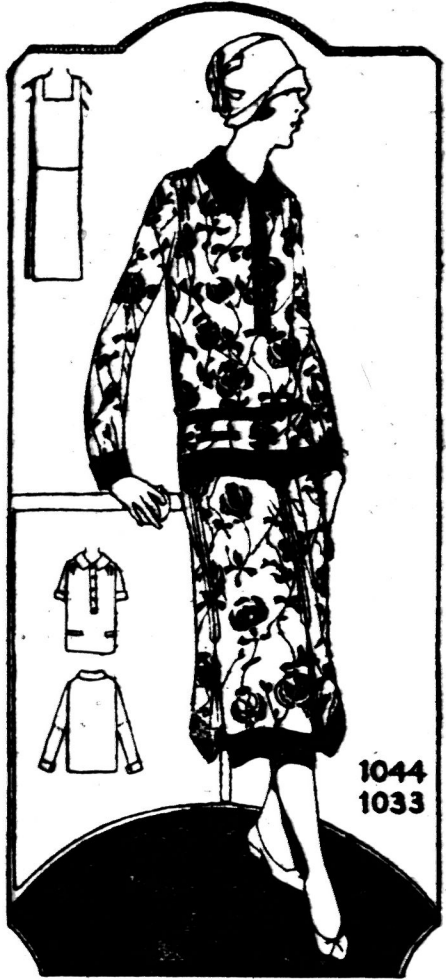


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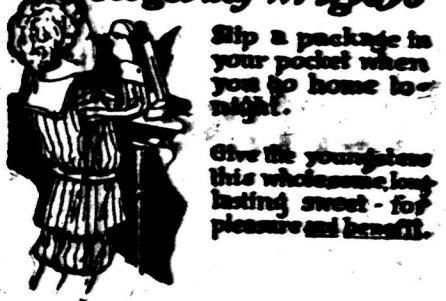
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PAPER SOLE OF KAZAN

James Oliver Curwood

A LOVE EPIC OF THE FAR NORTH

CHAPTER XXX.—(Cont'd.)

Something greater than mere curiosity began to take possession of Carvel. A whimsical humor became a fixed and deeper thought, an unreasonable anticipation was accompanied by a certain thrill of subdued excitement. By the time they reached the old beaver-pond the mystery of the strange adventure had a firm hold on him. From Beaver-tooth's colony Barea led him to the creek along which Wakayé, the black bear, had fished and thence straight to the Gray Loon.

It was early afternoon of a wonderful day. It was so still that the rippling waters of spring, singing in a thousand rills and streamlets, filled the forests with a droning music. In the warm sun the crimson hakeesch g'lowed like blood. In the open spaces the air was scented with the perfume of Blue Flowers. In the trees and bushes mated birds were building their nests. After the long sleep of winter Nature was at work in all her glory. It was Unekepesim, the Mating Moon, the Home Building Moon—and Barea was going home. Not to matehood—but to Nepeese. He knew that she was there now, perhaps at the very edge of the chasm where he had seen her last. They would be playing together again soon, as they had played yesterday, and the day before that, and in his joy he barked up into Carvel's face, and urged him to greater speed. Then they came to the clearing, and once more Barea stood like a rock. Carvel saw the charred ruins of the burned cabin, and a moment later the two graves under the tall spruce. He began to understand as his eyes returned slowly to the waiting, listening dog. A great swelling rose in his throat, and after a moment or two, he said softly, and with an effort.

"Boy, I guess you're home." Barea did not hear. With his head up and his nose tilted to the blue sky he was sniffing the air. What was it that came to him with the perfumes of the forests and the green meadow? Why was it that he trembled now as he stood there? What was there in the air? Carvel asked himself, and his questing eyes tried to answer the questions. Nothing. There was death here—death and desertion, that was all. And then, all at once, there came from Barea a strange cry—almost a human cry—and he was gone like the wind.

Carvel had thrown off his pack. He dropped his rifle beside it now, and followed Barea. He ran swiftly, straight across the open, into the dwarf balsams and to a grass-grown path that had once been worn by the travel of feet. He ran until he was panting for breath, and then stopped, and listened. He could hear nothing of Barea. But that old trail led on under the forest trees, and he followed it.

Close to the deep, dark pool in which he and the Willow had dispersed so often Barea, too, had stopped. He could hear the rippling of water, and his eyes shone with a gleaming fire as he gazed for Nepeese. He expected to see her there, her slim white body shimmering in some dark shadow of overhanging spruce, or gleaming suddenly white as snow in one of the warm splashes of sunlight. His eyes sought out their old hiding places; the great split rock on the other side, the shelving banks under which they used to dive like otter, the spruce boughs that dipped down to the surface, and in the midst of which the Willow loved to screen her naked body while he searched the pool for her. And at last the realization was borne upon him that she was not there, that he had still farther to go.

