

# Weird Tales

REGISTERED IN U.S. PATENT OFFICE



A MAGAZINE of the

BIZARRE and UNUSUAL

NUMBER 4

Published monthly by the Popular Fiction Publishing Company, 317 Baldwin Building, Indianapolis, Ind. Entered as second-class matter March 20, 1923, at the postoffice at Indianapolis, Ind., under the act of March 3, 1879. Single copies, 25 cents. Subscription, \$2.50 a year in the United States; \$3.00 a year in Canada. The publishers are not responsible for the loss of unsolicited manuscripts, although every care will be taken of such material while in their possession. The contents of this magazine are fully protected by copyright and must not be reproduced either wholly or in part without permission from the publishers. FARNSWORTH WRIGHT, Editor. Copyright, 1925, by the Popular Fiction Publishing Company

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*The Wolves Were Howling at the Door, but Far  
Off Across the Snow-Covered Steppes the old  
Russian Peasant Heard the Tinkling of*

## SLEIGH BELLS

By HASAN VOKINE

**I**T WAS cold in the fierce, heartless way of Siberia. A desert of snow stretched on every side beyond a lonely little *muzhik* hut. Within, covered by a sheepskin, lay Andrey Taranof. His son, kneeling at his side, listened anxiously to his heart beats.

For many days they had endured the cold with even no food, and now the father was about to cross the border. Painfully he spoke: "Dmitri—good-bye."

The son was unable to answer. He kissed his father and arose. Moving from the pile of straw he slid aside a block of wood, and exposed a small hole in the door. The moon shone down on a silver carpet, crossed and

recrossed by the sinister shadows of wolves. He studied the glistening fur which covered their lithe bodies, beautiful despite the shudder they caused.

They seldom congregated in such numbers around a solitary hut save when a man was dead or dying. What strange thing told them of Andrey's condition? Now a long, restless howl made his hand tremble as he replaced the shutter. Turning, he said in a low voice, "Father, let me open the door. You see that we shall die in the end. It would be better than this long waiting."

There was no answer.

His hand rested on the bolt. It turned!

"Dmitri! Wait."

The careworn eyes of the dying man had opened. He was alert.

"Dmitri, don't I hear bells, *droshky* bells? Yes! They come from the west, nearer and nearer."

The son shrugged his shoulders.

"But it could not be, father. No one would come—for us."

"But listen! Ah, don't you hear them?"

Dmitri put his ear to the door. The snow crunched under a hairy paw. That was all.

Still they waited. Dmitri dreamed, as he leaned against the wall, that the cold which crept slowly up his boots from the dirt floor was a pack of wolves, gnawing, gnawing at him, and he drew his long *cherkeska* more tightly about him.

THE SUN arose, and each beam chased away another wolf. Soon the whole world was glorious and golden, save for the two within the hut. The squalor of their existence was almost unbelievable. Although only exiles, their lot had been worse than that of some Saghalien prisoners. Forced to live in a miserable, one-room hut, or *izba*, not allowed even so much as an implement with which to eat their coarse food there, life was that of beasts.

"Now we must wait another long day—to die," said Dmitri.

"No, no! I cannot be mistaken," insisted the father, slowly and painfully. "I still hear the bells. They were very far off—and now they are nearer."

Dmitri looked at his father and wondered how much longer he would last—surely not until night. When that time came, when the pack had once more collected without the hut, he would tear open the door. In a minute the room would be surging with their cruel, glossy bodies, and in another minute he would have joined his father.

Again he resolved himself to waiting. Late in the afternoon Andrey motioned for water, and his sou fed him from a bowl a dirty mess, half water, half snow, which had filtered through the cracks. Darkness came early, and soon the occasional howls of the wolves were heard. A crunch of the hard upper snow some time later told him that one was just without. He carefully sounded the door. The snow was above his waist, which meant that once the door was opened it would be impossible to shut. He prayed that his father would not last much longer, and again he was startled at the old man's strength. Andrey was sitting up! His lips formed the word, "Listen!"

Another howl sounded. Then faintly, from far away, the tinkling of a speeding sleigh reached them.

Dmitri could not believe. He held his ears. It stopped. He released them, and again the tinkling came. It was steadily becoming louder.

It was just too much. In his exhausted condition such an emotion was more than Dmitri could withstand.

LATER, as they were taken into a room where there stood a table with a samovar, a big bowl of steaming *schii* and plenty of vodka, Dmitri told his rescuer of how his father had first heard his sleigh bells.

"But," said the farmer, "it must have been about the time I was starting out, miles from you."

So to this day they wonder how that old man, on the point of death, knew.

*This is a superstitious story, typical of the Russian peasant. The son's story was taken as an omen that Andrey had been forgiven by the Great Father as well as by their "Little Father" the tsar. Had he not been allowed to visit the misty world of after death? How else had he heard brother Vasili's sleigh bells?*