ATINKA stood before her mistress in the dark little kitchen and took the orders for the day. The mistress was small and sharp. She scolded Katinka for a yesterday’s stupidity; she warned her that in the future she must grow more intelligent. Katinka was so used to being scolded that she did not listen. She stared instead at her mistress’s neck ribbon. It was red, very broad and red, and it warmed Katinka. She wanted to touch and feel it. Everything else in the room—about her mistress and about herself—was ugly and faded. Only the red ribbon glowed like fire.

Soon the mistress went out of the kitchen, and Katinka began to work. There was enough to be done to last that day and the next and the next. The air in the kitchen was heavy and close, but she did not notice that. The coals in the stove gleamed orange and breathed out stifling heat. She bent her flat thin body stolidly over this heat—opening and slamming the rust-turned doors of the stove. There were unwashed dishes piled high on the table. Later she would have to wash them—and then there was the sweeping and cleaning such as it was, and the making up of three rooms and the serving—and after that, more work still. Katinka was strong, even though she looked bloodless and badly fed. Now she clattered clumsily around her kitchen, with her huge flapheeled shoes, her flabby skirts hitched up in front and dragging limply behind, her dirty brown gingham waist gaping open at the throat. And always she thought of the red ribbon and how bright and cheerful it was.

The first thing she remembered in all her squalid life, was a red handkerchief about her mother’s neck. Otherwise she could only look back upon beatings and cursings, and the bitter cold, the biting cold of Russia. Since then she had seen countless colors, in stuffs and ribbons, but she had never owned one of them—never even a colored spool of thread. Her mistress had many ribbons of reds and blues and purples. And her mistress’s child had many ribbons, too. That was a lucky child! It had much to eat, a nice white bed, gay toys, kind words and pretty dresses with sashes and shoulder knots to match. The child came often into the kitchen to plague and tease Katinka. It seemed to like the kitchen, just as Katinka liked the parlor, where everything was red plush, and where there were big pink paper roses in the window.

This particular morning, the child stole in earlier than usual. It was dressed in white, with a wide blue sash, whose dangling fringe swept the floor as the child darted here and there, fingering every-
thing, disarranging the dishes, peering on the shelves, questioning and getting in Katinka's way. Katinka was not afraid of the child as she was of the mistress, so she dared touch the sash. Its silk slipped scrapingly through her rough fingers as she stroked it and whispered guttural words to it. It seemed to streak in a broad blue band of light through the undusted kitchen.

Soon however, the child grew tired of Katinka and not even an offer of jam and bread could keep it near her. It ran wilfully, with a flirt of its sash, out of the door. The kitchen seemed darker when the mistress and child were not there. Katinka felt dumbly alone and sullen.

As she waited on the table that noon, she noticed that the child was wearing more finery than usual—also that the mistress was dressed as for Sunday. Katinka was glad of this, because it meant that they would be going out that afternoon and that she would have the house to herself. She wondered where they were going.

Immediately after dinner, they started off. Katinka watched them from the window. The mistress walked carefully and stiffly, holding her best skirt high above her brown cotton petticoat. The child in its big flaring hat and starched dress, minced along beside its mother. When they had disappeared around the corner, Katinka went directly to the parlor and sat in one of the big red plush chairs. She liked to smooth the plush with her fingers. But she did not dare to stay there long. The dishes must be cleared—the rooms done.

After she had finished all the downstairs work, she went to the child's room. There lying on the bed was the blue sash. It curled on the white cover like a blue snake. Katinka stared at it, fascinated. It had grown dark and gray outside and it was raining in great flat drops against the window pane. The room was very untidy, and was trimmed profusely with a soiled salmon pink. But to Katinka's eyes it was beautiful, and far above the daring of her dreams. Now the blue sash seemed to make it more beautiful than ever. She could not work while the sash lay there. The consciousness that she was alone with it overpowered her. She took it up timidly and put it like a scarf, around her neck. It clung boldly to her dull brown gingham waist, as if it had innumerable claws, clutching at her for support, sucking in her immobility. She stood motionless for some time. She seemed afraid to move—to put the scarf down where she had found it. She touched it carefully. But finally the first instinctive fear of such intimacy retreated and left her trembling over the pleasure of being alone with the sash. As she tidied up the room, she still felt the blue ribbon about her narrow shoulders.

At last, however, her work in the room was finished. She put the
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sash slowly back on the bed, but her shoulders twitched rebelliously. Then with a sudden uncouth gesture, she caught the sash up again, carried it out of the room, and started climbing the stairs to the garret where she slept. The stairs were steep and black. They creaked with each thud of her heavy feet.

It was damp and brown in the garret. The low wooden rafters of the ceiling pressed down smotheringly. A kitchen chair, a cracked wash-basin and pitcher, a wooden wash-stand and a narrow iron bed were all the room contained. Katinka shut the door behind her—the blue sash slipped from her shoulders and lay coiling and writhing on the dusty floor. She stooped awkwardly and picked it up. Then she sat on the edge of her bed and patted happily the soft blue silk of the ribbon.

