

overwhelming. The spiny crest of her emotion was a poignant contempt; the eddies beneath were a nauseous disgust.

Demoniac purpose peered from the Prince's bloodshot eyes. Evil and ruthless always, in this hour he was become a devil unthralled, a monster stung to final infamy by the scorpions of fear. Vicarious shame before such degradation of soul shook the woman, and she cowered from him. In the next moment, the stark hopelessness crashed upon her spirit. In the ferocity of the man's selfish cowardice, she saw the inevitable slaughter of her child.

"No, no!" she quavered, huskily. "No, no! You shall not!"

The Prince turned from her to lash the staggering horses yet once again. For a blessed instant, Vera believed that he had repented him of the intended crime. But there was small room for the folly of credulity. The leading wolf ranged closer, sprang for the nigh horse, missed, went sprawling in the drifted snow on the wayside. Another leaped. A sob burst from the Prince. He faced about in malignant panic.

"Throw him out!" he stammered. His voice was rough, sinister. Then, as his wife still huddled with the child sheltered on her bosom, he stepped toward her swiftly; his arms seized her.

The woman strove to writhe from the crushing grasp, but found herself utterly powerless against this savage strength. A sickness vibrated throughout her being. She half swooned, though always she clung fast to the child. The huge muscles of the man strained for a moment. With a power so great that the deed seemed almost effortless, he lifted wife and child together high aloft, swung them about his head to give an added impetus, then, with all his energy, hurled them forth to die in his stead.

CHAPTER IV

Vera lost all consciousness as she felt herself shot through the air. At last her arms relaxed from the desperate clutch on the child; yet the swathing furs still held it safely nestled at her bosom. Cast forth by the full frenzy of the craven's strength, mother and babe went hurtling far backward. But the excess of his vicious zeal itself made the infamous act of no avail to his need. As a matter of fact, the pair offered as prey to the brutes sped a long way under the momentum given by the man's dastard fear. And, as the two bodies were cast out, the horses fled onward even faster than before, the lightened sleigh affording a new ease. The ravenous pack leaped to follow with fresh ardor of speed, hunger the goad. The whole desire of the brutes centered on the plunging steeds and on the cursing driver, who stood plying the lash unflaggingly. They had no eyes for that which, for a brief second, darted over their heads, to fall and to be half buried in the snowdrifts by the roadside. The wolves bounded now with final, fiercest vigor; they were gaining again on horses

and man. The foremost of the pack sprang, caught for an instant on the flank of one of the outer horses; his teeth tore through the flesh. The odor of blood made madness of famine. Their bodies tensed for the kill.

Vera came back to consciousness slowly, but presently the freezing cold air and the contact of the snow in which her face lay restored to her some measure of sensibility. She sat up then, feebly; her arms once more tightened in their clasp on the child; she murmured soothingly as her ears caught the sound of faint whimpering.

The woman's senses cleared fully. Her body fibers grew taut; her eyes widened in the shock of renewed fright. Memory rolled back on her in a flood. She remembered the horrible menace of the wolves, their burning eyes, their red mouths with glistening fangs. She remembered the horror of the man's face as it had been when he screamed at her, the loathly grip of his hands upon her, the abhorrent deed.

Swiftly, the Princess's eyes roved the scene. To her ears came a confusion of yelping, snarling noises. Then, at last, her hurrying gaze found pursued and pursuers. The chase had driven far. Already wolves and horses and man were on the distant edge of the plain, more than a kilometer away from the spot where she crouched, watching. She could barely distinguish a clump of shadows that was the group against the pall of snow, a shadow that flung forward rapidly. Even as her eyes scanned it, the shadow vanished where the road dipped to the river. There came to her ears a final fusillade of sounds, in which thrilled high the torment of a horse's scream. Afterward there was silence. The wolves were too busy for more than low gruntings of content as they glutted the blood-lust.

To the woman, the silence was the supreme ghastly affront. Under its urge, she staggered to her feet, distraught. She stood for a moment swaying, impotent of action. It was a long minute ere the strength born of need came as an answer to her prayer. But it came at last, and forthwith she set off running over the road by which they had come, for she remembered Jan's cottage, less than three kilometers away. There she knew she would find safety for her child and safety for herself.

Terror paced the woman in her race with death, and she won safely on until the lights of the cottage gleamed welcome near. There, she halted. No least sound issued from the silence of the night: the wolves were still afar. The quiet whispered that all peril of the dreadful hour was past for her. She knew as well the truth that, by his own foul deed, her lord had set her free from bondage. Reverently, then, she bowed her face until the lips touched her son's brow through the veil that covered it. Very softly and very tenderly, she spoke the secret name aloud. For, now, she was free.



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