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KAZAN CHAPTER I.

The Miracle. Kazan lay mute and motionless, his gray nose between his forepaws, his eyes half closed. Yet every drop of the wild blood in his splendid body was racing in a ferment of excitement.

He had never known fear—until now. His hair stood on end before the desire to run—not even on that terrible day in the forest when he had fought and killed the big gray lynx. It was his first glimpse of civilization.

Suddenly Kazan lifted his ears a little. He heard steps, then low voices. One of them was his master's voice. But the other—it sent a little tremor through him. Once, so long ago that it must have been in his puppyhood days, he seemed to have had a dream of a laugh that was like the girl's laugh—a laugh that was all at once filled with a wonderful happiness, the thrill of a wonderful love, and a sweetness that made Kazan lift his head as they came in.

"Stop!" shouted the man. "He's dangerous! Kazan!" She was on her knees beside him, all flustered and beautiful, her eyes shining wonderfully. He saw the man running forward, pale as death. Then her hand fell upon his head, and she touched him a thrill through him.

"I never knew him to let anyone touch him—with their naked hand," he said in a tense, wondering voice. "Move back quickly, Isobel. Good heaven—look at that!" Kazan whined softly, his bloodshot eyes on the girl's face. He wanted to feel her hand again; he wanted to feel her face; he wanted to feel her hair.

Thereafter she placed a rug before the door for him to sleep on. All through the long nights he knew that she was just beyond the door, and he was content. Each day he thought less and less of the wild places and more of her. Then there came the beginning of the change. There was a strange hurry and excitement around him, and the girl paid less attention to him. He grew uneasy. He sniffed the change in the air, and he began to study his master's face. Then there came the morning, very early, when the babiche collar and the iron chain were fastened to him again. Not until he had followed his master out through the door and into the street did he begin to understand. They were sending him away! He sat suddenly back on his haunches and refused to budge.

It was in his holster in the tent. At his feet was McCready's whip, and in the passion of the moment he seized it and sprang upon Kazan. The dog crouched in the snow. He made no move to escape or to attack. Only once in his life could he remember having received a beating like that which Thorpe inflicted upon him now. But not a whimper or a growl escaped him.

"Not another blow!" she cried, and something in her voice held him from striking. McCready did not hear what she said then, but a strange look came into Thorpe's eyes, and without a word he followed his wife into the tent.

McCready Pays The Debt. For a long time after he had uttered those words McCready sat in silence beside the fire. Only for a moment or two did he raise his eyes to Kazan. After a little, when he was sure that Thorpe and Isobel had retired for the night, he went into his own tent and returned with a flask of whisky.

CHAPTER III. Isobel gave the promise. When they came out from the tent Kazan lifted his great head. The stinging lash had creased one of his eyes and his mouth was dripping blood. Isobel gave a low sob, but did not go near him. Half blinded, he knew that his mistress had stopped his punishment, and he whined softly, and wagged his thick tail in the snow.

Never had he felt so miserable as through the long hard hours of the day that followed, when he broods the trail of his team-mates into the North. One of his eyes was closed and filled with stinging fire, and his body was sore from the blows of the caribou lash. But it was not physical pain that gave his body that of that keen quick alertness of the lead-dog. From out the gloom of his mate's eyes, he saw the first time in his life, it was broken. McCready had bent him—long ago; his master had beaten him; and during this day their voices were fierce and vindictive in his ears. But it was his mistress who hurt him most. She held aloof from him, always beyond the reach of his leash; and when they stopped to rest, and again in camp, she looked at him with strange and wondering eyes, and did not speak. Whether she was ready to beat him, he believed that, and that night he lurked in one of the deepest shadows about the campfire and grieved alone. None knew that it was grief—unless it was the girl. She did not move toward him. He did not speak to him. But she watched him closely—and studied him hardest when he was looking at McCready.

