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The Abominable Snowman
by Laura Resnick
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Science Fiction

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To be abominable is easy. To be a snowman, however, is not. In fact, in Yeti's case, it was his status as a snowman that accounted for any abominable behavior on his part. For Yeti, you see, simply hated cold weather. He loathed the crisp, fresh whiteness of the fluffy snow which covered the North Pole from year to year. He detested the long, crystalline icicles that glistened beneath the midnight sun all summer long. He utterly despised the feeling of old Jack Frost nipping at his nose.

Yeti was an ungainly ice skater, a hopeless skier, and a hapless hiker. He was therefore unable to participate in any of the typical, vigorous, outdoor activities of the North Pole which kept Santa's elves fit and trim despite the long hours they spent sitting around making toys or reminiscing about the Good Old Days (that long-ago time, now only a dim memory, when there was no such thing as computer games, which are abominably hard for elves to make by hand).

It was probably as a direct result of Yeti's self-imposed isolation that he developed his reputation in the first place (since nobody likes a loner) and became the most feared and awed creature in the North Pole. Unfortunately, however, as is so often the case, his reputation exceeded him.

For one thing, Yeti was an old-style Buddhist and a strict vegetarian. Despite the rumors that erupted after Jimmy Hoffa's disappearance, Yeti had never eaten a person. In fact, he hadn't even touched animal flesh since sharing a little campfire feast with a sweet American lady named Amelia, who had flown off course and never did manage to find her way back home. The North Pole was full of people like that, which was why everyone assumed that Yeti knew what had happened to Jimmy Hoffa and why Elvis could still give an occasional concert there without causing too much of a stir.

The point is, Yeti really had no interest in eating elves or reindeer. And to give him credit, it wasn't always easy to be a vegetarian in a frozen tundra.

Moreover, Yeti was a pacifist, which was apparently one of the reasons he'd had to leave China so quickly after the Mongol invasions. He was always a little secretive about his past, and no one really knew much about what he'd done in Siberia and the Gobi Desert before turning up in Santa's Village. He was, however, usually the first one to welcome a newcomer to the North Pole -- though perhaps that's because his cave was invariably the first place wanderers and wayfarers stumbled across after getting lost.

So, you're probably wondering how a vegetable-eating, xenophilous pacifist got a reputation like Yeti's. Well, to be honest, his appearance had

a lot to do with it. He stood about nine feet tall and was covered with thick, shaggy, white fur from head to toe. His hands and feet were tipped with great, gleaming, razor-sharp, silver claws, and the many white fangs in his mouth made anyone who didn't know him very well feel quite skeptical about his professed vegetarianism. His massive torso contained four stomachs, all of which growled loudly and incessantly; no amount of herbal tea could silence them, and a course of prescribed antacids had only made the whole situation worse. Finally, his icy, glowing eyes had an unnerving habit of rotating independently, giving him a half-mad look just when he was trying to put someone at ease. All in all, one could forgive elves, who are small, timorous creatures, for being terrified of Yeti. Now Yeti didn't really mind the isolation all that much. After all, the hothouse garden he kept deep in the recesses of his cave took a great deal of his time and attention; he was attempting to grow his own bok choy, bean sprouts, and snowpeas, and the project was extremely demanding. He was also a great reader and was, at the time of the events about to be related, halfway through the Russian romantics. All of them.

It was a typical day, then, which found Yeti testing soil temperatures in his artificially lighted greenhouse and pondering the problems of Anna Karenina, when Santa came to call.

"Good morning, Yeti!" Kris Kringle cried merrily, his jowls shaking with good-natured mirth, his chins quivering, his cheerful blue eyes very nearly concealed by his layers of fat.

"Morning, Kris," Yeti said gloomily. "You've put on a little weight, haven't you?"

"Ho, ho, ho!" Kris patted his vast belly and beamed with pride. "Got to keep warm, you know!"

"I know." Yeti sniffed.

"Is that bronchitis of yours still hanging on?" Kris asked with concern.

Yeti nodded. "I hate this weather," he said morosely.

"You must get some real food into you, son! Mrs. Kringle sent me to invite you for Christmas dinner."

"Oh, thanks, Kris, but I don't think -- "

"Oh, pish!" cried Kris, which was strong language for him. "You've made excuses for the past three years, Yeti. It's time you got out of this cave, socialized, and ate a hearty meal."

"Kris, no offense intended, but one of Mrs. Kringle's Christmas meals could raise my cholesterol count to disastrous levels. Breaded veal with cream sauce, croissants, cheesecake, egg nog..." Yeti shuddered feelingly.

