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KAZAN

JAMES OLIVER CURWOOD

SYNOPSIS

CHAPTER I—Kazan, the wild steeple-chase rider, is a murderer. McCready, a "bushy" distributor of all men because of his brutal treatment of him, learns to love his master's wife when she is kind to him in new and strange surroundings.

CHAPTER II—He shows sympathy to McCready who is to accompany Thorpe and his wife to the Red River camp.

CHAPTER III—Kazan knows that McCready is a murderer. McCready, a "bushy" distributor of all men because of his brutal treatment of him, learns to love his master's wife when she is kind to him in new and strange surroundings.

CHAPTER IV—Born between love of his mistress, the fear of his master's club and the desire of the wolf nature in him, he at length sends forth the wolf cry.

CHAPTER V—Kazan runs with the wolves. He fights his leader, becomes master of the pack, and mates with Gray Wolf.

CHAPTER VI—Kazan and the pack attack Pierre Radisson, his daughter Joan and her baby. Pierre Radisson turns dog again and helps drive off the wolves.

CHAPTER VII—Kazan's wounds are dressed and he is tied to the sledge.

CHAPTER VIII—Pierre and Kazan drag the sledge. Gray Wolf follows at a distance. Pierre Radisson, his daughter Joan and her baby, are miles away from their home on the Little Beaver.

Under a thick clump of spruce he put up the tent, and then began gathering firewood. Joan helped him. As soon as they had boiled coffee and eaten a supper of meat and toasted biscuits, Joan went into the tent and dropped exhausted on her thick bed of balsam boughs, wrapping herself and the baby up close in the skins and blankets. Tonight she had no word for Kazan. And Pierre was glad that she was too tired to sit beside the fire and talk. And yet—

Kazan's alert eyes saw Pierre start suddenly. He rose from his seat on the sledge and went to the tent. He drew back the flap and thrust in his head and shoulders.

"Asleep, Joan?" he asked. "Almost, father. Won't you please come—soon?"

"After I smoke," he said. "Are you comfortable?"

"Yes. I'm so tired—and sleepy—" Pierre laughed softly. In the darkness he was gripping at his throat.

"We're almost home, Joan. That is our river out there—the Little Beaver. If it should run away and leave you tonight you could follow it right to our cabin. It's only forty miles. Do you hear?"

"Yes—I know—" "Forty miles—straight down the river. You couldn't lose yourself, Joan. Only you'd have to be careful of air-holes in the ice."

"Won't you come to bed, father? You're tired—and almost sick."

"Yes—after I smoke," he repeated. "Joan, will you keep reminding me tomorrow of the air-holes? I might forget. You can always tell them, for the snow and the crust over them are whiter than on the rest of the ice, and like a sponge. Will you remember—the air-holes?"

"Yes—yes—" Pierre dropped the tent-flap and returned to the fire. He staggered as he walked.

"Good night, boy," he said. "Guess I'd better go in with the kids. Two days more—forty miles—two days—"

Kazan watched him as he entered the tent. He laid his weight against the end of his chain until the collar split off his wrist. His legs and back twitched. In that tent where Radisson had gone were Joan and the baby. He knew that Pierre would not hurt them, but he knew, also, that with Pierre Radisson something terrible and impending was hovering very near to him. He wanted the man outside by the fire—where he could see still, and catch him.

In the tent there was silence. Nearer to him than before came Gray Wolf's cry. Each night his was calling earlier, and coming closer to the camp. He wanted her very near to him tonight, but he did not even whine in response. He dared not break that strange silence in the tent. He lay still for a long time, tired and lame from the day's journey, but sleepless. The fire burned lower; the wind in the tree tops died away; and the thick, gray clouds rolled like a massive curtain under the skies. The stars began to glow white and metallic, and from far in the north came faintly a crisp, moaning sound, like steel slipping runners running over frosty snow—the mysterious monotone of the northern lights. After that it grew steadily and swiftly colder.