Later, after Thorpe and his wife had gone into their tent, it began to snow, and the effect of the snow upon McCready puzzled Kazan. The man was restless, and he drank frequently from the flask that he had used the night before. In the freight light his face grew redder and redder, and Kazan could see the strange gleam of his eyes as he gazed at the tent in which his mistress was sleeping. Again and again he went close to that tent, and listened. Twice he heard movement. The last time, it was the sound of Thorpe's deep breathing. McCready hurried back to the fire and turned his face straight up to the sky. The snow was falling so thickly that when he lowered his face he blinked and wiped his eyes. Then he went into the gloom and bent low over the trail they had made a few hours before. It was almost obliterated by the falling snow. Another hour and there would be no trail—nothing but the next day's trail would remain past that they had come this way, by morning it would cover everything, even the fire, if he allowed it to die down. McCready drank again, out in the darkness. Low words of an insane joy burst from his lips. His heart was hot with a drunken fire. His head bent madly, but scarcely more furiously than did Kazan's when the dog saw that McCready was returning with a club! The club he placed up against a tree. The club he took a lantern from the sledge and lit it. He approached Thorpe's tent, and the lantern in his hand.

"Ho, Thorpe—Thorpe!" he called again. "Hello, McCready—is that you?" "Hello, McCready—the flap back a little, and spoke in a low voice. "Yes. Can you come out a minute? Something's happening out in the woods. Don't wake up your wife, please. He drew back and waited. A minute later Thorpe came quietly out of the tent. McCready pointed into the thick spruce. "I'll swear there's someone nosing around the camp," he said. "I'm certain that I saw a man out there a few minutes ago, when I went for a log—it's a good night for stealing dogs. Here—you take the lantern! If I wasn't clean fooled, we'll find a trail in the snow." He gave Thorpe the lantern and picked up the heavy club. A growl rose in Kazan's throat, but he choked it back. He wanted to snarl forth his warning, to snap at the man who had leapt, but he knew that if he did that, he would return and beat him. So he lay still, trembling and shivering, and whining softly. He watched them until they disappeared—and then waited—listened. At last he heard the crunch of snow. He was not surprised to see McCready come back alone. He had expected him to return alone. For he knew what a club meant!

McCready's face was terrible now. It was like a beast's. He was hatless, Kazan snuck deeper in his shadow at the low horrible laugh that fell from his lips—for the man still held the club as he entered and hung the lantern on a nail in the tent-pole. His movement did not awaken her, and for a few moments he stood there, staring—staring. Kazan watched McCready as he entered, and suddenly the dog was on his feet, his back tense and bristling, his limbs rigid. He saw McCready's huge shadow on the canvas, and a moment later there came a strange piercing cry. In the wild terror of that cry he recognized her voice—and he leaped toward her. A second and a third time he sprang the length of the leash into the night, and the babiche cord about his neck cut into his flesh like a knife. He stopped for an instant, gasping for breath. The shadows were still fighting. Now they were upright! Now they were crumpling down! With a fierce snarl he flung his whole weight once more at the end of the chain. There was a snap, as the thing about his neck gave way. In half a dozen bounds Kazan made the tent and rushed under the flap. With a snarl he was at McCready's throat. The first snap of his powerful jaws was death, but he did not know that. He knew only that his mistress was there, and that he was fighting for her. There came one choking gasp cry that ended with a terrible sob; it was McCready. The man sank from his knees upon his back, and Kazan thrust his fangs deeper into his enemy's throat; he felt the warm blood. The dog's mistress was calling to him now. She was pulling at his shaggy neck. But he would not loose his hold. He was fighting for a long time. When he did, his mistress looked down at the man and covered her face with her hands. Then she sank down upon the blankets. She was very still. Her face and hands were cold, and Kazan nuzzled them tenderly. Her eyes were closed. He snuggled up close against her, with his rigid jaws turned toward the dead man. Why was she so still, he wondered? A long time passed, and then she moved him. Then he heard a step outside. It was his master, and with that old thrill of fear—the fear of the club—he went swiftly to the door. There was his master in the freight-light, and in his hand he held the club. He was coming slowly, almost falling at each step, and his face was red with blood. But he had the club! He would beat him again—beat him terribly for hurting McCready; so Kazan slipped quietly under the tent-flap and stole off into the shadows. From out the gloom of the thick spruce he looked back, and a low whine of love and grief rose and died softly in his throat. They would beat him always now—after that. Even so he would beat them. They would hurt him down, and beat him when they found him.

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"Not Another Blow!"

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