THE WHITE WOMAN: BY KATHARINE METCALF ROOF


Scene—The interior of Sigurd’s cottage half-way up the mountain at dusk. Outside the snow is falling. The night looks blue seen from the lighted room. A fire of faggots burns upon the hearth. On each side of the chimney are high-backed seats of wood curiously carved. A tall clock of dark wood, also carved, points to six o’clock. A double row of shelves along the wall contains pewter ewers, mugs and spoons. One end of the room, partially shut off with a wooden partition like a high fence, is filled with stone and marble figures in various stages of completion. The child is kneeling upon the window seat watching the snow. Ilma, his mother, is busy over the fire. From time to time she lifts the lid of a pot hanging over the fire from which steam is arising.

RIC (softly, to himself):—The little white birds, the little white birds . . . their feathers are falling. (Chanting.) One by one their feathers are falling—
Ilma (turning around, sharply):—What are you talking about to yourself, there? I never knew such a child! You are like your father. There’s something not quite right in your head!
Eric:—When is father coming back?
Ilma:—A question I’ve long since given up asking. I suppose he is out cutting stone up the mountain, his supper and home forgotten. Some fine day he will get lost out in the wood all night and freeze to death in the snow. And then a pretty fix we’ll be in!
Eric (tears starting to his eyes):—I don’t want father to get lost in the snow.
Ilma (lifting the steaming pot from the fire and setting it down upon the hearth):—Forever thinking of his carven images! He cares more for them than for his own flesh and blood. Heathen, I call it.
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Eric:—Father carved me out a little wooden lamb. He made the wood like wool. I like the lamb better than the white images. The stone is cold—like ice.

Ilma (to herself):—There’s something strange about it. He’ll stand there cutting, cutting all the day and not hear me when I speak. And sometimes he talks softly to himself as if he were speaking to the stone. . . Ah, an evil day it was for me when I wed Sigurd! (Crosses the room to a tall cupboard, opens it, peers into several crockery jars, then closes the door and comes back to the hearth, grumbling). No milk nor meal for the morrow, as I feared, and like as not a three-days’ storm upon us! He’ll not remember it and God knows when he may return. I’d best go myself and borrow of our neighbor. Then if the deep snow walls us in, at least we need not starve.

Eric (whose gaze has returned to the window):—Oh, the little white birds, the little white birds . . . their feathers are falling—oh, mother—what was that!

Ilma (sharply):—Well, what now! What was what?

Eric (staring into the darkness): A white wolf . . . that slipped past in the snow. I saw it quite plainly . . . its eyes were red like balls of fire. Oh, mother, I am afraid!

Ilma:—You foolish child! If you don’t stop seeing your white wolves and your little white birds I shall whip you. Come away from the window and sit down there by the fire till I come back.

Eric:—A great white wolf . . . I know it was a wolf. A white wolf with a long body, red eyes and a pink tongue—

Ilma:—Be silent, not another word! There’s not a wolf for twenty miles around, and those there are black, not white. Come away from the window.

Eric (turning from the window and running to his mother):—Mother . . . don’t leave me—let me go, too. I am afraid.

Ilma:—Of course not, naughty child—that long walk in the snow and cold! Ah, it’s many the long walk I’ve had to take since the day I wedded Sigurd! (Takes a long fur cloak from a peg on the wall and wraps herself in it. Pauses with her hand on the latch). Mind now, keep away from that window, and you won’t see any more wolves.

(Eric goes over to the hearth, sits down and stares into the fire. The head of a white wolf appears at the window blurred by the falling snow. The child, turning at that moment, catches sight of it and screams. The wolf’s head disappears. The child hides his face in his arms and begins to cry. The noise of tramping feet is heard
outside, followed by the sound of some one knocking the snow from heavy boots).

   Eric (crying softly, afraid to lift his head):—Father!

   (The door opens and Sigurd appears on the threshold, accompanied by his friend, Theobald. They are dragging a heavy block of marble which they carry over to the end of the room containing the stone images).