Tonight Gray Wolf did not compass herself by the direction of the wind. She followed like a sneaking shadow over the trail Pierre Radisson had made, and when Kazan heard her blankets rustle he lay on his back with his head erect, and his body rigid, save for a curious twitching of his muscles. There was a new note in Gray Wolf's voice, a warning note in which there was more than the mate-call. It was The Message. And at the sound of it Kazan rose from out of his silence and his fear, and with his head turned straight up to the sky he howled as the wild dogs of the North howl before the tepees of masters who are newly dead.

Pierre Radisson was dead.

CHAPTER IX. Out of the Blizzard. It was dawn when the baby snuggled close to Joan's warm breast and awakened her with its cry of hunger. She opened her eyes, brushed back the thick hair from her face, and could see where the shadowy form of her father was lying at the other side of the tent. He was very quiet, and she was

fell, her loose hair flying in a shimmering veil over the snow. With a mighty pull Kazan was at her side, and his cold muzzle touched her face as she drew herself to her feet. For a moment Joan took his shaggy head between her two hands.

"Wolf!" she moaned. "Oh, Wolf!" She went on, her breath coming pantingly now, even from her brief exertion. The snow was not so deep on the ice of the river. But a wind was rising. It came from the north and east, straight in her face, and Joan bowed her head as she pulled with Kazan. Half a mile down the river she stopped, and no longer could she repress the hopelessness that rose to her lips in a sobbing, choking cry. Forty miles! She clutched her hands

at her breast, and stood breathing like one who had been beaten, her back to the wind. The baby was quiet. Joan went back and peered down under the stars, and what she saw there spurred her on. She almost decreed. Twice she stumbled to her knees in the drifts during the next quarter of a mile.

After that there was a stretch of wind-swept ice, and Kazan pulled the sledge alone. Joan walked at his side. There was a pain in her chest. A thousand needles seemed pricking her face, and suddenly she remembered the thermometer. She exposed it for a time on the top of the tent. When she looked at it a few minutes later it was 80 degrees below zero. Forty miles! And her father had told her that she could make it—and could not lose herself! But she did not know that even her father would have been afraid to face the north that day, with the temperature at 30 below, and a moaning wind bringing the first warning of a blizzard.

The timber was far behind her now. Ahead there was nothing but the pitiless barren, and the timber beyond that was hidden by the gray gloom of the day. If there had been trees, Joan's heart would not have choked so with terror. But there was nothing—nothing but the terrible monotony, with the rim of the sky touching the earth a mile away.

The snow grew heavy under her feet again. Always she was watching for those treacherous, frost-coated traps in the ice her father had spoken of. But she found now that all the ice and snow looked alike to her, and that there was a growing pain back of her eyes. It was the ice, cold.

The river widened into a small lake, and here the wind struck her in the face with such force that her weight was taken from the strap, and Kazan dragged the sledge alone. A few inches of snow impeded her as much as a foot had done before. Little by little she dropped back. Kazan forgot the sledge, every ounce of his magnificent strength in the traces. By the time they were on the river channel again Joan was at the back of the sledge, following in the trail made by Kazan. She was powerless to help him. She felt more and more the leaden weight of her legs. There was but one hope—and that was the forest. If there did not reach it soon, within half an hour, she would be able to go no farther. Over and over again she moaned a prayer for her baby as she struggled on. She fell in the snow-drifts. Kazan and the sledge became only a dark blotch to her. And then, all at once, she saw that they were leaving her. They were not more than twenty feet ahead of her—but the blotch seemed to be a vast distance away. Every bit of life and strength in her body was now bent upon reaching the sledge—and baby Joan.

It seemed an interminable time before she gained. With the sledge only six feet ahead of her, she struggled for what seemed to her to be an hour before she could reach out and touch it. With a moan she flung herself forward, and fell upon it. She no longer felt discomfort. With her face in the furs under which baby Joan was buried, there came to her with swiftness and joy a vision of warmth and home. And then the vision faded away, and she lay dead beside him.

Kazan stopped in the trail. He came back then and sat down upon his haunches beside her, waiting for her to move and speak. But she was very still. He thrust his nose into her loose hair. A white rose in his throat, and suddenly he raised his head and sniffed in the face of the wind. Something came to him with that wind. He sniffed Joan again, but she did not stir. Then he went forward, and stood in his traces, ready for the pull, and looked back at her. Still she did not move or speak, and Kazan's white gaze gave place to a sharp, excited bark.