"Well, I think it would do you some good. You can't keep living on foreign-type vegetables. Look how pale you've become!"

"I'm supposed to be pale. I'm a snowman, for God's sake. It's protective coloring to help me hide from my natural enemies."

Kris looked stunned. "Enemies? What enemies, Yeti?"

"Oh, you know, I.R.S. auditors, door-to-door religious fanatics, bigger snowmen..."

"Are there bigger snowmen?" Kris asked in awe.

"Steroids," Yeti explained dismissively. "Anyhow, Kris, I appreciate the invitation, but I just don't feel up to walking all that way in this awful weather."

"But it's barely half a mile!" Kris protested. "And we're having fine weather this Christmas season! It's supposed to get all the way up to eighty-seven-below today!"

Yeti shivered, causing his stomachs to growl ferociously. "Oh, blast it! I hate winter!"

"I thought it was summer that you hated."

"Kris, in this part of the world, I hate every season."

"But Yeti -- "

"It's always cold, snowy, icy, blustery, frigid, leafless, bleak,

barren, arctic..." The adjectives went on for quite some time; Yeti was very well read. When Kris remarked on this, Yeti blustered, "Well, of course I'm well read! What else can I do but read and tend the greenhouse in this hideous climate?" He grimaced fearsomely and said, "I want to go south, Kris. I want to go somewhere warm, where the sun can thaw my bones, clear my lungs, and ease my sorrows."

Kris gave a heavy sigh, or sighed heavily, and plumped himself down on a rock. "We've been over this before, Yeti."

"I know, I know."

"You're an Abominable Snowman."

"I feel abominable," Yeti said disagreeably.

"Abominable Snowman just don't go wandering around Hawaii, California, or Tahiti. How many times have I explained this? Believe me, Yeti, I've traveled, I know. People just don't understand. I mean, do you have any idea how difficult it is for me to get around on Christmas Eve these days? And I'm Santa Claus, for God's sake! People are expecting me, and it's still hell on wheels! I was nearly shot down by NASA last year."

"I remember. Rudolph's got to do something about that nose."

"So imagine how people would behave if you wandered down to Cancun and started sunning yourself on a beach there! Trust me, Yeti, it wouldn't work out."

Yeti's enormous shoulders slumped. "Not even for Christmas, Kris? The whole world goes on vacation at Christmas, except for me. I still have to hang out in this freezing cold cave, being abominable. It's just so depressing!"

"Remember what it was like in Siberia? And in the Gobi Desert?" Kris was the only person who knew some of the details of the persecution Yeti had suffered in the old country. "You've read the papers. You know about the nonsense that goes on in Saskatchewan." Yeti nodded and Kris persisted, "You don't want to go through something like that again, now do you?"

Yeti shook his head, but he moped and grunted unresponsively when Kris again invited him to Christmas dinner and tried to encourage him to participate in all those gay Christmas festivities that any informed person automatically associates with the North Pole. It was clearly hopeless, however, and with a sigh that shook his piles, Kris finally left Yeti alone.

No one bothered Yeti much during the next few days, since that fourth week in December is always such a busy time in Santa's Village. The company controller discovered a shortage in Lettuce Patch Dolls due to an error in paperwork, and the elves really had to put their shoulders to the wheel, so to speak, during those last few crucial days. Then on Christmas Eve, there was, as usual, a big send off for Kris, Dasher, Dancer, Prancer, Vixen, Comet, Cupid, Donner, Blixen, and Rudolph. The event was sort of a combination food fest, parade, and clean up party (because all that frenetic activity of the pre-Christmas week always left Santa's Village looking like there'd been a rock concert there).

Yeti, as Kris had feared, didn't attend the send off. Standing around in the snow made his feet go numb and his nose run, and he had never really enjoyed the hot buttered rum and steamed cider that Mrs. Kringle pressed on him -- particularly not with all those elves quivering every time his stomachs growled.

So Yeti stayed home in his cave on Christmas Eve, dreaming of the things he really wanted to do. He longed to lie in a softly rocking hammock strung between two banyan trees and sip strawberry daiquiris -- or maybe margaritas -- while fanning himself lazily and listening to the chirping of tropical birds in some steamy southern clime.

The howling of the north wind, however, broke in upon his thoughts, reminding him that, as Kris had pointed out at least a dozen times, Abominable Snowmen lived in the snow, not in steamy jungles or seaside resorts. With a great, sad sound, Yeti took himself off to bed.