   Sigurd:—There! That was a heavy pull, with the snow piling up so fast! But what a block it is, white as the frozen torrent up the mountain. In it, already, I can see my dream.

   Theobald:—You mean the Holy Mother.

   Sigurd (shaking his head):—No, not this time. . . . I will tell you. . . .

   Eric (starting up and running toward him):—Father!

   (Sigurd catches up the child in his arms. Eric hides his head on his father's shoulder).

   Sigurd:—Tears, Eric? What does this mean?

   Eric:—Oh, father, the wolf, the long white wolf!

   Sigurd:—The wolf! Has the mother been telling tales to frighten thee? I will not have it. (Strokes the child's head, tenderly).

   Eric:—The wicked white wolf out in the snow, with red eyes and a long pink tongue . . . didn’t you see him?

   Sigurd:—A white wolf—(Pauses, then laughs). Thou foolish child! There is no wolf within twenty miles of here.

   Eric:—That is what mother said, but I saw it there . . . twice, quite plainly.

   Sigurd (kissing the child, then putting him down):—If there had been a wolf outside, would I not have met him? In any case, father is home now and no wolf can harm thee. I have a strong knife here in my belt, and if he comes near us, I will bury it in his throat. There, run over by the fire and play with the little wooden lamb I made thee.

   Eric:—Mother left some porridge on the hearth.

   Sigurd (absently):—Not now.

   (The two men remove their heavy wraps and hang them upon wooden pegs on the wall).

   Sigurd:—Now I will show you my white woman, my wonderful white woman. (Pauses). But perhaps, neighbor, you would like a taste of the hot porridge first?

   Theobald:—Thank you, friend, it is true the night is cold. I
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will drink some porridge while you show me your marvelous stone
woman.

(Sigurd pours out a bowl of porridge from the pot and hands it to
Theobald, then leads the way to the end of the room where the stone
figures are standing).

Theobald:—Yonder crucifix is for the monastery down the moun-
tain, is it not?

Sigurd (absently):—Yes. . . . It is not quite finished. And
that madonna, too, is for the monastery, for the tomb of Brother
Anthony who died last month, peace to his soul. What think you
of it?

Theobald (scanning it):—It is beautiful, most beautiful. And
yet—(He sets down his bowl of porridge and stands staring at
the figure).

Sigurd:—Well, and yet—speak out!

Theobald:—I hesitate to say it, friend. It is beautiful and yet—
the face to me looks not quite like the Holy Mother.

Sigurd (pettishly):—And pray, who knows how the Holy Mother
looked!

Theobald (horrified):—Neighbor, your words are blasphemy!
(Crosses himself). I believe you are half heathen like the simple folk
over the mountain. I meant the face of Holy Mary here seemed not
quite holy, although beautiful.

Sigurd (absently):—Beyond the mountain. It was there I saw
her.

Theobald (staring):—Her? Who?

Sigurd (in a lower voice):—My white woman, my strange, won-
derful white woman.

Theobald (drawing back in alarm):—Sigurd, are you crazed?

Sigurd (laughing):—Now you talk like Ilma—poor Ilma.

Theobald (repeats, puzzled and suspicious):—Poor Ilma!

Sigurd:—Yes, poor Ilma, for she thinks, I fear, that she has
done ill by herself in wedding me.

Theobald (resuming his porridge):—Well, what of this white
woman?

Sigurd (seating himself upon the block of marble):—It was long
ago that I first saw her. I was a lad, just grown, with little thought
for women. That afternoon, I was chopping wood in the forest,
for in those days I carved in wood, you may remember. I had my
brother, little Cedric, with me. The night was coming on, yet it
was gray, not dark. Of a sudden, as I chopped, something rushed
OUTSIDE THE SNOW IS FALLING ***
THE CHILD IS KNEELING UPON THE WINDOW SEAT WATCHING THE STORM.
"NO SIGN OF WOLF COULD I SEE, BUT INSTEAD, A TALL WOMAN CLAD IN WHITE: WHEN I LOOKED AT HER, SHE SMILED."
past me. Then the child cried out. And turning I saw a white wolf, crouching on the ground, a long white wolf, about to spring.

