blow to our self-appointed humorist."

She went downstairs with him and watched from the window as he climbed the hillside, his big shoulders already thickening with snow, the ax swinging lightly in his hand. The windy rattle of the casements was in her ears as she saw his figure appearing and disappearing in flooding veils of snow.

Unaware of the gesture, Nancy put her hand up to her throat as he approached the figure. He stood opposite it a moment, examining it, hefting the ax. And then the ax, swung heavily in his hands, cut off the snowman's head, sent it flying ponderously away. In a few minutes, there was nothing left but clumsy chunks of snow scattered here and there, each of which Philip followed up methodically and chopped and trampled into powder. Nancy, at the window, took a deep breath and went into the kitchen. It was gone. It would be hunched upon the hill no longer, to startle her looking out.

WHEN Philip shucked his overcoat, he came into the kitchen where Nancy was measuring out coffee into the drip pot. The blue kettle already hissed upon the stove.

"Our snowman is defunct," he said, rubbing his hands. "However, I saved his pipe. Obligated to. It's much too good to throw away." He took it from his pocket and turned it in his fingers admiringly, wiping it dry with a handkerchief. "Isn't that a honey?" He held it out to her.

"Um——" she said absently, carefully spooning eggs into a pot of boiling water, and then glanced at it to please him. It *was* rather a nice pipe, wasn't it? Far too good for a snowman's cold lips. Where had she seen one like it before? Puzzled, she took it from his hand.

Suddenly, the kitchen began to spin about her in large black circles, roaring circles of darkness and sound. Philip caught her as she fell.

When she opened her eyes, her face was wet; his sopping handkerchief was held to her forehead. "I'm all right," she said weakly.

Philip's white worried face hung above her; to her whirling brain, it seemed as big as a moon. And then she felt his arm lifting her as he carried her inside to the couch in the living-room, and covered her with a woolen throw.

"Better?" he said, sitting down beside her, massaging her cold hands in his warm fingers. "I'll have some hot coffee for you in a moment. What happened, Nancy?"

For a moment, she could not remember; she could only remember her legs turning to straw under her, and her body going down into roaring waves.

And then suddenly, as though something had touched her and said, "Think, Nancy," she remembered.

Philip leaned down beside her. "There is nothing to be afraid of. What is it, darling? Tell me!"

The words came out in a prolonged half-senseless flood, from where they had been waiting, green-scummed, stagnant, for a year. "That pipe—the snowman's—that was Spencer's pipe. I've seen it a million times, Philip. It has his initial on it, S. R. And there's a little crack——" She paused. "I remember when it split and he had it mended. It's his—but it couldn't be! Because it's down a crevasse in Switzerland, with him. And the men told me nobody had ever gone to the bottom of that crevasse—nobody could." She lay looking up into his dark worried eyes. "It couldn't come up out of that

crevasse. Philip, Spencer's death wasn't an *accident*."

Philip's eyes changed suddenly, as though behind them a strange and disturbing thought had come. "What do you mean, Nancy?" he said sharply. "You're talking nonsense. You're ill."

"No—no. You promised me nothing would ever make any difference to your love." The scene she was about to tell gathered force, pictured itself for her as it had a thousand times since it had happened, so that it was hardly any effort to put it into speech. "That day it happened—that morning—I had asked him for a divorce. I told him I wanted to marry you. He refused—he made jokes. You never met him—you can't know how cruel and filthy he could be when he wanted to. He called me a——"

Nancy's head was aching, a deep thundering throb in her skull. "That morning we went climbing, just the two of us. He liked it that way—we were both very good at it. And we were going up a bad place, roped together, and he said suddenly—I was ahead of him—'This would be a nasty place for you to get careless.' And I turned around and he was looking up at me. His eyes seemed to get scared. If he hadn't been afraid, I wouldn't have thought of it. I was up there safe on the ledge, with the rope braced around a rock, and there he was climbing, at a very bad spot, where he needed the help of the rope." The clean biting air seemed to come back to her, apple-green, cold, and that instant of blinding temptation. "If I hadn't thought of what it would mean with him gone, and we free to marry, it still wouldn't have happened. But thinking of that seemed to break down my will. And I never looked at him again, but I took out my knife——"

She hadn't looked at him again, but she could remember it perfectly: Spencer, clawing at the rock like a terrified spider, his whitening jaws clamped tight around the stem of his pipe, as he clawed there without a word, seeking frantically for a foothold. She went on, "And I cut the rope with my knife, and he went down." Like a bird that had been shot, turning over and over in the still air without a sound, the pipe still clamped tight in his mouth.

The little Swiss papers had headlined it, *Terrible Climbing Accident*. And the men had assured her sorrowfully that she would never see her husband again; no one could ever plumb the depths of the black gaping crack into which he had fallen.

