

RUBE'S REFORMATION.

Rube Rexford 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, besides her unwavering love, possessed a determined will, which, when once aroused, carried much before it. Rube Rexford 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 that state, 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 spree 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 to-night. Give in to me this time and stay 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 hands around his neck, whispered into his ear, her cheeks flushed brightly, then sat down in the rocker and cried as if her heart would break. Rube stood the gun in a 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 his wife looked upon him 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 months. Very early in the morning he started, and when the afternoon shadows began to lengthen Kate looked out eagerly for his return. It was toward daybreak when he appeared, his hands and feet almost frozen and his senses almost stupefied by liquor.

The wife's new hopes were destined to be short lived. Freshly-made promises marked the morrow, but days went by only to see them unfulfilled. Now there was a new torture. Rube had forsaken Washburn's and made his visit 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 she could not and would not long 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 it is possible for me to endure. I have prayed and entreated you to abandon a habit which has disgraced us both. I cannot and 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 my foot again."

"That's all talk," Rube answered, in a rough, joking, 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 the wolves," Rube laughed again. "There have been half a dozen seen lately. It has been a hard winter for them, and they're most 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 Rube Rexford 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, 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 the chair at the cradle side, a look of firm determination on her face, and opening the cabin door she 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 arms, 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 winds had blown it almost entirely 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 not the slightest suspicion of fear.

Rube Rexford sat near the warm fire, which was surrounded by a dozen men besides him. He had been there for hours listening to anecdotes of hunters' lives, even adding to the general fund with some of his own experiences, but though his companions coaxed and persuaded him they could not prevail upon him to taste liquor. This was something so entirely new that many a laugh and joke was had at his expense. He answered all persuasions to imbibe in the same way, saying only, "Not to-day, boys; not to-day."

When sunset came he was still in his seat. He wanted to be home, he wanted to keep his promise, but he thought he would wait awhile and start later, so it would not look to Kate too much as if he were giving in. So thinking, he went to a quiet corner by himself, and had not been there long before he fell asleep. It was eleven o'clock when he awoke with a start, and said hurriedly:

"What is it, Kate?"

A loud roar of laughter brought him to his senses, and a rough voice cried:

"Rube, guess you have been dreaming."

"Yes," he replied, foolishly; "I thought my wife was calling me."

He glanced at the clock and said:

"Boys, I must go."

"Have something before you leave," was the general cry.

"No, no; not to-night."

Then he was gone. His conscience smote him as he trudged through the snow. It would be after two o'clock when he reached home. One thing consoled him somewhat; he was sober. But would Kate be in the cabin when he returned? Of course she must be. Nothing short of madness could tempt her to keep the rash vow she made in the morning. So thought Rube. This was because he was incapable of estimating the great suffering which he had caused his wife.

On he went, until through the stillness of the night was borne to his ears the sound of falling waters. It proceeded from a spot which marked the half way between Pineville and his own home, and was caused by the river tumbling down a steep descent of fifteen or twenty feet of rugged rock. His road at this point lay close at the river bank and soon he was in full view of the cascade. As he passed it he noticed with a sort of shudder how cold and dark the water looked as it tumbled down. For thirty feet above the falls there was no ice. It broke off abruptly, and the current rushed from beneath with terrible velocity. Beyond in the moonlight glistened an unbroken surface of clear ice for fully half a mile before there was a bend in the river bank. The sight was an old one to Rube and he paid no heed to it but stalked on silently, still thinking of Kate and wondering if the cabin would be tenantless. Suddenly he stood still and listened. Many an ear would have heard nothing but the sound of rushing waters. Rube's acute and practiced hearing detected something more, and he felt instinctively for his ammunition and looked to the priming of his rifle. Then from a distance the sound came again—a peculiar cry, followed by another and another, until they ended in a chorus of unearthly yells. Rube muttered to himself one word—wolves—and strained his eyes in the direction of the curve to the river's edge. The cry proceeded from that direction and grew louder every instant.

Before he could decide on a plan of action there shot out from a bend in the river what looked to him like a woman carrying a bundle and skating for dear life. She strained every nerve, but never once cried out. Next came a wolf, followed rapidly by others, which swelled the pack to a dozen, all ravenous, yelping, snarling, and gaining closely on their prey. Rube raised his rifle, fired, and began to load as he had never loaded before. The cries came nearer and nearer. The wolves were almost upon the woman! It seemed as if no earthly help could save her, when, quick as an arrow from a bow, she swerved to one side, the man on the bank in the meantime firing rapidly and picking off wolf after wolf. A fresh danger arose. The woman evidently did not see the abrupt break in the ice above the falls, and the dark, swift current which lay beyond. Perhaps she was