Theobald:—A white wolf! There are none upon the mountain. It’s not a moment since you said so to the child!

Sigurd:—There was one then, at least, for I saw it.

Theobald (fearfully):—The child has seen one, too. It bodes some ill.

Sigurd:—No, no ill it boded, but something beautiful. I raised my ax to strike the wolf, but it was quicker far than I and sprang behind a great rock standing there. I followed it at once, and yet, when I got behind the rock, no sign of a wolf could I see, but instead, a tall woman, clad in white . . . all in white, and when I looked at her, she smiled. I stood there dumb, for I had never seen or dreamed of anything so white, so strange, so wonderful . . . Then she spoke “Kill not the wolf,” she said. I found words at last. “But why?” I asked, “it would have killed my brother.” Then she smiled, “The wolf was hungry. One does not kill a man because he seeks food when he starves,” she said. And as she spoke she seemed to glow like the snow in the light, and like a mighty rush of wind it swept over me that I could not let her go. I asked her where she lived and whither she was going, but instead of answering me, she smiled again, and shook her head. “Come with me,” I said, and I started to go near to her and then—you will scarce believe me, friend—but, as I walked toward her, she—vanished.

Theobald:—Vanished! (Crosses himself). She was an evil spirit!

Sigurd (shaking his head):—No evil thing could be so beautiful. Yet, afterward, I feared that she had been a spirit. . . . Still, it was growing dark, and—somehow she might have slipped away without my seeing. (Falls into a reverie).

Theobald:—And is that all?

Sigurd:—No, not all; that was the first time.

Theobald:—You saw her, then, again?

Sigurd (nodding):—But long afterward . . . too late.

Theobald:—Too late! How do you mean?

Sigurd (absently):—For long after I had seen her I could not bear to look upon the maids. I had begun to think that you were like to die unwed.

Sigurd:—The months passed, and the years, and I did not see her.
And Ilma—well, she had red cheeks and bold black eyes. She seemed to favor me—and so it came about. (He pauses, becoming lost in thought). 

Theobald:—But you saw this strange creature once again, you say? 

Sigurd (rushing himself):—Ay, ay, again . . . too late; after I had plighted troth to Ilma, when the day was even set. Again, I was at work within the forest, hewing out a block of stone—for after I had looked upon the white flame of her flesh, I could no longer carve my women out of wood and so began to cut in this white stone. Well, to go on, that day—I was far up the mountain, hewing this white stone, when I heard, a little distance off, a sound like a woman’s cries, faint, piteous cries. So throwing down my heavy pick, I walked in the direction of the sound, and suddenly I came upon the woman. She was bound to a tree, hand and foot and all her fair white body. The thongs that bound her were of tough green bark that cut into her flesh, and her garments had been stripped from her. All naked she was bound there, white and wonderful, like a winter star. . . . I cut her free and questioned her—“what fiend has done this thing?” Again she did not answer, but bent and kissed my hand, and that kiss . . . I swear, it burned like fire—or ice. One thought only I had then, that I must not let her go. I caught her hand. Then . . . the thought of Ilma came back to me and struck through me like a knife. I dropped her hand and hid my face so that I could not see her. And when I looked again—she was so fair I had to look—she had vanished. 

Theobald:—Vanished again! how strange. She surely was some spirit. And yet she spoke, you say. 

Sigurd:—She was no spirit, but a mortal woman. I have touched her hand and felt her kiss. 

Theobald:—And you have never seen her since? 

Sigurd:—Never. But I shall. Something tells me I shall see her just once more. 

Theobald:—She was unholy. It is better that you do not meet again. And now you have a wife. 

Sigurd:—She was no more unholy than the snow or sky or the fragile frost flowers on the window pane. See, I will show her to you. 

(Rises and going up to a figure veiled with a white cloth, uncovers it.) Here—as I saw her last, bound to the tree. 

Theobald (looking half fearfully):—Of a truth she is most beautiful,
and she looks not like an evil spirit . . . and yet—she is not holy. (Studies the face of the white woman, then looks from it to the statue of the Virgin and starts). Sigurd!

