

The Honor

By James Oliver Curwood

PROLOGUE.

Up in the "Big Snows," near the dome of the earth, lies the scene of this story of real men and real women, who have all of the virtues of their hardening environment and few of the failings of their more civilized relatives. This is a tale for reading when one is tired of the artificialities of civilization—or at any other time when a good story is appreciated. You will find in it romance and adventure and mystery mixed in such skillful manner and in such proportion that no ingredient interferes with another. Yet all go to make fine reading for women who like to hear of brave deeds and sacrifice for love's sake and for men with even a drop of the spirit of adventure in their veins. And one thing more—the author has lived among the people whose lives he describes, and he knows how to tell a story.

CHAPTER XV. Jan's Story.

"M'sieur," began Jan in the low voice which Thornton was beginning to understand, "I am going to tell you something which I have told to but two other human beings. It is the story of another man—a man from civilization, like you, who came up into this country of ours years and years ago and who met a woman, as you have met this girl at Oxford House, and who loved her as you love this one and perhaps more. It is singular that the case should be so similar, m'sieur, and it is because of this that I believe our Blessed Lady gives me courage to tell it to you, for this man, like you, left a wife and two children when he came into the north. M'sieur, I pray the great God to forgive him, for he left a third child—unborn."

Jan leaned upon his hand so that it shaded his face.

"It is not so much of that as of what followed that I am going to tell you, m'sieur," he went on. "It was a beautiful love on the woman's part, and it would have been a beautiful love on the man's part if it had been pure. For her he gave up everything, even his God, as you would give up everything and your God for this girl at Oxford House. M'sieur, I will speak mostly of the woman now. She was beautiful. She was one of the three most beautiful things that God ever placed in our world, and she loved this man. She married him, believed in him, was ready to die for him, to follow him to the ends of the earth, as our women will do for the men they love. God in heaven! Can you not guess what happened, m'sieur? A child was born!"

So fiercely did Jan cry out the words that Thornton jerked back as though a blow had been struck at him from out of the gloom.

"A child was born," repeated Jan, and Thornton heard his nails digging in the table. "That was the first curse of God—a child! Carrion, beasts of carrion, that is what we call them—beasts of carrion and carrion eaters, breeders of devils and sin! My God! That is what happened. A child was born with the curse of God upon him!"

Jan stopped, his nails digging deeper, his breath escaping from him as though he had been running.

"Down in your world he would have grown up a man," he continued, speaking more calmly. "I have heard that since. But here it is different. The curse never dies. It follows, day after day, year after year. And this child, more unfortunate than the wild things, was born one of them. If the winds had whispered the secret nothing would have come near him. The Indian women would sooner have touched the plague. He would have been an outcast, despised as he grew older, pointed at and taunted, called names which are worse than those called to the lowest and meanest dogs. That is what it means to be born under that curse—up here."

He waited for Thornton to speak, but the other sat silent and motionless across the table.

"The curse worked swiftly, m'sieur. It came first—in remorse—to the man. It gnawed at his soul, at him alive and drove him from place to place with the woman and the child. The purity and love of the woman added to his suffering, and at last he came to know that the hand of God had fallen upon his head. The woman saw his grief, but did not know the reason for it. And so the curse first came to her. They went north—far north, above the Barren Lands, and the curse followed there. It gnawed at his life until he died. That was seven years after the child was born."

The oil lamp sputtered and began to smoke, and with a quick movement Jan turned the wick down until they were left in darkness.

"M'sieur, it was then that the curse began to fall upon the woman and the

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Big Snows

Author of "The Danger Trail"

softly. "I thank you for bringing me face to face with a God like yours. You have taught me more than has ever been preached into me, and this great, glorious world of yours is sending me back a better man for having

come into it. I am going—south. Some day I will return, and I will be one of this world and one of your people. I will come, and I will bring no curse. If I could send this word to her, ask her forgiveness, tell her what I have almost been and that I still have hope—faith—I could go easier down into that other world."

"You can," said Jan. "I will take this word for you, m'sieur, and I will take more, for I will tell her what it has been the kind fate for Jan Thoreau to find in the heart of M'sieur Thornton. She is one of my people, and she will forgive, and love you more for what you have done. For this, m'sieur, is what the Cree god has given to his people as the honor of the great snows. She will still love you, and if there is to be hope it will burn in her breast too. M'sieur—"

Something like a sob broke through Thornton's lips as he moved back through the darkness.

"And you—I will find you again?"

"They will know where I go from Oxford House. I will leave word with her," said Jan.

"Goodbye," said Thornton huskily.

Jan listened until his footsteps had died away, and for a long time after that he sat with his head buried in his arms upon the little table. And Kazan, whining softly, seemed to know that in the darkened room had come to pass the thing which broke at last his master's overburdened heart.

That night Jan Thoreau passed for the last time back into the shelter of his forests, and all that night he traveled, and with each mile that he left behind him something larger and bolder grew in his breast until he cracked his whip in the old way and shouted to the dogs in the old way, and the blood in him sang to the wild spirit of the wilderness. Once more he was home. To him the forest had always been home.

And from above him the stars looked down like a billion tiny fires kindled by loving hands to light his way—the stars that had given him music, peace, since he could remember and that had taught him more of the silent power of God than the lips of man could ever tell. From this time forth Jan Thoreau knew that these things would be his life, his god. He had loved the forest—now he worshipped it. In its vast silence he still possessed Melisse.

