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Alone With the Wolves

by Orvin Morgan

How-oo-ow-oo-oo-l! How-oo-ow-oo-oo-l!

It was the fearful howling of wolves. Margareta lay in bed and shivered. How she hated that sound!

On these clear autumn nights, when the touch of frost was in the air and the moon rode high, the wolves would call to each other for hours.

Margareta knew all too well what those wolves could do. She had heard of children being attacked by them. She remembered tales of lonely travelers who never reached home. The wolves got them first.

How-oo-oo-ow-oo-l, how-oo-oo-ow-oo-l, they called again. It was good to be in bed, safe and protected.

But Margareta didn't realize how soon she would meet those wolves face-to-face.

Mother's call awakened her. The sun was not yet up, but this was the time of wheat harvest, and every moment counted.

Quickly, the family ate breakfast and then gathered to pray. Father read Psalm 34 from Grandmother's old German Bible. Together they repeated verse 7 (KJV): "The angel of

the Lord encampeth round about them that fear him, and delivereth them." They bowed their heads and asked for the Lord's protection throughout the day.

After milking the cows, the family set off for the wheat field just as the sun came up. All the farmers in that Russian community in the 1890s lived in the village and had fields some distance from their homes. Margareta and her parents had to go over a hill to reach their field.

They took the cows with them to let them graze. Every day during harvest, Mother and Father would cut the ripened wheat with scythes and bind it into bundles. Margareta's job was to watch the cows and see they did not start eating the stacked wheat.

Usually, Mother and Father harvested a wagonload each day. Then, in the evening, with the wagon piled high, they would herd the cows and go back over the hill to their home.

But today, clouds were forming. Father feared an early rain would ruin the crop. So he and Mother worked harder than ever with the goal of getting in two wagonloads.

It wasn't long after lunch when the first load was gathered. Father asked Margareta to keep her eyes on the cows while he and Mother were gone.

"We'll be back soon," he promised.

Margareta watched the horse pull the wagon up the dirt road with her parents beside it. Soon they disappeared around a corner, and she turned back to the cows.

She enjoyed being by herself. The sun was still shining brightly. In fields not far off she saw neighbors cutting their wheat and loading their wagons.

The afternoon passed quickly—much more quickly than she realized. When she looked up, she noticed a yellow haziness over the landscape. The shadows had grown long. The sun was almost down.

Why had Mother and Father not come back? Had they run into trouble? What was keeping them?

Then, from the hills that surrounded her came the sound that made her heart stand still. *How-oo-oo-ow-oo-l. How-oo-oo-ow-oo-l.* The wolves were beginning to stir!

Mother and Father had not intended to be away so long. But unfortunately, they had put too much wheat on the wagon. When they tried to go to the village by the usual route, the horse could not pull the heavy wagon up the hill. They had to turn around, go back down the hill, and follow a longer road that didn't have such a steep incline.

The horse snorted and strained. For a while they thought he wouldn't make this hill either. But finally, he reached the top, and it seemed their troubles were over. But the troubles were only beginning.

As they came down the hill on the other side, one of the two wheels struck a rock. *Crash, bump, bang!* The horse and wagon stopped. The load of wheat teetered at a crazy angle. The wheel was broken!

It was impossible to go on. Father left Mother with the horse and started off to the house of a friend, hoping to borrow a wheel. The friend returned with him, and together they lifted the load and blocked it up long enough to remove the broken wheel and attach the borrowed one.

Father was greatly relieved when, at last, they were able to move again. But it had taken time—much more time than they had planned on. The sun was far into the west when they reached home. It was useless to think of bringing in another load.

Then Father heard the wolves.

Margareta also heard them and shivered, more from fear than cold. Why didn't Father come? She knew nothing about the broken wheel. Her frightened imagination pictured all

sorts of evil things. She looked up the road, hoping for some sight of her parents.