**Sigurd:**—Well, what now?

**Theobald:**—The face—the Holy Mother’s face!

**Sigurd:**—What do you mean?

**Theobald:**—Look—the same face upon the Holy Mother! This white woman I believe to be a witch—and you have made the Holy Virgin with her face!

**Sigurd:**—Ay, no doubt, for I have seen no other woman’s face since first I saw her. And I shall see her once again . . . and carve her as I see her, out of this white block of stone. With my chisel I will uncover her. She is hidden there. (Stares down at the block of marble, forgetting Theobald).

**Theobald:**—There is something about all this that seems not right. I fear for that next meeting. But now I must go home. The snow is falling thick and the night grows cold. (They leave the stone figures and walk toward the door. Theobald puts on his heavy cloak and opens the door).

**Theobald:**—Well, good night, my friend, and may the Holy Mother protect you from your own madonna there with the witch’s face.

**Sigurd:**—Fear not for me, my friend. Good night.

(Theobald goes out. Sigurd crosses over to the hearth where the child lies asleep, and stares into the fire; then, rousing himself, stirs it, pours out a bowl of porridge from the kettle and sits down to drink it. A faint knock comes on the door. He sets down the bowl and listens. The child rouses with a cry): “The white wolf! The white wolf! Father, save me!”

**Sigurd:**—Thou foolish, frightened child! Art thou not safe with father here? I thought I heard a knock upon the door. It could not have been the mother. But surely ’tis an ill night for a guest. (The knock is heard again). Yes, it was a knock. (Crosses to the door and opens it. A cloud of snow blows in, temporarily blind- ing him).

**Eric:**—Father . . . the icy wind—

(Sigurd brushing the snow from his eyes sees before him a tall woman in a white fur cloak. A pointed white fur cap almost entirely conceals her face. The child gives a cry and covers his eyes).

**Eric:**—Father, the wolf, the long white wolf!

**Sigurd:**—Child, thou art possessed! Canst thou not see that it is a woman clad in fur? (Turning to the woman). What can we
do for you, my friend? 'Tis a wild night for women to be out. Shelter, you wish, perhaps, and food?

The White Woman:—Shelter for a space . . . and food . . . if you fear not to entertain a stranger as your guest.

Sigurd:—And why, pray, should one fear to give shelter to a stranger? On such a night as this the veriest churl could do no less. Have you come far?

The White Woman:—Not so far . . . from over yonder mountain.

Sigurd:—It must be an urgent errand takes you out a night like this.

The White Woman:—Ay, ay, an urgent errand. (Laughs strangely).

Sigurd:—What is your errand? Can I help you?

The White Woman (in a low voice):—Hunger it was that took me out—hunger, fierce and terrible.

Sigurd (shocked):—Hunger! That at least can soon be remedied. Cast off your hood and cloak and draw nearer to the fire. There is porridge here on the hearth and bread in the cupboard.

(She throws open her cloak and her hood slips back. Sigurd, watching her, starts forward with a cry as he sees her face. The child draws near and looks up at her).

Eric:—What a white lady! What a wonderful white lady! Where did she come from, father?

(The White Woman looks down at the child and smiles, holding out her hands).

Will you come to me, little one? (Eric approaches her slowly as if fascinated, then suddenly starts back against his father with a cry).

Eric:—Oh, her red eyes!

Sigurd:—What sayest thou—red eyes? Child, thou hast surely had an evil dream! Her eyes are blue as ice at twilight.

Eric (his face hidden against his father's knee):—She has red eyes like the wolf.

Sigurd (to the White Woman):—The child has been sorely frightened. He is not himself tonight. Look, little one, into her eyes. See how they shine—not red, but blue.

(The child turns slowly and looks):—Yes, now I see they are not red, but blue, and she is beautiful, not ugly like the wolf.

Sigurd (putting down the child and speaking to the woman):—Come over by the fire and have some broth.