Nearly a month passed before he reached Oxford House and found the sweet faced girl whom Thornton loved. He did as Thornton had asked and went on—into the north and east. He had no mission now except to roam in his forests. He went down the Hayes, getting his few supplies at Indian camps and stopped at last, with the beginning of spring, far up on the Cutaway. Here he built himself a camp and lived for a time, setting dead falls for bear. Then he struck north again and still east, keeping always away from Lac Bain. When the first chill winds of the bay brought warning of winter down to him he was filled for a time with a longing to strike north and west, to go once more back to his Barren Lands. But, instead, he went south, and so it came to pass that a year after he had left Lac Bain he built himself a cabin deep in the forest of God's river, fifty miles from Oxford House, and trapped once more for the company. He had not forgotten his promise to Thornton, and at Oxford House left word where he could be found if the man from civilization should return.

In late midwinter Jan returned to Oxford House with his furs. It was on the night of the day that he came into the post that he heard a Frenchman who had come down from the north speak of Lac Bain. None noticed the change in Jan's face as he hung back in the shadows of the company's store. A little later he followed the Frenchman outside and stopped him where there were no others near to overhear.

"M'sieur, you spoke of Lac Bain," he said in French. "You have been there?"

"Yes," replied the other, "I was there for a week waiting for the first sledge snow."

"It is my old home," said Jan, trying to keep his voice natural. "I have wondered if there are changes. You saw Cummins, the factor?"

"Yes, he was there."

"And—Jean de Gravois, the chief man?"

"He was away."

"The factor had a daughter, Melisse?"

"She left Lac Bain a long time ago, m'sieur," said the trapper. "M'sieur Cummins told me that he had not seen her in a long time. I believe it was almost a year."

Jan went to the company's store. He took his pack to the sledge and dogs in the edge of the spruce, and Kazan leaped to greet him at the end of his halibut. That night as Jan traveled through the forest he did not notice the stars or the friendly shadows.

"A year," he repeated to himself again and again, and once when Kazan rubbed against his leg and looked up into his face he said: "Ah, Kazan, our Melisse went away with the Englishman. May the great God give them happiness!"

The forest claimed him more than ever after this. He did not go back to Oxford House in the spring, but sold his furs to a passing halfbreed and wandered through all of that spring and summer in the country to the west. It was January when he returned to his cabin, when the snows were deepest, and three days later he set out to outfit at the Hudson's bay post on God's lake instead of at Oxford House. It was while they were crossing a part of the lake that Kazan leaped aside for an instant in his

traces and snapped at something in the snow.

Jan saw the movement, but gave no attention to it until a little later when Kazan stopped and fell upon his belly, biting at the harness and whining in pain. The thought of Kazan's sudden snap at the snow came to him then like a knife thrust, and with a low cry of horror and fear he fell upon his knees beside the dog. Kazan whimpered, and his bushy tail swept the snow as Jan lifted his great wolfish head between his two hands. No other sound came from Jan's lips now, and slowly he drew the dog up to him until he held him in his arms as he might have held a child. Kazan stilled the whimpering sounds in his throat. His one eye rested on his master's face, faithful, watching for some sign, for some language there, even as the burning fires of a strange torture gnawed at his life, and in that eye Jan saw the deepening reddish film which he had seen a hundred times before in the eyes of foxes and wolves killed by poison bait.

A moan of anguish burst from Jan's lips, and he held his face close down against Kazan's head and sobbed now like a child, while Kazan rubbed his hot muzzle against his cheek and his muscles hardened in a last desire to give battle to whatever was giving his master grief. It was a long time before Jan lifted his face from the shaggy head, and when he did he knew that the last of all love, of all companionship, of all that bound him to flesh and blood in his lonely world, was gone. Kazan was dead.

From the sledge he took a blanket and wrapped Kazan in it and carried him a hundred yards back from the trail. With bowed head he came behind his four dogs into God's House. Half an hour later he turned back into the wilderness with his supplies. It was dark when he returned to where he had left Kazan. He placed him upon the sledge, and the four huskies whined as they dragged on their burden, from which the smell of death came to them. They stopped in the deep forests beyond the lake, and Jan built a fire.

This night, as on all nights in his lonely life, Jan drew Kazan close to him, and he slivered as the other dogs slunk back from him suspiciously and the fire and the spruce tops broke the stillness of the forest. He looked at the crackling flames, at the fitful shadows which they set dancing and grimacing about him, and it seemed to him now that they were no longer friends, but were taunting him—gloating in Kazan's death and telling him that he was alone, alone, alone. He let the fire die down, stirring it into life only when the cold stiffened him, and when at last he fell into an uneasy slumber it was still to hear the spruce tops whispering to him that Kazan was dead and that in dying he had broken the last fragile link between Jan Thoreau and Melisse.

(To Be Continued.)

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Funeral Is Delayed.

From Wednesday's Daily. The funeral of the late Washington Delihay, which was to have occurred Monday, was postponed until yesterday morning at 10 o'clock, owing to the failure of the casket to arrive from Omaha. The funeral was largely attended and occurred from the home and the interment was made in the Horning cemetery.

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