

beginning to lay back and their necks to stretch out. Jangle, jangle, jangle, thud thud, thud, go hoofs and bells. A hot steam streams away from the animals, and the bright red ray of a little lamp in front of the sledge casts a glow upon their sweating flanks. The driver is standing up now and unwinds the lash of his long whip. His hat is off and he looks with a frown behind him. To us horse and man and vehicle seem but the incarnation of flying terror; to him on foot a chariot sent straight from God.

And thus they meet, these men, than whom all Norway could not show two enemies more bitter. They are dwellers in the little village of Joksdal, in Finmark, the most northern division of Tromsø, or Northern Norway. There had their fathers lived before them, and there had Svantsen, rich, proud, and the autocrat of his birth-place, cruelly wronged Eric Skien, a young herdsman, and a poor one.

An old, stale story it was, of two men loving the same woman. Young Eric had been everything to her until the other came creeping into her heart, ousting the old love and replacing it with one ten times as powerful. She dared not tell her betrothed, and upon the very eve of their marriage Svantsen had stolen the girl away with her own consent, married her in a distant hamlet, and then, returning, braved the black storm of rage that swept over him. All believed this step to be one of the most lawless abductions upon the man's part, and he, only thinking for his wife and her reputation, was content that in such a belief Joksdal should remain. Eric Skien, however, was wiser. He had long noted the change in his sweetheart, and the blow did not fall so heavily upon him, therefore, as his friends supposed. He was a good-hearted, easy-going, loutish fellow, not over-quick of comprehension, but a popular man among his comrades, and one with a kind soul in him. That he would nurse his revenge until it grew into something strong and terrible and could walk alone was the general opinion in Joksdal. But Skien breathed no word of his future intentions to anybody, and went on living and working tamely enough, though with most of the laughter and rough frolic blotted out of his life. It is improbable that he would ever have seriously set about retaliation or gone far out of his way to get it. Dwellers in northern lands, all things being equal, are not so fruitful of violence and the knife as hot-blooded men of the south. Nor have they quite such keenness and capability for either suffering or joy. Their sensibilities are somewhat more blunt and there is more prose and less poetry in their lives, less sunshine and more hard work. I speak, of course, of the lowest social classes; Skien was a shepherd; Svantsen the keeper of a small inn.

And now—a year after the catastrophe—they meet, the one flushed and hot, and nearly spent with his hard running, the other cold and white, and with all his wits about him. Skien, thinking to see a friend, looks up at the man in the sledge. As he does so anxiety changes to incredulous and savage joy; the howl of wolves falls unheeded upon his ear; he clutches hard at something hidden in his belt and shows his teeth. The other, with an iron hand upon the reins, checks for an instant the flying sledge and keeps pace with his old enemy. One of the struggling horses, arrested in his flight for life, neighs and plunges to be free. The bells clash and jangle; for a moment the hungry throats behind are silent; over all the moon shines bright and cold, bringing out every detail of the same as clearly as daylight could.

Rollo Svantsen speaks first:

"Ah, friend Skien," thou wilt have to go at greater pace than thy present jog if Joksdal is to see thee again. Graabeen travels a world faster, and is no nearer to thee than thou art to home. Wilt deign to accept a seat? If so, it is at thy service."

"At last we meet, then," gasped the other. "I had rather see thee than the truest friend and strongest horse in Norway. At last thou art in my hand, Rollo Svantsen. Nay, stay thine horses, or I will do it for thee."

"Fool! Thou do it? Couldst thou stop me a year ago? Then think not to hold back those mad brutes here by any act of thine."

For answer Skien levelled a pistol at the head of the horse nearest him. The barrel flashed in the moonlight like a knife, and Svantsen choking in his throat the cry of horror that rose into it, pulled at the reins, and nearly overturned the vehicle he drove.

"This is no time for jangling, man," he cried. "Leap by me, and do it quickly, or we shall both be lost."

"And why not? Thou has left me nothing to live for. Everything that was good to me in the world has been taken by thee; now it is my turn, and I could slay thee, but that I had rather leave it to those brutes."

While the horses were nearly dislocating his shoulder joints, Svantsen made answer:

"Think not I fear death any more than thee. If thou wiltest that but one of us shall reach his home I care not. I plead not for my safety, least of all at thy hands, but others plead for it. The past is past, the wrongs I have done to thee are past, and past atoning. Slay me if thou wilt, it is but justice, but be generous in thine hour of triumph. Save thyslf, Skien, I implore it, and see that what is now in the sledge be given to those I leave behind. Declare, when questioned, that I fled from my place and thou couldst not slay thine horses to save me."

So he spoke, and a great wave of feeling passed through the other's mind. Never had his heavy brains been so stirred, never before had the possibility of noble and heroic actions entered them. Like a dream picture, as his enemy's words fell upon his ear, he saw the girl at home nursing her baby, saw the sledge dash through the village street, saw the husband reel into the strong out-tretched arms of his friends, and heard the wife's cry of thankfulness to God. That was all; no vision of his own figure in the story obtruded itself. A flash of light might not be quicker than the thought, as it filled his brain, and transformed every ambition, passion, desire.

"True," he said. "I have no quarrel with those in thine home. Thou art a husband and a father—I had forgotten. Get you gone, Svantsen; my eyes are opened now and I see far ahead. Fly, man, while there is yet time: take these pistols with thee, too, and remember in the days to come there was no evil between us at the end. Go, I say, the horses are killing themselves."