(The woman crosses over to the hearth, seats herself on one of the
“ALL NAKED SHE WAS BOUND THERE, WHITE AND WONDERFUL LIKE A WINTER STAR
I CUT HER FREE AND QUESTIONED HER.”
"AS ILMA LOWERED THE CANDLE, THE LIGHT FALLS UPON THE FORM OF SIGURD, LYING AT THE FOOT OF THE CRUCIFIX."
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benches and accepts the broth which Sigurd pours out for her. Sigurd sits on the opposite bench, the child between his knees, leaning against his shoulder).

Sigurd (his eyes upon the woman):—I have seen you twice before this night. Do you remember? And I knew—I knew that you would come again.

Eric:—Where does the beautiful white lady come from, father?

Sigurd:—From beyond the mountain. . . . Dost remember, oh, white wonder of a woman, how and where we met? (The White Woman smiles and shakes her head). Then I will show you here, imprisoned in the stone, perhaps then you will remember. (He puts aside the child and lifting a ember from the hearth with the tongs lights a candle standing on the shelf. The woman leans forward toward the child). Will you not come to me? I will tell you a story. . . . of the little white elves that live in snow caves under the mountain, and of the wee silver fish that swim in the frozen brooks under the ice . . . and of the gray gnomes that never speak, but steal softly out, when night comes with the snow.

(Eric goes slowly toward her. She takes him in her arms. The candle goes out. Sigurd takes another brand from the fire and holds it over the candle wick. When it has lighted he carries the candle over to the end of the room by the marble images and sets it down. The woman bends her face down over the child).

Eric (crying out):—Father. . . . She is hurting me. (Sigurd comes back to the hearth).

The White Woman:—I did but take him in my arms to hold. I would not hurt him. I had begun to tell him a little story.

Sigurd:—The child is quite too foolish. He should be in bed, but his mother is not home. I shall take him now myself.

The White Woman (softly):—Do not take him yet.

Sigurd:—Well, then, since you wish it he may stay. . . . But, oh, look at me, white wonder of a woman, not at the child. He is but a child and cannot see the marvel of your beauty, while I—I have lived with your face in my dreams these many years.

The White Woman:—Are you not that maker of images of whom I hear them speak all over the mountain? He, who makes women out of stone and wood and worships them? Why were it not easier to mould them out of snow, or carve them out of ice?

Sigurd:—If I did make them out of snow or ice, strange woman, they would melt away and I would lose them.

The White Woman:—Why should you wish to keep them? All
things melt away . . . and why do you worship them, these hard white women? (Laughs).

Sigurd.—Ah, thy laughter is like ice bells, and yet—it seems to mock me. But I am no worshiper of images, white wonder. One woman only have I worshiped in the stone—one that I might not look on in the flesh and so I carved her out of stone. Oh . . . do you not remember? Let me come near and touch you.

The White Woman (raising her hand):—No, no—you do not understand why I have come.

Sigurd.—Hunger it was that drove you out. But now you have had food and the cupboard holds yet more.

(He rises and crosses to the cupboard. The woman leans forward and speaks to Eric). Will you not come to me? (Eric moves toward her again slowly. She holds out her arms). And I will tell you a story of the little white birds far over the mountain.

Eric (clapping his hands):—The little white birds that drop their feathers out of the sky? (She nods, smiling strangely. He approaches her and leans against her knee. She puts her arm about him. He looks up into her eyes).

Eric (screaming):—How could I have thought your eyes were red like the wolf, the wicked wolf! They are blue as the sky in the night, and your hair is like moonlight on the frost. Oh, you are very beautiful. (Gazes at her curiously).

The White Woman (lifting him up in her arms):—Up, up, in the clouds are flocks of little white birds, little white birds that love the cold, the bitter cold that bites your little fingers and your toes like this— (Bends down over the child’s hand).

Eric (screaming):—Oh, you hurt! Father, she is hurting me!

Sigurd (turning from the cupboard):—The foolish child, he must go to bed at once! There is no more food in the cupboard, white woman. I fear it was for that reason the child’s mother has gone out; but she will be soon back. (Catches sight of her bowl of porridge). But you have scarcely touched your broth! Does it not please you?

