

Kate and the Wolves.

RUBE Wexford ought to have been a happy fellow. He was certainly considered one on the day when Kate Wilde became his bride. He was the envy of every young man in the rude western hamlet where the ceremony took place, and many were the good wishes showered on the heads of the newly-wedded pair for their future happiness and prosperity. Still there were those who not only insinuated, but boasted that the helpmate of her choice was unworthy the woman he had won. Kate's father and mother were particularly opposed to the match, and did all in their power to prevent it, but the girl, beside her unwavering lover, possessed a determined will, which, when once aroused, carried much before it. Rube Wexford was never accounted a strictly temperate man. Indeed there had been times before marriage when he was for days under the influence of liquor, and Kate had seen him in this state, and, therefore, knew fully the extent of his weakness. But the woman loved the man, and within herself resolved that his reclamation should be her duty. That success must crown her efforts she little doubted.

Autumn drifted away, the crops had been gathered in, and all the indications pointed to an early and severe winter. Rube's sprees continued. No wind was too cold, no snow too deep to keep him from Washburn's, a not distant tavern. One evening in the latter part of December he took down his leggings and gun from the pegs where they hung and was preparing to go out. Kate went to him and said:

"Rube, you must not leave me to-night. Give in to me this time and say at home."

"I am only going for a jaunt," he replied. "I'll be back soon."

"No, you are going to Washburn's. To-night you will, you must gratify me. I am afraid to remain here alone."

"Afraid?" he answered. Such a thing as fear was almost unknown to Kate Wilde.

She clasped her arms around his neck, whispered into his ear, her cheeks flushing brightly, then sat down in the rocker and cried as if her heart would break. Rube stood the gun in the corner, threw aside the leggings and cried too.

The next morning when the winter sun beamed upon the cabin, the little log shelter held three souls instead of two. A wee stranger had come in the night, a bright-eyed baby girl. Her weak cry seemed to move all the better part of the husband's nature, and the wife looked on with a new-born confidence in her face. After a week, when Kate was able to sit up, Rube went to relate the happy event to his grandparents. It was the first time he had visited them for some months. Very early in the morning he started, and when the afternoon shadows began to lengthen Kate looked up eagerly for his return. It was toward day-break when he appeared, his hands and feet almost frozen, and his senses stupefied by liquor. The wife's new hopes were destined to be short-lived. Freshly-made promises marked the morrow but days went on only to see them unfulfilled. Now there was a new torture. Rube had forsaken Washburn's, and made his visits to Pineville instead, where Kate's father and mother lived. It was almost more than the woman's nature could bear to know that her parents were the frequent witnesses of her husband's disgrace. This was a sort of thing which she could not and would no longer brook.

Little Kate, the baby, was a month old to a day when Rube made preparations one morning for a trip to Pineville. Kate looked on silently for a few moments, and then said:

"Where are you going?"

"Only to Pineville."

"What for?"

"To see about some powder and stuff."

"That is untrue. You are going to spend the day with worthless companions and you will come back stupid with liquor. Rube listen to me. I have stood all which it is possible for me to endure. I have prayed and entreated you to abandon a habit which has disgraced us both. My pleadings have brought nothing. I cannot and I will not have our child grow up to know a father who is a drunkard. If you refuse to stay at home, I have said my last say. Go to Pineville if you insist on doing so, but if you are not here sober by sunset I shall go with the baby to father's, and in this house I will never set foot again."

"That's all talk," Rube answered in a rough joking and half serious fashion. "Why, it's fifteen miles to Pineville."

"No matter," was the firm rejoinder—"I will make the start if the child and I freeze to death by the way."

"Look out for wolves," Rube laughed again. "There has been half a dozen seen lately. It has been a hard winter for them and they're almost starved."

"Wolves or no wolves," muttered Kate, "I'll go."

Rube hung about the house uneasily for an hour or so, then rigged himself out, leggings, buffalo coat, gun and all. Kate worked away and said never a word. He opened the door, and, without looking back, remarked:

"I'll be here at sunset."

"See that you are," was the reply. "If you come here later the house will be empty."

The wife watched his form across the clearing and saw it disappear in the heavy timber which circled the cabin. She turned to her household duties, but had no heart for them. Well she knew that Rube Wexford would break his last promise, as he had broken others before it. If so, he must abide by the result. She was determined.

The day went by at a snail's pace, and the afternoon seemed never ending. Kate fondled the baby, and listened to her crow and cry, and fed her a dozen times. Then she prepared supper, and sunset came when it was completed; But it brought no Rube. Another hour and still he was absent. So the moments passed until the clock struck ten. The baby was fast asleep. Kate rose from a chair at the cradle's side, a look of firm determination on her face, and opening the cabin door, peered across the clearing. Not a soul was visible. She closed the door, went to the chest, and took from it a pair of old-fashioned skates whose steel runners gleamed in the fire-light. She laid them ready for use and proceeded to wrap herself as warmly as possible. Then she bundled the baby in the same manner, lifted her tenderly in her arm, and with the skates slung over her shoulder, started across the clearing. After reaching the timber she left the beaten path and made for the river. It was coated heavily with ice, and the strong winds had blown it almost free from snow, leaving a nearly naked surface. Kate laid the baby down for a few moments while she fastened on her skates. Then she lifted her baby once more and started for Pineville, fifteen miles away. The moon shone brightly. She was a wonderfully rapid skater, and she knew no slightest suspicion of fear.