The neighbors in the fields nearby gathered their tools and hitched up their horses. In groups of two or three, they made their way up the road and were gone. Margareta wanted to go with them. But she had been told to watch the cows. She could not take them home without help, and as long as the cows were in the field, she would have to stay there too.

She looked around. There was not another human being in sight now. She was alone—all alone.

A deadly hush had settled over the hills and fields. The wolves, for some reason, had stopped howling. The lowering sun was changing the clouds into great flames of red and scarlet, and the odd color made everything eerie.

Still no sign of Father and the wagon.

Something moving in the next field caught her eye. She turned to look at it more carefully.

Two dark forms were slinking through the standing wheat, coming her way. Wolves!

At home, Father finished unloading the wheat. He wasn't worried about the wolves. They often howled at this time of night. There wasn't a chance in a million they would come near the village.

He surveyed the pile of wheat with a satisfied smile. "Too bad we didn't get the second load in," he muttered. "But it's a good day's work, anyway."

Since it was too late to get the other load, he didn't bother to take the wagon but mounted his horse.

"I'll be back soon," he told Mother. "And be sure to have a nice supper for Margareta and me."

"You know I will," she replied. "But hurry, dear. It's getting dark, and you know how frightened Margareta is of the wolves."

"Yes, I do." Father smiled. "It's surprising how children can be afraid when there is nothing to worry about."

"I think you ought to take the gun," Mother suggested.

"Oh, we'll be all right," Father replied. "But if you would feel better, I'll take it."

Mother brought out the gun, and Father slung it over his shoulder. At a quick pace, he set off down the road and up the hill.

Out at the field Margareta trembled from head to foot. For a moment she was too scared to move. Two hungry wolves were coming after her.

Then she turned and ran, which only attracted the wolves' attention. Where could she go? There were no trees nearby. And now, seeing her run, the wolves quickened their pace. They dashed after her, coming much faster than she could go. It would be only a matter of seconds before they caught up.

Margareta reached a wheat shock larger than herself. Perhaps she could hide in it. Looking only for places to escape, she forgot how easily the two great animals could knock over a thing so light. She pulled aside some of the bundles and pushed her way into the middle of the shock, then pulled the bundles together behind her.

Into her mind flashed the text Father had read at morning worship. "Please, Jesus," she prayed, "please protect me. Please send an angel to camp around me and deliver me."

Why didn't Father come? The wolves were upon her. She heard them sniffing at the wheat. She caught a glimpse of their evil eyes. She saw their flashing teeth. She felt the heat of their breath.

Clenching her fists, she prayed again. "Please, Jesus, look after me." She remembered Daniel in the lions' den. "Please, Jesus, send an angel to shut their mouths. And please make Father come. Please make him come quick."

Father reached the top of the hill. In the dusk he ran his eyes over the wheat field. He could see the cows and the standing shocks of wheat. But Margareta—where was she? Then he saw the wolves.

Striking spurs to the horse, he galloped down the hill. He would gladly have tried a shot at the savage beasts, but in that half-light he feared he would miss. He might hit Margareta instead, if Margareta was still there.

He raised the muzzle and fired into the air. Alarmed at the sudden noise, the wolves looked up and then dashed away.

Father raced on. There was still no sight of Margareta. He remembered exactly where she had been when they had said goodbye. He galloped to that place, but Margareta was not there.

Fear clutched his heart. Where was she? Had the wolves got her? Why had he been so long in coming? Why had he not hurried more? Why had that wheel broken? Why? Why?

"Margareta, where are you? Margareta!" He leaped from the horse, looking in all directions. "Margareta! Margareta!"

There was a rustling in a wheat shock. A pale, trembling form emerged, too frightened, almost, to stand. Father rushed to her and clasped her in his arms.

"Margareta, are you all right?"

There was no time to say more. Father rounded up the cows, then mounted the horse and lifted his daughter up beside him.

What a story they had to tell Mother over the supper table that night! Then, in deep gratitude, they knelt beside the fire and thanked God for His tender watch care, dedicating their lives anew to Him.