The strange thing in the wind came to him stronger for a moment. He began to shiver, and he knew that he had frozen to the snow, and it took every ounce of his strength to free himself. Twice during the next five minutes he stopped and sniffed the air. The third time that he halted, in a drift of snow, he returned to Joan's side again, and whined to awaken her. Then he tugged again at the end of his traces, and foot by foot he dragged the sledge through the drift. Beyond the drift there was a stretch of clear ice, and here Kazan rested. During a lull in the wind the scent came to him stronger than before.

At the end of the clear ice was a narrow break in the shore, where a creek ran into the main stream. If Joan had been conscious she would have urged him straight ahead. But Kazan turned into the break, and for ten minutes he struggled through the snow without a rest, whining more and more frequently, until at last the white broke into a joyous bark. Ahead of him, close to the creek, was a small cabin, and he sniffed it, a shred of meat and as much hot tea as she could drink.

The terrible hour she dreaded followed that. She wrapped blankets closely about her father's body, and tied them with babble cord. After that she piled all the furs and blankets that remained on the sledge close to the fire, and snuggled baby Joan deep down in them. Pulling down the tent was a task. The ropes were stiff and frozen, and when she had finished one of her hands was bleeding. She piled the tent on the sledge, and then, half covering her face, turned and looked back.

Pierre Radisson lay on his balsam bed, with nothing over him now but the gray sky and the spruce-tops. Kazan stood stiff-legged and sniffed the air. His spine bristled when Joan went back slowly and knelt beside the blanket-wrapped object. When she returned to him her face was white and tense, and now there was a strange and terrible look in her eyes as she stared out across the barren. She put him in the traces, and fastened about her slender waist the strap that Pierre had used. Thus they struck out for the river, sounding knee-deep in the freshly fallen and drifted snow. Halfway Joan stumbled in a drift and

of furs on the sledge the wailing, half-smothered voice of baby Joan. A deep sigh of relief heaved up from Kazan's chest. He was exhausted. His strength was gone. His feet were torn and bleeding. But the voice of baby Joan filled him with a strange happiness, and he lay down in his traces, while the man carried Joan and the baby into the life and warmth of the cabin.

A few minutes later the man reappeared. He was not old, like Pierre Radisson, but he came close to Kazan, and looked down at him.

"My God," he said. "And you did that alone!" He bent down fearlessly, unfastened him from the traces, and led him toward the cabin door. Kazan hesitated but once—almost on the threshold. He turned his head, swift and alert. From out of the moaning and wailing of the storm it seemed to him that for a moment he had heard the voice of Gray Wolf.

Then the cabin door closed behind him. Back in a shadowy corner of the cabin he lay, while the man prepared something over a hot stove for Joan. It was a long time before Joan rose from the cot on which the man had placed her. After that Kazan heard her sobbing; and then the man made her eat, and for a time they talked. Then the stranger hung up a white blanket in front of the bunk, and sat down to the stove. Quietly Kazan slipped along the wall, and crept under the bunk. For a long time he could hear the sobbing breath of the girl. Then all was still.

The next morning he slipped out through the door when the man opened it, and sped swiftly into the forest. Half a mile away he found the trail of Gray Wolf, and called to her. From the frozen river came her reply, and he went to her.

Vainly Gray Wolf tried to lure him back into their old haunts—away from the cabin and the scent of man. Late that morning the man harnessed his dogs, and from the fringe of the forest Kazan saw him tuck Joan and the baby among the furs on the sledge, as old Pierre had done. All that day he followed in the trail of the team, with Gray Wolf slinking behind him. They traveled until dark; and then, under the stars and the moon that had followed the storm, the man still urged on his team. It was deep in the night when they came to another cabin, and the man bent upon the door. A light, the opening of the door, the joyous welcome of a man's voice: Joan's sobbing cry—Kazan heard these from the shadows in which he was hidden, and then slipped back to Gray Wolf.

In the days and weeks that followed Joan's homecoming the lure of the cabin and of the woman's hand held Kazan. As he had tolerated Pierre, so now he tolerated the younger man who lived with Joan in the security of the retreat at the top of the rock.

