

THE HATER

By B. W. WILSON

IVAN KOBELEV was filled with hate from his birth.

Always he had hated someone—something. It almost seemed that he could not live without hate. His whole nature was cold, sneering—and saturated with hate.

Before he was able to walk he jabbed with impotent rage at the little pig eyes of his fat, good-natured nurse. She only laughed at him and thought he would some day be a great man.

As soon as he was large enough to steal kopeks from his father's purse, and pour salt into the sunovar, Ivan transferred his unnatural attentions to the one he should have loved—his mother.

But she still loved him. She had prayed, when he nestled in her arms a tiny babe, that he would grow to be a great, good man. All the Kobelevs had been great, but she prayed that he might be good, and kind.

Soon that prayer seemed strange to her. She began to wonder how she could have thought there was any kindness in Ivan's little hate-filled heart. Then she prayed only that she might not live to see her son a man; a strange prayer—for a mother.

Once, as she sat mending his little woolen shirt by the firelight, the boy, with a fiendish expression on his face, caught up the scissors and buried them full at her face—cutting a deep gash on her cheek.

Ivan's father roared with delight, his flaming red beard shaking with approval. "Ha ha"—he laughed gratingly. "His first blood—and in the family. Keep on, Ivan my boy, and some day you will be a great soldier like your father." Proudly he stroked his stiff whiskers.

Then with a kind of brutal kindness he spoke to his wife, who was timidly trying to staunch the flow of blood with her kerchief.

"Never mind, Anna; the lad has spirit and will soon be a man. His country will need such men"—his voice dropped a trifle—"when we are ready."

Anna paled, but knew better than to speak.

"Yes," her husband continued with his inhuman smile, "we shall need such men as he. Men who can forget their

families, forget their wives, forget everything." He laughed: the raucous laugh of one who dreams a bad dream—a nightmare.

But Ivan could not always remain a boy. He grew; and with him grew deeper and blacker his obsessing hatred. No longer did he give vent to it in open acts of violence. He had learned that he could give his mother more pain by little acts of disobedience—contemptuous ignoring of her authority.

Sometimes, as she was tucking him into his bed at night, his body would grow rigid at her touch.

"Oh! How I hate you!" he would murmur through his tense lips.

So, after a few more years, Anna Koblelev died, carrying the scar on her cheek to the grave. The doctor said "pneumonia"—but old Nitekhof, the town sage, shook his head doubtfully, sadly. He had known Anna when she was a girl.

For a time Ivan wandered about from place to place, dazed. The object of his hate gone, his life seemed purposeless. Finally he joined the army and was sent to a little garrison in Siberia.

He was a good soldier; he could command men; and soon he was made an officer. But all the soldiers hated him for his cruelty.

"Ah," he would say to a villager brought before him. "Your reindeer broke out again yesterday."

"Yes," the peasant would stammer, fascinated by the terrible glint in the other's eyes, "but the soldiers took away part of my fence to—"

"Twenty blows with the whip," Ivan would order calmly.

He never imposed fines—he did not seem to care for money. But he was always out in the yard to see his sentence executed. As the blood oozed from the back of his tortured victim, freezing in the icy air, he smiled. It was as if some hunger within him were being satiated.

It was soon after he became commander of the post that Ivan met Maria Tchernov. Maria—the "flower girl" the peasants called her—was eighteen, with a light heart and a smiling face.

"Oho," she scoffed when they told her of their hard-hearted commander,

"show me this cruel man and I will tame him for you." She shook her bright curls merrily.

But when she saw him, all her roguishness left her.

"Oh!" she breathed, and fled blushing to her mother's cottage. There, in her little room, she buried her face in her hands.

"Oh, Little Mother," she moaned, "it can't be true. He is so handsome, so tall—" her face was covered with a shy smile as she lifted it from her hands, and defiantly she threw back her head—"and I—love him," she finished quickly.

Ivan was bewildered by the "flower girl." It may be that he remembered vaguely his mother—and was sorry. But he could not understand himself. No more could he enjoy the sufferings of others. Slowly the hate began to leave his face. The glint died out of his eye. The soldiers noticed it and nodded understandingly at each other.

"The little flower girl," they said thankfully, "has captured him."

At Christmas time they were married, and Ivan took his little bride to live in the commandant's cottage.

Soft and tender he was with her. Never would he let her do any hard work.

"Your hands are for play, Maria," he would say. "Mine"—thrusting out his brawny fists—"for work."

So they lived, peacefully and quietly, while the villagers went about their work smiling.

"Our little flower girl has changed his heart," they said to one another.

Now, when a citizen was brought to him, Ivan looked at him kindly. "So your reindeer have broken out again!" he would ask gently. "That is too bad. I will send the soldiers to build you a better fence in the morning."

Thus it came about that all the villages began to love Ivan and Maria; the "flower gods" they called them.

It was soon after their little golden-haired son was born that Maria began to fade. She did not sicken, but, like a beautiful, deep-hued, delicate flower, she faded away softly. Finally she went—a smile on her face and her hand tightly clasped in Ivan's.

(Continued on page 78)

THE HATER

(Continued from page 75)

With a sob Ivan went out into the snow. For days he walked the frozen tundra—alone. Only at night did he come to the village for food.

Those who saw him shook their heads. "It is coming back," they said sorrowfully. "He is forgetting the little shaver girl."

Then one morning Ivan staggered into the town, gaunt and laggard.

"Call the people together," he said hollowly, and the soldiers noted the glint in his eye.

He picked one of the men from the mass—old Zemorief the cobbler it was—had him stripped and tied to the whipping post.

"Twenty blows," he commanded the soldiers hoarsely; but the sight of blood sickened him.

"No! No!" he cried after a few blows, "I can't!"

He gave the suffering man a piece of gold, and went to his empty cottage. There he sat in a stupor. He knew now that no more could he enjoy the sufferings of others. Maria had killed that—forever.

"Ah, Ivan," he muttered over and over to himself, "what a fool you are!"

Then, finally, with something like a smile: "Ah, Ivan, how I hate you—how I hate you!"

Suddenly a light broke over his face.

"Ha, Ivan," he exulted wildly, "you can kill—kill the one you hate!" The glint in his eye sparkled and danced.

The next morning the peasants found him hanging from a beam of his cottage. His arms were opened wide, and on his face was that pleased, satiated smile; in his eyes a cold, hateful glint—fixed there forever.

Table of Contents

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PLANET PARADISE	DICK PRESLEY TOOKER	3
THE TAP	ARTHUR EDWARDS CHAPMAN	14
THE THING THAT SHOULD NOT BE.....	BURTON PETER THOM	17
THE GUILTY MAN.....	MARION CARRERE	21
THE TRANSPARENT GHOST	ISA-BELLE MANZER	21
COILS OF DARKNESS.....	SYBLA RAMUS	25
CARVED IN THE FLESH.....	TOM RAWSON HILBOURN	22
THE HALL BEDROOM.....	W. ELWYN RACKUS	25
THE DOOR OF DOOM	MART SHARON	41
THE ABYSSAL HORROR	B. WALLIS	42
THE HOUND	H. P. LOVECRAFT	54
DRACONDA	JOHN MARTIN LEAHY	52
THE GHOST OF SILENT SMITH.....	C. FRANKLIN MILLER	54
DOCTOR DEBRUCE	EARL LEASTON BELL	71
THE HATER	E. W. WILSON	71
WEIRD CRIMES	SEABURY QUINN	74
THE KYRIE	THE EDITOR	79
THE KILLER	HAROLD WARD	81

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