He went on to the tepee. The little open space in which they had built their hidden wigwam was flooded with sunshine that came through a break in the forest to the west. The tepee was still there. It did not seem very even then it seemed quite the most natural thing in the world that it should be Nepeese, and none other. He had lost her yesterday. To-day he had found her. And in answer to his whine there came a sobbing cry straight out of the soul of the Willow. Carvel found them there a few minutes later, the dog's head hugged close up against the Willow's breast, and the Willow was crying—crying like a little child, her face hidden from him on Barea's neck. He did not interrupt them, but waited; and as he waited something in the sobbing voice and the stillness of the forest seemed to whisper to him a bit of the story of the burned cabin and the two graves, and the meaning of the Call that had come to Barea from out of the south.

CHAPTER XXXI. That night there was a new campfire in the open. It was not a small fire, built with the fear that other eyes might see it, but a fire that sent its flames high. In the glow of it stood Carvel. And as the fire had changed from that small smouldering heap over which the Willow had cooed her dimer, so Carvel, the official dead outlaw, had changed. The beard was gone from his face; he had thrown off his caribou-skin coat; his sleeves were rolled up to the elbows, and there was a wild flush in his face that was not altogether the tanning of wind and sun and storm, and a glow in his eyes that had not been there for five years, perhaps never before. His eyes were on Nepeese.

"To-morrow or the next day I am going to Lac Bain," he said, a hard and bitter note back of the gentle worship in his voice. "I will not come back until I have—killed him." The Willow looked straight into the fire. For a time there was a silence broken only by the crackling of the flames, and in that silence Carvel's fingers waded in and out of the silken strands of the Willow's hair. His thoughts flashed back. What a chance he had missed that day on Bush McTaggart's trap-line—if he had only known! His jaws set hard as he saw in the red-hot heart of the fire the mental pictures of the day when the Factor from Lac Bain had killed Pierrot. She had told him the whole story. Her flight. Her plunge to what she had thought was certain death in the flames; he could see faithfully the furious torrent of the chasm. Her miraculous escape from the waters—and how she was discovered, nearly dead, by Tuboa, the toothless old Cree whom Pierrot out of pity had allowed to hunt in part of his domain. He felt within himself the tragedy and the horror of the one terrible hour in which the sun had gone out of the world for the Willow, and in the flames he could see faithfully Tuboa as he called on his last strength to bear Nepeese over the long miles that lay between the chasm and his cabin; he caught shifting visions of the weeks that followed in that cabin, weeks of hunger and of intense cold in which the Willow's life hung by a single thread. And at last, when the snows were deepest, Tuboa had died. Carvel's fingers clenched in the flames of the Willow's hair. A deep breath rose out of his chest, and he said, staring deep into the fire:

"To-morrow I will go to Lac Bain." For a moment Nepeese did not answer. She, too, was looking into the fire. Then she said:

"Tuboa meant to kill him when the spring came, and he could travel. When Tuboa died I knew that it was I who must kill him. So I came, with Tuboa's gun. It was fresh loaded—yesterday. And—M'sieu Jeem"—she looked up at him, a triumphant glow in her eyes as she added, almost in a whisper—"You are not going to Lac Bain. I have sent a messenger."

"A messenger?" "Yes, Oookimow Jeem—a messenger. Two days ago, I sent word that I had not died, but was here—waiting for him—and that I would be Iskwao now, his wife. Ooo-oo, he will come, Oookimow Jeem—he will come fast. And you shall not kill him. Non!" She smiled into his face, and the throb of Carvel's heart was like a drum. "The gun is loaded," she said softly. "I will shoot."

"Two days ago," said Carvel. "And from Lac Bain it is—" "He will be here to-morrow," Nepeese answered him. "To-morrow, as the sun goes down, he will enter the clearing. I know. My blood has been singing it all day. To-morrow—to-morrow—for he will travel fast, Oookimow Jeem. Yes, he will come fast."

Carvel had bent his head. The soft tresses gripped in his fingers were crushed to his lips. The Willow, looking again into the fire, did not see. But she felt—and her soul was beating like the wings of a bird.

"Oookimow Jeem," she whispered—a breath, a flutter of the lips so soft that Carvel heard no sound.

If old Tuboa had been there that night it is possible he would have read strange warnings in the winds that whispered now and then softly in the treetops. It was such a night; a night when the Red Gods whisper low among themselves, a carnival of glory in which even the dipping shadows and the high stars seemed to quiver with the life of a potent language. It is barely possible that old Tuboa, with his ninety years behind him, would have learned something, or that at least he would have suspected a thing which Carvel in his youth and confidence did not see. To-morrow—he will come to-morrow! The Willow, exultant, had said that. But to old Tuboa the trees might have whispered, why not to-night?

It was midnight when the big moon stood full above the little open in the forest. In the tepee the Willow was sleeping. In a beam shadow, back from the fire slept Barea, and still farther back in the edge of a spruce thicket slept Carvel. Dog and man were tired. They had travelled far and fast that day, and they heard no sound.