The White Woman (taking it up):—Yes, yes, it is most excellent. (Sigurd picks up the child and carrying him over to a cot in the corner, lays him gently upon it, then returns to the woman).

Sigurd:—Oh, wonderful white woman, there is a more terrible hunger than that of the body for food—the hunger of the spirit for the vision it has seen and lost; hunger of the eyes for that lost vision, hunger of the lips and of the hands. Ah, strange, white woman of my dream . . . let me but touch thy hair—thy silvery hair.
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The White Woman (drawing back):—The touch would chill you.

Sigurd:—Draw nearer to the fire.

The White Woman:—I am not cold.

Sigurd:—Let me touch your hand. (He puts out his hand, touches hers, then draws back). It burns like ice or fire. . . . I know not which. Yet I would burn myself again—

The White Woman:—Nay . . do not touch me. It is not well.

Sigurd:—Thou who hast known the hunger of the body might compass this great and racking hunger of the soul.

(He sinks upon his knees at her feet and takes a fold of her white gown in his hands). Let me but touch thy white frozen beauty! It is like the touch of frost that fills the blood with fire. (He touches her hand). Why dost thou look at me so strangely? Oh, I fear thine eyes. (Sinks back, covering his face with his hands. She rises softly and crosses to the couch where the child lies sleeping, gathers it up in her arms and moves swiftly and noiselessly toward the door. As she reaches for the latch the child wakens and cries. Sigurd lifting his head, discovers her and rushes to the door). Where are you going? What would you do with the child? Give him back to me—(Flings himself before the door so that he faces her. As he meets her eyes he gives a cry and again covers his face with his hands). Ah, they are red . . . like fire. Thine eyes are red. Give me the child. (He tries to take Eric from her). God, how strong you are—like a wild beast—not like a woman. Your muscles are like iron, and your hands like claws. . . . What are you? Give me my child. (They struggle for possession of Eric. At last with a fearful wrench he draws the child from her and sets him down). Run, Eric, to thy cot. (He puts out his hand to catch the woman but she eludes him and runs from him in the direction of the stone figures. He pursues her). I will know now what thou art, woman or witch, here where I have had my dreams of thee. (As she turns at bay, facing him, she stands directly before the crucifix, illumined by the lighted candle. With a terrible cry she turns to run and overturns the candle, leaving them in darkness). Ah, now thou

(The voice of Eric in the darkness.) Father!

(Approaching steps are heard outside, then the sound of a hand feeling for the latch. The door opens). (The voice of Ilma). What’s this, all darkness! The fire half out! A pretty state of things!

Eric:—Mother, mother—

Ilma:—Yes, it is mother. A lucky thing you have a mother! Your precious father would leave you here to starve and freeze.

Eric:—Oh, mother, I am frightened. Light the light.

Ilma (reaching along the shelf for a candle):—Yes, yes, have a little patience. (Picks up an ember with the tongs and lights the candle.) Is your father not at home yet?

Eric:—Yes, he is home . . . . in there—(Points in the direction of the stone figures).

Ilma:—In there—and does not even come to greet me!

Eric (running up to her):—Mother, do not leave me. I’m afraid!

Ilma:—Afraid. Afraid of what?

Eric:—The strange white lady.

Ilma:—What is the child talking about! First it is a flock of little white birds, and then it is a wolf; and now it is a white lady! Of a truth you are your father’s child. (She unclasps the child’s hands and walks over to the stone images, leaving him standing in the middle of the room. She raises the candle and looks about). There is no lady here. (She lowers the candle and the light falls upon the form of Sigurd lying at the foot of the crucifix. She screams). Sigurd . . . and a wolf. It is dead—pierced with his knife . . . the floor is red with blood! (She bends lower). Sigurd! (Screams again). Ah, the white wolf—its teeth are in his throat. . . Sigurd . . . he does not speak! Sigurd. . . Its teeth are in his throat! . . .

Eric (standing alone not daring to move):—Father! (Listens a moment, then repeats in a louder tone): Father!