Spencer's pipe, she thought numbly, must be at the bottom of that crevasse, deep where no one could ever reach it or Spencer. And yet a few moments ago, she had held the pipe in her hand; she knew it had been there, the bowl in her palm, ice-cold and repellent.

She closed her eyes. And then she felt Philip's fingers gentle on her face.

"Poor Nancy!" he said. "That is a terrible thing to have carried alone for a year."

She looked up at him. "You must hate me, Philip." Hate her for having fouled their shining relationship.

"Hate you? How many times do you think I killed him in my heart?" He took her hand in his. "And was it murder? Was it a long-planned ugly thing? Didn't it happen in the flash of a moment, because he had pushed you over the brink of torture?" He leaned down and kissed her. "Nancy, don't worry any more."

In a little while, they set about getting their breakfast. It was when they were carrying the coffee and fruit into

the table that Nancy said suddenly, fright pinching cold about her heart again, "But Philip! That pipe—where *could* it have come from?"

"Whoever made the snowman," he said quietly, "also happened to have a pipe that looked like Spencer's. 'S. R.' could stand for anything under the sun, Nancy. 'Samuel Ridgley,' 'Solomon Rivers,' but not 'Spencer Rogers.' Now let's stop thinking and talking about a tiresome and unpleasant joke. And we'll never think again, Nancy, about what you told me just now." He picked up the pipe and tossed it into the fire.

"Never," she said. Of course Philip was right! A chance resemblance, that was all. S. R. *could* stand for almost anyone's name. And she need never think again of that icy wind-swept Switzerland mountain. She had told it. It was confessed.

The snowman was kicked down, and she had seen Philip throw his pipe into the fire. A deep feeling of relief in her heart, she looked out at the hillside, innocent and empty in the falling snow. There was nothing of the snowman left at all.

THE snow deepened and deepened through the day, heaping the house and the hillside in thickening white drifts; Nancy felt that it closed her into a happiness that she had never known. She had told the horror that had tormented her for a year like black wings hovering above her head; she felt clean-swept and free. And it had not torn Philip from her—it seemed as though it had tightened the bond between them, made it everlastingly secure.

They had had dinner. Philip was yawning over a brief he worked on, now and then glancing up at her with

his slow warning smile. Nancy, looking at the dying fire, saw that it wanted mending.

"We need more logs," she said. "No—don't get up, Phil. I'd like some fresh air."

She put on a coat and went out. The wind had died and the snow fell silently as feathers from the night. She picked up an armful of the small split logs and stood there, looking about, flakes lodging gently in her eyelashes. And then the logs tumbled from her arms into the deep snow with a smothered thunder.

Gasping Philip's name, her hands groping frantically for the knob of the closed door, she got the door open somehow, and locked and bolted it behind her. She faced the bright light of the living-room, her mouth opening and closing without any words.

Philip leaped from his chair. "Nancy, what is it! What's wrong!"

He grasped her trembling hands, and held them still.

"Philip——" She clutched at those warm firm hands as though they were all that kept her from drowning in terror. "The snowman—out there on the path!" So close to the house now that its ice-cold arm all but touched the windows.

With a muttered curse, dragging her with him because she would not let go his hands, Philip ran to the window and thrust the curtain aside.

The white stare of the snowman peered in at them.

He swept the curtains shut again. His face was very pale, but his jaw jutted suddenly, angrily.

"That settles it," he cried; "we go back to New York tonight." His eyes searched hers. "Don't be afraid. It can't harm you—it's only snow—it's——" He found no more words.

She felt herself being pulled from the room. Her legs were like straws under her; she could not think, or move of her own will. All that she knew was that now retribution was coming and Philip could not stop it for her.

"No use, Philip. No use," she repeated over and over. But she let him take her with him up the stairs, trembled beside him as he packed their bags hastily, leaving bureau drawers gaping, forgetting things, his look coming back to her constantly, stricken with anxiety for her.

He took the bags in one hand, and pushed the electric light switch. White swaying snow-shadows spilled into the room, soft upon the walls; like little clocks, snow ticked against the windows. His other hand caught hers.

"Nancy!" he said imploringly.

She stumbled after him out into the dim hall. She could not feel his fingers knotted about hers; a great hard cold seemed to be creeping upward toward her heart. They went down the dark stairs, the bags bumping clumsily against the wall.

And then, upon the lower landing, they were stricken into stillness, motionless, dumb. Through the house had sounded hollowly, like a measured angry drum-beat, a knocking on the panels of the front door. Like a terrified beast, she clung to Philip, her eyes growing wide, her mouth dry as ashes.

The knocking came again, thunderous; the small house deep in snow shook with it.

Hysteria spilled into her brain, welling like dark flood waters. She sank from Philip's hand, slid into a corner of the wall.

"Open the door!" she cried, covering her eyes, groveling against the wall. "Open the door! The snowman wants to come in!"