

BAREE

Son of Kazan

By JAMES OLIVER CURWOOD

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On the morning of this same day Bush McTaggart rose from his bed while it was still dark. The time had come. He had hesitated at murder—at the killing of Pierrot; and in his hesitation he had found a better way. There could be no escape for Nepeese.

It was a wonderful scheme, so easy of accomplishment, so inevitable in its outcome. And all the time Pierrot would think he was away to the East on a mission!

He ate his breakfast before dawn, and was on the trail before it was yet light. There was a vast amount of brutal satisfaction to McTaggart in anticipating what was about to happen, and he reveled in it to the full. There was no chance for disappointment. He was positive that Nepeese would not accompany her father to Lac Baln. She would be at the cabin on the Gray Loon—alone.

This slowness was to Nepeese burdened with no thought of danger. There were times, now, when the thought of being alone was pleasant to her, when she wanted to dream by herself, when she visioned things into the mysteries of which she would not admit even Pierrot. She was growing into womanhood—just the sweet, closed bud of womanhood as yet—still a girl with the soft velvet of girlhood in her eyes, yet with the mystery of woman stirring gently in her soul, as if the Great Hand were hesitating between awakening her and letting her sleep a little longer. At these times, when the opportunity came to steal hours by herself, she would put on the red dress and do up her wonderful hair as she saw it in the pictures of the magazines Pierrot had sent up twice a year from Nelson House.

On the second day of Pierrot's absence Nepeese dressed herself like this, but today she let her hair cascade in a shining glory about her, and about her forehead bound a circlet of red ribbon. She was not yet done. Today she had marvelous designs. On the wall close to her mirror she had tacked a large page from a woman's magazine, and on this page was a lovely vision of curls. Fifteen hundred miles north of the sunny California studio in which the picture had been taken, Nepeese, with pouted red lips and puckered forehead, was fighting to master the mystery of the other girl's curls!

She was looking into her mirror, her face flushed and her eyes aglow in the excitement of the struggle to fashion one of the coveted ringlets from a tress that fell away below her hips, when the door opened behind her, and Bush McTaggart walked in.

Chapter XI

The Willow's back was toward the door when the Factor from Lac Baln entered the cabin, and for a few startled seconds she did not turn. Her first thought was of Pierrot—for some reason he had returned. But even as this thought came to her, she heard a snarl at Baree's throat that brought her suddenly to her feet, facing the door.

McTaggart was standing with his back against the door; and at Nepeese—in her wonderful dress and flowing hair—he was staring as if stunned for a space at what he saw. Fate, or accident, was playing against the Willow now. If there had been a spark of slumbering chivalry, of mercy, even, in Bush McTaggart's soul, it was extinguished by what he saw. Never had Nepeese looked more beautiful, not even on that day when MacDonald the map-maker had taken her picture. The sun, flooding through the window, lighted up her marvelous hair; her flushed face was framed in its lustrous darkness like a tinted cameo. He had dreamed, but he had pictured nothing like this woman who stood before him now, her eyes widening with fear and the flush leaving her face even as he looked at her.

It was not a long interval in which their eyes met in that terrible silence—terribly to the girl. Words were unnecessary. At last she understood—understood what her peril had been that day at the edge of the chasm and in the forest, when fearlessly she had played with the menace that was confronting her now.

A breath that was like a sob broke from her lips. "M'sieu!" she tried to say. But it was only a gasp—an effort. She seemed choking.

Plainly she heard the click of the iron bolt as it locked the door. McTaggart advanced a step.

Only a single step McTaggart advanced. On the floor Baree had remained like a carved thiaz. He had not moved. He had not made a sound but that one wailing shriek—

McTaggart took the step. And then, like a flash, he was up and in front of Nepeese, every hair of his body on end; and at the fury in his growl McTaggart lunged back against the barred door. A word from Nepeese in that moment, and it would have been over. But an instant was lost—an instant before her cry came. In that moment man's hard and brain worked swifter than brute understanding; and as Baree launched himself at the Factor's throat, there came a flash and a deafening explosion almost in the Willow's eyes.

It was a chance shot, a shot from the hip with McTaggart's automatic. Baree fell short. He struck the floor with a thud and rolled against the log wall. There was not a tick or a quiver left in his body. McTaggart laughed nervously as he shoved his pistol back in its holster. He knew that only a brain shot could have done that.

With her back against the further wall, Nepeese was waiting. McTaggart could hear her panting breath. He advanced halfway to her.

"Nepeese, I have come to make you my wife," he said.

She did not answer. He could see that her breath was choking her. She raised a hand to her throat. He took two more steps, and stopped. He had never seen such eyes.

"I have come to make you my wife, Nepeese. Tomorrow you will go on to Nelson House with me, and then back to Lac Baln—forever." He added the last words as an afterthought. "Forever," he repeated.

He did not mince words. His courage and his determination rose as he saw her body droop a little against the wall. She was powerless. There was no escape. Pierrot was gone. Baree was dead.

He had thought that no living creature could move as swiftly as the Willow when his arms reached out for her. She made no sound as she darted under one of his outstretched arms. He made a lunge, a brutal grab, and his fingers caught a bit of hair. He heard the snap of it as she tore herself free and flew to the door. She had thrown back the bolt when he caught her and his arms closed about her. He dragged her back, and now she cried out—cried out in her despair for Pierrot, for Baree, for some miracle of God that might save her.