But they had travelled neither so far nor so fast as Bush McTaggart. Between sunrise and midnight he had come forty miles when he strode into the clearing where Pierrot's cabin had stood. Twice from the edge of the forest he had called; and now, when he found no answer, he stood under the light of the moon and listened. Nepeese was to be here—waiting. He was tired, but exhaustion could not still the fire that burned in his blood. It had been blazing all day, and now—so near its realization and its triumph—the old passion was like a drunken wine in his veins. Somewhere, near where he stood, Nepeese was waiting for him, waiting for him. Once again he called, his heart beating in a fierce anticipation as he listened. There was no answer. And then for a thrilling instant his breath stopped. He sniffed the air—and there came to him faintly the smell of smoke.

With the first instinct of the forest man he fronted the wind that was but a faint breath under the sardlit skies. He did not call again, but hastened across the clearing. Nepeese was off there—somewhere—sleeping beside her fire, and out of him there rose a low cry of exultation. He came to the edge of the forest; chance directed his steps to the overgrown trail; he followed it, and the smoke smell came stronger to his nostrils.

It was the forest man's instinct, too, that added the element of caution to his advance. That, and the utter stillness of the night. He broke no sticks under his feet. He disturbed the brush so quietly that it made no sound.

When he came out back to the main open where Carvel's fire was still burning a crowd of mosquitoes swarmed up into the air it was with a stealth that failed even to rouse Barea. Perhaps, deep down in him, these smouldered an old suspicion; perhaps it was because he wanted to come to her while she was sleeping. The sight of the tepee made his heart throb faster. It was light as day when it stood in the moonlight, and he saw hanging outside it a few bits of woman's apparel. He advanced softly as a fox and stood a moment later with his hand on the cloth flap at the wigwam door, his head bent forward to catch the moanest breath of sound. He could hear the breathing. For an instant his face turned so that the moonlight struck his eyes. They were closed with a mad fire. Then, still very quietly, he drew aside the flap at the door.

It could not have been sound that roused Barea, hidden in the black balsam shadow a dozen paces away. Perhaps it was scent. His nostrils twitched first; then he awoke. For a few seconds his eyes gazed at the bent figure in the tepee door. He knew that it was not Carvel. The old smell—the man-beast's smell, filled his nostrils like a hated poison. He sprang to his feet and stood with his lips snarling back slowly from his long fangs. McTaggart had disappeared. From inside the tepee there came a sound; a sudden movement of bodies, a startled ejaculation of one awakening from sleep—and then a cry, a low, half-smothered, frightened cry, and in response to that cry Barea shot out from under the balsam with a sound in his throat that had in it the note of death.

In the edge of the spruce thicket Carvel rolled uneasily. Strange sounds were rousing him, cries that in his exhaustion came to him as if in a dream. At last he sat up, and then in sudden horror leaped to his feet and rushed toward the tepee. Nepeese was in the open, crying the name she had given him—"Oookimow Jeem—Oookimow Jeem—Oookimow Jeem—"

She was standing there white and slim, her eyes with the blaze of the stars in them, and when she saw Carvel she flung out her arms to him, still crying: "Oookimow Jeem—Oo-oo, Oookimow Jeem—"

In the tepee he heard the rage of a beast; the moaning cries of a man. He forgot that it was only last night he had come, and with a cry he swept the Willow to his breast, and the Willow's arms tightened round his neck as she moaned:

"Oookimow Jeem—it is the man-beast—in there! It is the man-beast from Lac Bain—and Barea—"

Truth flashed upon Carvel, and he caught Nepeese up in his arms and ran away with her from the sounds that had grown sickening and horrible. In the spruce thicket he put her feet once more to the ground. Her arms were still tight around his neck; he felt the wild terror of her body as it thrashed against him; her breath was sobbing, and her eyes were on his face. He drew her closer, and suddenly he crushed his face down close against hers and felt for an instant the warm thrill of her lips against his own.

"He is dead, Nepeese." "Dead, Oookimow Jeem?" "Yes, Barea killed him." She did not seem to breathe. Gently with his lips in her hair, Carvel whispered his plans for their paradise.

"No one will know, my sweetheart. To-night I will bury him and burn the tepee. To-morrow we will start for Nelson House, where there is a Missioner. And after that—we will come back—and I will build a new cabin where the old one buried. Do you love me, ka sakahet?" "Ooi—yes—Oookimow Jeem—I love you—"

Suddenly there came an interruption. Barea at last was giving his cry of triumph. It rose to the stars; it waivered over the roofs of the forests and filled the quiet skies—a wolfish howl of exultation, of achievement, of vengeance fulfilled. Its echoes died slowly away, and silence came again. A great peace whispered in the soft breath of the treetops. Out of the north came the making call of a loon. About Carvel's shoulders the Willow's arms crept closer. And Carvel out of his heart, thanked God.

(The End.)

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