When he reached the bottom he no longer hesitated, but darted swiftly in the direction of the cabin. Because of that instinct of the wild that was still in him, he always approached the cabin with caution. He never gave warning, and for a moment Joan was startled when she looked up from her baby and saw Kazan's shaggy head and shoulders in the open door. The baby struggled and kicked in her delight, and held out her two hands with cooling cries to Kazan. Joan, too, held out a hand.

"Kazan!" she cried softly. "Come in, Kazan!" Slowly the wild red light in Kazan's eyes softened. He put a forefoot on the sill, and stood there, while the girl urged him again. Suddenly his legs seemed to sink a little under him, his tail drooped and he slunk in with that doggy air of having committed a crime. The creature he loved were in the cabin, but the cabin itself he hated all cabins for they were all breathed of the club and the whip bondage. Like all the sledge-dogs, he preferred the open snow for a bed, and all through the wilderness, in plain and forest, there was the rippling murmur of the spring foods fling their way to Hudson's bay. In that great bay there was the rumble and crash of the ice-fields thundering down in the early break-up through the Roes Welcome—the doorway to the Arctic, and for that reason there still came with the April wind an occasional sharp breath of winter.

Kazan had shivered himself against that wind. Not a breath of air stirred in the sunny spot the wolf-dog had chosen for himself. He was more comfortable than he had been at any time during the six months of terrible winter—and as he slept he dreamed.

Gray Wolf, his wild mate, lay near him, but on his belly, her forepaws raised, her eyes and nostrils as keen and alert as the smell of man could make them. For there was that smell of man, as well as of balsam and spruce, in the warm spring air. She gazed anxiously and sometimes steadily, at Kazan as he slept. Her own gray spine stiffened when she saw the tawny hair along Kazan's back bristle at some dreamy vision. She whined softly as his upper lip snarled back, showing his long, white fangs. But, for the most part, Kazan lay quiet, save for the muscular twitchings of legs, shoulders and muzzle, which always tell when a dog is dreaming; and as he dreamed there came to the door of the cabin out on the plain a blue-eyed girl-woman, with a big brown braid over her shoulder, who called through the cup of her hands, "Kazan, Kazan, Kazan!"

The voice reached faintly to the top of the Sun rock, and Gray Wolf fastened her ears. Kazan stirred, and in another instant he was awake and on his feet. He leaped to an outcropping ledge, sniffing the air and looking far out over the plain that lay below them.

Over the plain the woman's voice came to them again, and Kazan ran to the edge of the rock and whined. Gray Wolf stepped softly to his side and laid her muzzle on his shoulder. She had grown to know what the Voice meant. Day and night she feared it, more than she feared the scent or sound of man.

Since she had given up the pack and her old life for Kazan, the Voice had become Gray Wolf's greatest enemy, and she hated it. It took Kazan from her. And wherever it went, Kazan followed.

Night after night it robbed her of her mate, and left her to wander alone under the stars and the moon, keeping faithfully to her loneliness, and never once responding with her wild tongue to the hunt-calls of her old brothers and sisters in the forests and out on the plains. Usually she would snarl at the Voice, and sometimes nip Kazan lightly to show her displeasure. But today, as the Voice came a third time, she slunk back into the darkness of a fissure between two rocks, and Kazan saw only the fiery glow of her eyes.

Kazan ran nervously to the trail their feet had worn up to the top of the Sun rock, and stood undecided. All day, and yesterday, he had been uneasy and disturbed. Whatever it was that stirred him seemed to be in the air, for he could not see it or hear it or scent it. But he could feel it. He went to the fissure and sniffed at Gray Wolf. Usually she whined coaxingly. But her response today was to draw back her lips until he could see her white fangs.

A fourth time the Voice came to them faintly, and she snapped fiercely at some unseen thing in the darkness between the two rocks. Kazan went again to the trail, still hesitating. Then he began to go down. It was a narrow, winding trail, worn only by the pads and claws of animals, for the Sun rock was a huge crag that rose almost sheer up for a hundred feet above the tops of the spruce and balsam, its bald

crest catching the first gleams of the sun in the morning and the last glow of it in the evening. Gray Wolf had first led Kazan to the security of the retreat at the top of the rock.