And Nepeese fought. She twisted in his arms until she was facing him. She could no longer see. She was smothered in her hair. It covered her face and breast and body, suffocating her, entangling her hands and arms—and still she fought. In the struggle McTaggart stumbled over the body of Baree, and they went down. Nepeese was up fully five seconds ahead of the man. She could have reached the door. But again it was her hair. She paused to fling back the thick masses of it so that she could see, and McTaggart was at the door ahead of her.

He did not lock it again, but stood facing her. His face was scratched and bleeding. He was no longer a man but a devil. Nepeese was broken, panting—a low sobbing came with her breath. She bent down, and picked up a piece of firewood. McTaggart could see that her strength was almost gone.

She clutched the stick as he approached her again. But McTaggart had lost all thought of fear or caution. He sprang upon her like an animal. The stick of firewood fell. And again fate played against the girl. In her terror and hopelessness she had caught up the first stick her hand had touched—a light one. With her last strength she struck at McTaggart with it, and as it fell on his head, he staggered back. But it did not make him loose his hold.

Vainly she was fighting now, not to strike him or to escape, but to get her breath. She tried to cry out again, but this time no sound came from between her gasping lips.

Again he laughed, and as he laughed, he heard the door open. Was it the wind? He turned, still holding her in his arms.

In the open door stood Pierrot.

During that terrible space which followed an eternity of time rolled slowly through the little cabin on the Gray Loon—that eternity which lies somewhere between life and death and which is sometimes meted out to a human life in seconds instead of eons.

In those seconds Pierrot did not move from where he stood in the doorway. McTaggart, huddled over with the weight in his arms, and staring at Pierrot, did not move. But the Willow's eyes were opening. And a convulsive quiver ran through the body of Baree, where he lay near the wall. There was not the sound of a breath. And then, in that silence, a great gasping sob came from Nepeese.

Then Pierrot stirred to life. He spoke, and his voice was not like Pierrot's. It was a strange voice.

"The great God has sent me back in time, m'sieu," he said. "I traveled by way of the east, and saw your trail where it turned this way."

No, that was not like Pierrot's voice! A chill ran through McTaggart now, and slowly he let go of Nepeese. She fell to the floor. Slowly he straightened.

"Is it not true, m'sieu?" said Pierrot again. "I have come in time?"

What power was it—what great fear, perhaps, that made McTaggart nod his head, that made his thick lips form huskily the words, "Yes—in time." And yet it was not fear. It was something greater, something more all-powerful than that. And Pierrot said, in that same strange voice:

"I thank the great God!" The eyes of madman met the eyes of madman now. Between them was

death. Both saw it. Both thought that they saw the direction in which their bony finger pointed. Both were certain. McTaggart's hand did not go to the pistol in his holster, and Pierrot did not touch the knife in his belt. When they came together, it was throat to throat—two beasts mow, instead of one, for Pierrot had in him the fury and strength of the wolf, the cat, and the panther.

McTaggart was the bigger and heavier man, a giant in strength; yet in the face of Pierrot's fury he tumbled back over the table and went down with a crash. Many times in his life he had fought, but he had never felt a grip at his throat like the grip of Pierrot's hands. They almost crushed the life from him at once. His neck



His Neck Snapped—A Little More and It Would Have Broken.

snapped—a little more, and it would have broken. He struck out blindly from his back, and twisted himself to throw off the weight of the halfbreed's body. But Pierrot was fastened there.

as Nepeese the emine had fastened itself at the jugular of the partridge, and Mush McTaggart's jaws slowly swung open, and his face began to turn from red to purple.

Cold air rushing through the door, Pierrot's voice and the sound of battle roused Nepeese quickly to consciousness and the power to raise herself from the floor. She had fallen near Baree, and as she lifted her head, her eyes rested for a moment on the dog before they went to the fighting men. Baree was alive! His body was twitching; his eyes were open; he made an effort to raise his head as she was looking at him.

Then she dragged herself to her knees and turned to the men, and Pierrot, even in the blood-red fury of his desire to kill, must have heard the sharp cry of joy that came from her when she saw that it was the Factor from Lac Baln who was underneath. With a tremendous effort she staggered to her feet, and for a few moments she stood swaying unsteadily as her brain and her body readjusted themselves. Even as she looked down upon the blackening face from which Pierrot's fingers were choking the life, Bush McTaggart's hand was groping blindly for his pistol. He found it. Unseen by Pierrot, he dragged it from its holster. It was one of the black devils of chance that favored him again, for in his excitement he had not snapped the safety shut after shooting Baree. Now he had only strength left to pull the trigger. Twice his forefinger closed. Twice there came a deadened explosion close to Pierrot's body.

In Pierrot's face Nepeese saw what had happened. Her heart died in her breast as she looked upon the swift and terrible change wrought by sudden death. Slowly Pierrot straightened. His eyes were wide for a moment—wide and staring. He made no sound. She could not see his lips move. And then he fell toward her, so that McTaggart's body was free. Blindly and with an agony that gave no evidence in cry or word she flung herself down beside him. He was

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