His ruminations on Tolstoy were disturbed the next day when he heard the cry of a loud male voice, a voice characterized by the somewhat jarring

nasality most commonly associated with an English public school education.

"I say! Is anybody there? Hullo!"

Wrapping several warm blankets around himself, since it was a bone-chilling ninety-eight-below today, Yeti left his cave and went in search of the owner of that voice. He had long since stopped being amazed at how many people lost their way in the North Pole and stumbled upon his cave, but he honestly hadn't expected to find a stranger wandering around on Christmas Day. Most folks, even mad dogs and Englishmen, could be counted on to stay where they belonged on December 25th. But not, Yeti was about to learn, an intrepid explorer like Sir Hilary Winston Gladstone Edmundson-Smythe III.

"Speak English, do you? Jolly good show!" cried Sir Hilary when Yeti introduced himself. "Bit lost, y'know. Devil of a time! Sherpas deserted eight days ago. Rotten luck, what?"

"Uh, yes," Yeti said carefully. Sir Hilary was either snow-blind or terribly jaded, since he was acting as if it were an everyday thing to encounter an Abominable Snowman.

"Yeti..." Sir Hilary said musingly. "Tibetan word, eh? May apply to a real but unknown Himalayan creature, or to a mountain spirit or demon."

"That's ... quite impressive, Sir Hilary. Not many people know the origin of my name."

"Nothing to it. Something of a linguist, y'know," said Sir Hilary modestly. His long nose had grown quite red in the cold, and some ice was crusted on his enormous blond moustache. He was dressed in sensible, warm, arctic gear and was carrying a big knapsack on his back.

"Would you like me to carry your camping supplies?" Yeti asked politely. Lost explorers were usually pretty tired by the time they got this far off the beaten path.

"Not camping supplies," Sir Hilary said. "Had to leave them behind when the last sled dog died. Roughing it now."

"How dreadful for you!"

"Oh, piffle! Nothing to it. Enjoy a bit of a challenge, y'know."

"I see. Then what's in the backpack?"

"Scientific equipment, of course! Mustn't leave that behind. Mustn't let my end down just because of a few mishaps. One has one's duty to fulfill, and all that."

"Yes, of course. What are you looking for?"

"Why, the North Pole, man!"

"Really?"

"Any idea whereabouts I might find it?"

"Well ... This is it, actually." Yeti was basically a goodhearted fellow, and he hoped the anticlimax wouldn't be too much of a blow to Sir Hilary.

"Marvelous!" cried Sir Hilary, rallying to the occasion. "Simply marvelous!"

Yeti smiled, causing even an intrepid fellow like Sir Hilary to fall back a step or two. "I say! Are you some relation to Gigantopithecus?"

"I don't know. I'm afraid my Latin's not very good."

"Ah, educated at Harrow, eh? Damned misfortune. Nothing like a good grasp of Latin to give one the basics of a sound classical education. Went to Eton, m'self," he added, as if Yeti hadn't already guessed. He stepped closer and studied Yeti with interest. "I must say, if you don't mind my saying so, you're a fascinating looking chap." After another moment of professional evaluation, he said, "An Abominable Snowman, aren't you?"

"Yes," Yeti admitted.

"Yes, yes, thought so. The auxiliary maxillae and prehensile vertebrae are a dead giveaway," Sir Hilary muttered almost to himself. "Should have noticed right away, but feeling a trifle fatigued, y'know."

"You don't mind?" Yeti asked, surprised. Most people were very nervous about the idea of socializing with an Abominable Snowman, even in a tolerant place like the North Pole.

"Of course not! You seem a decent sort of a chap." He peered at Yeti and asked abruptly, "Not a socialist, are you?"

"No. I'm fairly apolitical," Yeti assured him.

"Well, then, jolly good, we'll rub along tolerably well together, I should think. Now, to business."

"What business?" Yeti asked curiously.

"Must stake my claim, mark my discovery, that sort of thing. Honor of Queen and country, y'know." He pulled a British flag out of his backpack, planted it firmly in the ice outside Yeti's cave, and sang God Save the Queen. Then, brushing off some of the snow which had accumulated on his person during his chat with Yeti, he said, "Right ho! That's done."

"Congratulations," Yeti said, rather hoping that Sir Hilary, who seemed like a nice guy, wouldn't notice any of the fifty-odd other flags planted in the general vicinity.

"D'you think there's any place hereabouts where a chap could get a bit of grub? Dreadfully hungry, y'know. Haven't eaten since I killed a yak with my bare hands four days ago."