He held up his weapons, and finding that the driver was too occupied to take them from him placed both pistols at his feet in the sledge, as Svantsen answered:

"Sayest thou this?" he cried. "By Heavens, Skien, such an enemy as thou makest is worth a thousand friends. Leave thee man? Never! Mount; I command it; else I will shoot these frantic beasts myself. God willing, we shall yet sleep in our homes to-night; if not, then together here." Eric hesitated for a brief moment. The thought of a great sacrifice was strong within him, but his old enemy would not be denied. His will was as powerful as the other's, and most assuredly both men must have perished had not Skien relented. At last, therefore, yielding to Svantsen's entreaty, he crawled exhausted upon the hinder seat of the sledge, and not a moment too soon, the men were whirled away together.

(Read without haste, the above dialogue, if timed, would be found to take two and a half minutes. In fact, however, it barely occupied two.)

Five short minutes later the wolves arrived upon the spot where the snow is trampled and Skien's footmarks cease. Now they are racing, for the quarry shows up black and clear against the snow, little more than a mile ahead.

Let us once more hunt with the hunters and watch with them as—their feet falling like the pattering rustle of rain—they came on, one hustling against another. Their mouths are open, the hair upon their backs is beginning to stiffen and stand on end, their phosphorescent eyes are fixed upon the flying sledge. A long stern chase it has been, and seems like to meet with a grand reward, if all goes well. So yard by yard they get upon better terms with the vehicle. True, the black horizon gradually changes into irregular outlines of a pine forest; true, also, beneath the trees, gleam sparks of red and yellow fire that suggest human habitations; but Joksdal is distant a mile yet, whereas three hundred yards alone separate wolves and men. Now, a long pull, a strong pull, a pull together, and then—supper!

Like the bellows of a forge sob the horses and need not the heavy whip, though that now and again hisses in the air over their heads, great jets of steam burst from their gaping nostrils, and they show the bloodshot whites of their eyes. Since Skien got upon the sledge not another word has been spoken. Svantsen drives with magnificent nerve and judgment, keeping the horses steady, but getting every inch out of them he can. If either comes down it must mean certain death for all. Skien sits crouched up at the back of the sledge with his face to the oncoming multitude and a pistol in each hand. Nearer get the wolves and nearer. They are now going about twenty yards in a hundred quicker than their prey. The big sledge rug manufactured from skins of their defunct kindred is thrown to them; but what are dead wolves' coats as an article of food compared with the shaggy sides of those galloping animals, now only fifty yards in front? It hardly stays them for a moment.

Joksdal is still nearly a quarter of a mile off, Svantsen jodels, and the clear notes go echoing forward to the village and back to the wolves. They give tongue again in answer and strive each to be alongside the horses before the other. That last long-drawn howl may save the sledge, for it has told those at home everything. Svantsen sees lights flashing in the distance and knows that doors are being opened, dogs let loose, and guns hastily snatched from their places. Twenty-five yards only now between the sledge and the foremost wolf. Skien cocks his pistols and keeps cool as a statue. Graabeen No. 1 is a grand, determined fellow, believe me. They look at one another, the man and brute, and there is more expression now in the wolf's face than in the man's. One, reckoning without his host, his snark's eyes glittering like stars, is divided between an attack upon Eric or the horses. The human being feels a pistol trigger under each forefinger and waits, for it will not go to miss. Twenty yards, eighteen, fifteen—then Svantsen shouts to his comrad:

"The dogs are coming!"

Skien does so not answer and keeps his eyes upon the foremost wolf. Ten yards off he is now. The deep baying of big dogs and the shouts of men mingle with the cry of the wolves, the snort of the horses, and the bells ringing on over everything. Then Skien feels the sledge slacken speed and raises his arm not a moment too soon. Graabeen No. 1 sees a stream of fire cart toward him, feels a terrible blow in the chest and falls, writhing, bleeding, and gnashing his teeth in the cold snow. Some among his companions stop to do the last honours to their old leader, but more than half keep on. Skien shoots another, and harling his pistols with tremendous force among them, breaks the leg of a third. Svantsen gives the horses their heads and strikes at the long grey brutes now steaming upon either side. Here come the dogs at last, fresh and full of fighting. Twenty there are, if not more, all eager for a tussle with the universal enemy. They rush into the wolves, and at the same moment one of the horses comes down with a crash, struggles upon his knees, falls again, strikes, tries in vain to rise, and rolls over beaten upon his side. The other, breaking his traces and lashing out, comes near braining his driver, but instead catches a wolf which has jumped at Svantsen fair in the chest, and hurls him back five yards. Skien has wound his coat round his left arm and uses a knife with his right. The freed horse with a dozen wolves leaping at its head, runs straight into the rescuing party. Then torches gleam and men yell and fight hand-to-hand battles with gaunt, dragged brutes that snap at their throats, fill the air with the strong vulpine smell of their kind, and when a blow gets home howl and kick out their lives in the reddening snow.

It was a notable and terrific battle while it lasted, and forms topic for conversation to this day in Joksdal. Half the dogs were killed, and more than one brave man who rushed to the rescue will carry deep tokens of the fight to the grave. Svantsen came worst off. His left arm was badly torn, and one bite in his throat must have been fatal had the brute who made it jumped a little stronger. Skien fought like a demon, and escaped marvellously, with scarce more than an ugly scratch or two. One horse died where it fell, the other escaped with its life, but was ruined for all practical purposes. Svantsen's wife, however, looked to it that the excellent beast should live the remainder of his days in honoured idleness.

And the wolves, though decisively beaten, cannot be disgraced. Upon the field they left four-and-twenty slain and some eight or nine