Suddenly she started. The front door had slammed. The mistress and the child were back. At once she thrust the sash beneath the cover of the bed and without a backward glance at it, she stumbled downstairs. The mistress scolded her well for not being at the door. The child ran up to its room, but evidently did not miss the sash, for it did not ask about it.

Katinka went at the rest of her work stupidly. She could think of nothing but the blue sash waiting for her beneath the cover of the bed.

That evening her young man came and sat with her. Katinka never thought of this young man, except on the one night a week when he was allowed to see her. He was honest and sober enough. Some day she would marry him. He had often told her that she was a good worker. She worked while he was there. She darned a big black heap of the child’s stockings. He watched her with dull approval. They neither of them felt it necessary to converse. At nine o’clock promptly he went away. Katinka was glad. She wanted to be alone in the dark with the blue sash. There was no remorse in her heart. She did not consider it wrong to have taken the sash. She might have taken it long ago if she had thought. She slept with it around her neck, that night. At dawn she woke to touch it and look at its warm blue. When she was dressed, she hid it again under the mattress.

But the suggestion of the sash upstairs stayed with her all that day and started a strange unwieldy revolution of her being. She felt suddenly drunk with the idea of owning more ribbons and finery. She thought constantly of this, and the more she thought of it, the more tenacious and fixed became her greedy and starving wish for other companions.

She began to watch her mistress and the child. Her eyes turned
always to their rooms and the pretty things they left about. Whenever they went out, she would fumble and hunt slyly in their bureau drawers, until little by little, her treasure grew. A ribbon here—a belt there, a piece of gay-colored stuff—small bits, each of them, but mounting steadily into a rich pile of flaming color—hidden by day beneath Katinka’s mattress, scattered by night in prodigal wealth over the iron bed. Katinka hugged her secret. She brooded over it gluttonously. Now during the day, she was still the drudge, going and coming, carrying and washing and serving others. But the dark little kitchen, the scoldings, the flat colorlessness of the day slid by her vacantly. The weekly visits of the young man blurred themselves into the whole. She did not think of telling him her secret. She sang sometimes tunelessly as she worked. Even the mistress noticed the change in her and began to watch her, for she was suspicious of things she did not understand, and there was no reason that she could see why her servant should sing. So she scolded and spied upon Katinka more than ever.

Only the nights were Katinka’s own, and in them, she learned to be happy. Night after night, she played with her treasure. Her one little candle burned palely in its sickly yellow point. Its light was feeble by contrast to the ribbons. Sometimes she would lay them out in different patterns on the floor and look at them for hours. Such patterns as Katinka would weave! Narrow and broad, short and long ribbons, smooth and wrinkled, they would stretch their orange, blue and red arms out into the shadows and beckon and twist and turn and point. Sometimes when a sliver of moonlight crept painfully in through the top of the narrow window, Katinka would blow out the candle, and heap them in the thin path of the moon whiteness. Then the colors would burn strangely, as with a thousand eyes. To Katinka they seemed to stir and breathe. She would often seize them up, and strain them to her, and as she bent over them, with her pale hair and face, her high hard cheekbones, her narrow sunken shoulders, the ribbons looked in their brilliant tones as if they had sucked the life from her. Other times she dressed up in them. They hung from her grotesquely, like weird flapping winged banners. There were indeed many ways in which to enjoy them. Oh, those were gay warm-blooded nights spent with good friends!

Still Katinka grew bolder. Her passion became fierce as a miser’s greed for gold. The day was dull and worthless in which she did not bring another ribbon to add to her pile beneath the mattress. Once a danger note sounded. The child wished to wear the blue sash. It was nowhere to be found. The mistress asked Katinka if she had seen the sash, and Katinka, in a sudden panic, answered
that one day when she was cleaning, it had blown out of the window. The mistress accepted this explanation silently and no more was said about it. But from that day the mistress grew very careless. Once she left her best brooch—a big bowknot with a bright stone in the center of it—on the bureau. It did not tempt Katinka. She looked at it without envy. But that same morning she found a long piece of brick-colored satin ribbon lying on the child’s bureau, and that she took greedily.

In the evening, her young man came to see her. Katinka had so much work to do that she could not sit with him. She was tired. Her head ached doggedly. Her thick ankles and feet turned in resistlessly, as she shuffled about the kitchen, scraping the rust-worn pans, washing the greasy dishes. A smell of fish hung strongly in the air. Katinka’s young man snuffed it in contentedly. He stared at Katinka and thought to himself that she would make him a good wife. He did not notice the drabness of her hair, the flatness of her face, the shapelessness of her figure. Katinka was glad he was there—she would be glad when he went. She wanted to feel the silky touch of her new ribbon slide through her rough fingers.

