
The Snow Woman—by Norah Burke

One morning Lha-mo found the tracks of a snow man and followed them.

Normally she would have been far too frightened to do so, but this time there was a compelling reason.

She stood dumbfounded, staring at that mark of a naked foot in the drift. The prints were large and fresh, but filling up fast with falling snow.

This was not the first time Lha-mo had seen the trail of a yeti, for all her life had been lived here in the high Himalayas, and she had grown up with the knowledge that among these thousands of kilometres of snow there lived a great creature unknown to the rest of the world. But such prints were rare, and these were nearly as fresh as her own.

Lha-mo was a Bhutia woman, always smiling. The piercing climate had made her people squat and sturdy. She too. She stood now, a little dumpy figure in a vast landscape. Alone among giant peaks, in the snow, under the lowering sky, she was a bundle of old but handsome and workmanlike clothes. Snow-roses glowed in her brown cheeks. There was a knife in her belt, and her heart was strong.

She looked up now, after the tracks which continued steadily the snowfield and up some scree and along a ridge and –

She was already far from home, having come to search for some strayed animals. Her husband and all her brothers-in-law were out too. There was no one left behind in the yak-hair tents except her little son and his grandmother.

Lha-mo smiled, thinking of him, her jewel. How he had yelled when he realized that his mother was going out and that he was to be left behind! How he had clung to her, burying his face in her clothing and drawing the cloth over his ears, to shut out unpleasant things.

He, like Lha-mo, had been born into this life of tents and herds, and movement from place to place, as they pastured their animals or traded in salt and borax, in musk, wool, yak tails, herbs, and such; and just now they were crossing this high range, on their way to other valleys.

Once a year, the nomads descended from their steppes and snows into the little raggle-taggle towns to sell and to buy.

It was there that Lha-mo had heard about the expedition come from Darjeeling into these mountains to search for the yeti. It was there that she had seen white faces for the first time in her life, and been told of the huge rewards which were on offer for news of tracks, for descriptions of the animal, bits of skin, anything.

And it was there that she had seen the necklace!

Kokh Bazaar was one of the last villages for climbers on their way to Everest and other peaks; and this new scientific expedition was making the place its headquarters, from which mobile units could dart out with camera and rifle after information of any kind.

"These madmen," smiled Kokh Bazaar, "they do not believe the yeti exists, but they have come to look for it! Imagine!"



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But the foreigners said: "The tracks could be those of a bear or of a langur monkey. Any marks a day or two old become larger as they melt under strong sun. Such prints may be made sometimes by one creature, sometimes another, which would account for the conflicting descriptions of them. Some four-footed animals place the hind foot in the print of the front one, thus giving the impression of a two-footed upright being."

As Lha-mo and her people had moved about in the stinking bazaar filth protects from cold- she had heard all the talk.

She saw pomegranates and water melons laid out for sale, and guns being made. She examined beads and cloth.

The silversmith sat in front of his open shop, making a necklace. Turquoise, amber, and coral were being put into silver, and he was using prodigious quantities of all these things.

It was no ordinary necklace. Up till that moment, Lha-mo had been perfectly content - even proud - with her own numerous ornaments, but now she saw that they were only thin silver hoops. This necklace that was being made to some lady's order was broad, new, and splendid, unlike anything she'd ever imagined. In the sun it flashed, not extinguished by the grime of wear. The intricacies of the silver were not filled level with black dirt. The necklace was not for sale, but it could be copied.

She had thought of the thing ever since, and now here were yeti tracks –

Her heart began to pound. All that she had ever heard about the beast came back to her. "It is fierce. It eats people. To meet one is to die. It is unlucky even to come upon the tracks. Whenever you see them, Lha-mo, run away!"

But now she made up her mind to follow, and alone. There was no time to fetch anyone else. Snow was covering the tracks fast, and she was already a long way from camp. If this trail was to be followed, to discover the gorge or cave where the creature lived, it must be now, at once. When she had pinpointed the area, she could return with others to kill the beast, or capture it.

After all, the rewards were great. Besides the necklace, there would be splendid clothes for all the family. Much food. She could see already a blue satin cap, stitched with gold thread, for the boy. Next year when they went down into the warm valleys, they would buy apricots and peaches, and boxes made of poplar or walnut in which to store their wealth. There would be something more to eat than meat and tea and barley. Already she could taste pink apricot juice on her tongue. She saw her whole family warmed by food and good fortune.

There were all these reasons, but the necklace sparkled clearest of all.

She listened.

Wind and snow whispered together. She heard the long singing crack of ice. She heard her own breath and heart. Nothing else.

Her knife was a fine one, kept sharp, to flay meat and shape leather. It had a rough turquoise in the hilt, and enamel. Now she whetted it on a stone till the sound quavered on the glassy air.