"Well, Mrs. Kringle is making a huge Christmas feast. I said I wouldn't be attending, but seeing as you're here now..."

"Good Lord, is it Christmas already? Where does a year go? I'm supposed to be in South America by New Year's Eve."

"I'd say they're just about ready to sit down at the Kringles'. We can make it if we hurry," Yeti urged.

"Afraid I'm not exactly dressed for dinner, dear chap. Hope it's not formal."

"Oh, no, don't worry," Yeti assured him. "Elves and reindeer aren't really great ones for dressing up."

"Good show!"

Mrs. Kringle was, of course, delighted to have two more guests at Christmas dinner. Besides being a naturally generous person, she loved to watch folks eat -- which was what had initially attracted her to Kris. Not only did she find it a special treat to have Yeti at Christmas dinner, but she was thrilled to face the challenge of fattening up the skinny Englishman he had brought with him.

"Sir Hilary, have some more plum pudding and brandy sauce! Have some blintzes! Have some rumaki!" she insisted, piling carcinogens on his plate before he could object.

As Sir Hilary waxed poetic about his arduous journey through frozen wastelands and his triumphant discovery of the North Pole, everyone listened politely. Folks in the North Pole were too inherently courteous to point out to the intrepid explorer that someone had been there before him, or that there were easier ways to get there these days.

"Now that you've found the North Pole, Sir Hilary..." Kris winked a piggy eye as he said this, but you had to know him well to really notice. "What's next?"

"Off to Brazil. Looking for the source of the Amazon, y'know."

"Really? That sounds interesting," said Mrs. Kringle. "Have some cheese souffle! Have some Yorkshire pudding!"

"Thanks awfully," said Sir Hilary. "Yes, it should be interesting. Very isolated, y'know. Rather like this place. Full of strange and wondrous things, weird creatures and missing people."

"Really?" asked Kris with interest. "But it's hot there?"

"Oh, yes. Frightfully so."

"It sounds wonderful," said Yeti dreamily. "Like paradise."

"There aren't, however, as far as I'm aware, any red-nosed reindeer in the Amazon," said Sir Hilary, staring at Rudolph with interest.

"Well, you can't have everything," said Kris philosophically. "Will you have to leave right away?"

"Afraid so. Dreadful problem, though. A proper expedition needs a good secretary. Someone to keep records, take notes, bribe border officials, that

sort of thing."

"And you don't have a secretary?" Yeti asked.

"I did. Fell off Mount Everest three weeks ago, though, when we took a wrong turning. Probably should go back to England and find someone new to fill the position. Damned nuisance, all in all."

Kris, who hadn't built an empire like Santa's Village on sheer dumb luck, said, "You know, Sir Hilary, I think we may have someone here who's admirably qualified for the post."

"Indeed? Who?"

"Yeti."

"What? This fellow here?" Sir Hilary took a hard, appraising look at Yeti.

"He's well read, has beautiful penmanship, speaks eight languages (including two dead ones), has cast iron stomachs, amazing endurance, and has always longed to travel to the tropics. Your description of the Amazon jungle makes it sound as if a fellow of Yeti's, uh, unique appearance would get along all right there. And speaking as the president of Santa's Village Incorporated, I can assure you he'll be a first-rate asset to your expedition."

"Hmmm. Well, what do you say, old chap?" Sir Hilary finally said to Yeti. "Interested in signing on?"

Before Yeti could spoil his bargaining position by appearing too eager, Kris added, "Of course, there's the matter of salary to be discussed. And we'll want to know what sort of benefit package you're offering. I couldn't, in good conscience, turn Yeti over to an employer whose health insurance program didn't cover all four of his stomachs."

The two men haggled for a while, finally agreeing that Yeti would work during Christmas and Hanukkah when necessary, but never on Yom Kippur or the Chinese New Year. They were still working out the final details when Yeti went back to his cave to pack a few of his belongings. The next morning, he set out on his journey with Sir Hilary to realize, at long last, his dream of living somewhere warm and green.

About a year and a half later, during the slow season, Kris was relaxing outdoors on a beautiful day in the North Pole (twenty-seven below) when one of the elves, who had just received a long letter from a distant relative working in Florida, told him the news. Several sightings of a strange creature deep in the Amazon rain forest had led people to believe that some prehistoric creature had survived the eons and was still living in Brazil. Noted explorer Sir Hilary Winston Gladstone Edmundson-Smythe III, who was still looking for the source of the Amazon, refused to confirm rumors that he'd been seen playing cards with the creature.

Kris smiled and went in search of a pre-dinner snack.

-- The End --

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