Suddenly a door slammed and there were footsteps on the kitchen stairs. Katinka recognized them. They were short flat steps. She had heard them descending those stairs every morning since she had been in this place. She put her big red hands, dripping as they were with dish water, under her apron. It was an instinctive gesture. She could not imagine why her mistress was coming down to the kitchen.

The young man rose awkwardly and made as if to go, then he changed his mind and stood on one foot, with one thick shoulder and arm sagging. His little eyes shifted uncomfortably from Katinka to the door of the kitchen which opened presently with a rattle. The mistress walked in. Her blue silk and lace waist and the black satin skirt rustled aggressively. Katinka was not used to seeing her mistress in the kitchen after dinner, and it gave her a vague feeling of confusion. Also she was afraid that the mistress would scold her because of the young man. The mistress stood small and sharp in the middle of the room. The cheap kitchen lamp flared in her face; the silk of her skirt crackled as she turned to the young man.

“Are you Katinka’s friend?” she asked.

“Yes, ma’am,” he answered, hoarsely.

“Then you come upstairs with me—and you, too, Katinka,” commanded the mistress.

The young man looked at Katinka helplessly, but Katinka did not meet his eyes. She was used to obeying her mistress. She
shambled after her now—the young man following. The mistress went on ahead rapidly—up the black kitchen stairs to the parlor floor. The young man gaped in at the parlor, with its red plush furniture and pink paper flowers. It looked very pretty, lighted up with the pink paper shaded lamp, in the middle of the table. But the mistress did not pause there. She went on past her own room and the child’s room. The child popped its head around the half-open door of its room and stuck its tongue out at Katinka.

Finally they reached the crooked dusty flight of stairs leading to the garret—the mistress still hurrying ahead. Katinka mounted the stairs breathing heavily. The young man came slowly after her—his eyes looked bewildered.

The mistress threw open the door of Katinka’s wretched room. The candle was burning wanly. It flickered in a sudden frightened panic from the unexpected draft. The room looked stale and damp—it smelt of dust. The bed clothes had been disarranged and pulled apart, the linen sheet trailed on the floor, the mattress was awry, the woollen blanket was pushed back—and half dragging on the dirty floor, half lying on the covers, were all the ribbons that Katinka had taken. Strangled and coiled, one with the other, they looked like bleeding tortured things thrown aside to die.

Katinka gave a little guttural cry when she saw them and her face twisted itself into a grotesque mask of pain. The candle light fell palely on the colors, which seemed to be trying to hide by fusing. The whole heap of them dissolved into purples and reds. The mistress pointed to them.

“Here”—she said to the young man. “She stole them. They’re all mine.”

The young man stared at the mistress stupidly. Katinka crouched in a corner, her eyes on the ribbons.

“That’s what she is,” continued the mistress, triumphantly—“A thief. Do you want to have a thief for a wife?”

The young man shook his head. He seemed incapable of words. A dull red flushed his face. He no longer looked at Katinka.

“Then you can go,” said the mistress. “No decent respectable man would have it. You’d better go.”

She motioned to the door. The young man backed out of the room. His steps marking heavily his descent, grew fainter and fainter. Katinka seemed hardly to notice that he had gone. She had looked up once at him, while her mistress was speaking, but the rest of the time she stared as if in a stupor at the ribbons.

“As for you,” said the mistress. “You pack your trunk and get out early tomorrow morning. It’s no more than you deserve. And
before you go—the first thing in the morning, I want you to press each one of these things neatly, and lay them on the kitchen table. I won’t touch them in the crumpled state they’re in now. I’ve counted them all, and if you take as much as one I’ll have you arrested. You’re very lucky that I don’t anyway.”

Then she went out of the room and shut the wooden door behind her. Katinka was alone.

Katinka went over to the ribbons, seized them passionately in her arms and crushed them to her. They streamed gaily from her hands, and flung out long red and blue banners, which clung to her dirty apron and torn skirt. They seemed to recognize her touch. She talked to them incoherently, and stroked them and laid her cheek against them. Then she knelt on the floor and counted them, sorting them carefully. The last one of all which she took up was the blue sash. She looked at it a long while. Finally she rose, and stood holding it in her hand. Then she put it around her neck. The silk was soft and brushed against her skin. She shivered as it touched her. Then she put it down and dragged her box out, with a slow rasping sound, from beneath the bed; she unhooked a few limp dress rags hanging behind a faded curtain and put them in the box.

Suddenly she slammed down the lid of the box, and snatching up the sash again, buried her face in it. Then a gust of shivering seized her. As if impelled by it, she climbed painfully on top of the box, and reaching up knotted an end of the sash to one of the low rafters. Then she made a loop in the other end of the sash, put it carefully around her neck, and stepped off the box. The other ribbons sprawled at her feet. The candle spluttered after a while and went out.