The footprints had toes, and so she hesitated, wondering which way to go, because it is known that the yeti's toes are on the back of its feet. But a glance at the tracks convinced her

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that this could not be so. The pressure and the drag indicated that the creature was going the other way.

Tibetan women are independent and resolute; Lha-mo was as bold as any, and impulsive too. She decided to rely on her lifelong knowledge of tracks and follow forward as she would have done for any other animal.

She set out, leaning into the driving snow.

It was second nature to her to notice landmarks as she went, and thus remember the way back; so she had no fear of losing herself, however far she might go.

The air was so cold that her breath not only smoked but seemed as if it must drop in ice. Yet she herself, fortified by all the cups of buttered tea which she had already drunk this morning, and for which she carried always the ingredients in the blousing of her clothes, so that no weather would catch her out without it - she herself was so hot, she steamed, and had to open her clothing to let the cruel air cool her skin.

Flakes whirled, the sky was full, and all the world was lit by the dark light of snow.

Although the yeti tracks were disappearing, they were easy to follow.

"It is taller than I am," she thought, "and heavier."

Now and then Lha-mo stopped to see if the wind could tell her anything. Scent of any kind means life, but up here no resin or animals altered the thin air. Each lungful was the purest in the world. Although she did see the lollop of hare-tracks in the snow, and once a flick of black and red - a chough hopping among rocks - she was almost above life now.

Several kilometres of snow-desert lay between her and the smoky smelly tents of home, where her little son waited to burrow his face against her, in shy joy at her return.

She settled into a steady plod that took her across drifts and packed snow, over swept rock and ice, and glacier and moraine, up and down steep slopes; and still the tracks chained on and on into unknown country.

Snow squeaked underfoot. There was the brush-brush of her own clothes. Otherwise only the wind. Once she broke through a snow-crust on to rock and jarred her spine.

But look! Here the creature had stopped by the wayside. And here snow was still melted where it had sat down. Steppe grasses were showing through. Lha-mo knelt and sniffed. There was scent, but nothing she recognized. An unknown animal.

She got up, brushing her knees, and gazed ahead, her heart going. In front rose an escarpment, broken by gullies. Was it time to turn back? Was this the place?

Even as she looked, she thought she glimpsed something moving, a tall white figure, sometimes upright and sometimes down like an animal; but next minute she rubbed the snow mirages from her eyes and saw that there was nothing.

She walked on.

The tracks went forward into a narrow ravine and Lha-mo halted.

In the gorge a pebble rattled.

It would be mad to enter such a place. Instead, she climbed swiftly and silently onto the ridge alongside, then wriggled to the knife-edge to look down into the gully below.

For a moment there was nothing. Then movement showed up a live thing. Almost directly below her and unaware of her presence was an animal she had never seen before. Was it a bear or ape? She had no idea. She could see only that it was large, and

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for a moment she took it to be white. Then the wind, blowing from behind, lifted the floppy silver gloss of topcoat, and she saw that underneath the white was cinnamon. If this animal took to living lower down, it would turn brown.

Ah, if only she had got with her one of those beautiful guns from Kokh Bazaar, she could have killed and skinned this treasure, and gone home with triumph, with the pelt folded on her back and edged with red icicles. The chance of a lifetime was here at hand, never to come again.

A weapon?

Beside her lay a big boulder.

Lha-mo got her shoulder against it, and at the third heave she pushed it over the edge.

The boulder whistled down on to the yeti. The animal leaped for safety, but too late. The rock took it on the head, and rock and animal rolled together to the bottom of the defile where the yeti lay motionless. Echoes went ringing everywhere, and setting off avalanches.

Lha-mo, glittering with success, waited for the commotion to be over. Then, as the animal did not move, she drew her knife and scrambled down after it.

There it lay, among snow and pebbles, a mound of heavy silvery hair, much bigger than she had expected from above. She threw one or two stones at it first, to make sure it was dead.

When it still did not move, she approached, but as she got nearer, she saw that it was breathing.

Stunned perhaps?

She sprinted to finish it off with her knife before it regained consciousness.

But it was not a snow man. It was a snow woman with a baby.

The baby was unhurt. He was about the size of a human baby. Her own, for instance. And as she raced up to them, he gave a cry and buried his face against his mother, drawing her long fur over his ears.

Lha-mo recoiled as if shot.

She gasped a horrified breath into her.

Then she backed out, and turned and ran.

That rich mad expedition would now go home and tell the world that there was no such thing as a yeti, and that all the hill people were ignorant and superstitious, but she did not care.

Before she was out of sight, she looked back. The yeti was rising and shaking her head. She picked up her child and bounded away.

Lha-mo made for home as fast as ever she could. As she approached it, she saw that the strayed animals were back, rounded up by one of the others, no doubt. She went in and sat down by the fire, and began to shake.

She was late, of course, and her husband angry.

"Where have you been?" he demanded.

"Out," replied Lha-mo.