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CHAPTER X. The Great Change. The rocks, the ridges and the valleys were taking on a warmer glow. The poplar buds were ready to burst. The scent of balsam and of spruce grew heavier in the air each day, and all through the wilderness, in plain and forest, there was the rippling murmur of the spring foods fling their way to Hudson's bay. In that great bay there was the rumble and crash of the ice-fields thundering down in the early break-up through the Roes Welcome—the doorway to the Arctic, and for that reason there still came with the April wind an occasional sharp breath of winter.

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CHAPTER X. The Great Change. The rocks, the ridges and the valleys were taking on a warmer glow. The poplar buds were ready to burst. The scent of balsam and of spruce grew heavier in the air each day, and all through the wilderness, in plain and forest, there was the rippling murmur of the spring foods fling their way to Hudson's bay. In that great bay there was the rumble and crash of the ice-fields thundering down in the early break-up through the Roes Welcome—the doorway to the Arctic, and for that reason there still came with the April wind an occasional sharp breath of winter.

Kazan had shivered himself against that wind. Not a breath of air stirred in the sunny spot the wolf-dog had chosen for himself. He was more comfortable than he had been at any time during the six months of terrible winter—and as he slept he dreamed.

Gray Wolf, his wild mate, lay near him, but on his belly, her forepaws raised, her eyes and nostrils as keen and alert as the smell of man could make them. For there was that smell of man, as well as of balsam and spruce, in the warm spring air. She gazed anxiously and sometimes steadily, at Kazan as he slept. Her own gray spine stiffened when she saw the tawny hair along Kazan's back bristle at some dreamy vision. She whined softly as his upper lip snarled back, showing his long, white fangs. But, for the most part, Kazan lay quiet, save for the muscular twitchings of legs, shoulders and muzzle, which always tell when a dog is dreaming; and as he dreamed there came to the door of the cabin out on the plain a blue-eyed girl-woman, with a big brown braid over her shoulder, who called through the cup of her hands, "Kazan, Kazan, Kazan!"

The voice reached faintly to the top of the Sun rock, and Gray Wolf fastened her ears. Kazan stirred, and in another instant he was awake and on his feet. He leaped to an outcropping ledge, sniffing the air and looking far out over the plain that lay below them.

Over the plain the woman's voice came to them again, and Kazan ran to the edge of the rock and whined. Gray Wolf stepped softly to his side and laid her muzzle on his shoulder. She had grown to know what the Voice meant. Day and night she feared it, more than she feared the scent or sound of man.

Kazan went off to his corner, and lay down. Just as there had been some strange thing at the top of the Sun Rock to disturb him that day, so now there was a mystery that disturbed him in the cabin. He sniffed the air, trying to fathom its secret. Whatever it was, it seemed to make his mistress different, too. And she was digging out all sorts of odds and ends of things about the cabin, and doing Green Wolf packages. Late that night, before she went to bed, Joan came and snuggled her hand close down beside him for a few moments.

"We're going away," she whispered, and there was a curious tremble that was almost a sob in her voice. "We're going home, Kazan. We're going away down where his people live—where they have churches, and cities, and music, and all the beautiful things in the world. And we're going to take you, Kazan!"

Kazan didn't understand. But he was happy at having the woman so near to him, and talking to him. At these times he forgot Gray Wolf. The dog that was in him urged over his quarter-strain of wildness, and the woman after the baby alone filled his world. But after Joan had gone to her bed, and all was quiet in the cabin, his old uneasiness returned. He rose to his feet and moved stealthily about the cabin, sniffing at the walls, the door and the things his mistress had done into packages. The two white roses in his throat. Joan, half asleep, heard it, and murmured:

"Be quiet, Kazan. Go to sleep—go to sleep—" Long after that, Kazan stood rigid in the center of the room, listening, trembling. And faintly he heard, far away, the wailing cry of Gray Wolf. But tonight it was not the cry of loneliness. It sent a thrill through him. He ran to the door, and whined, but Joan was deep in slumber and did not hear him. Once more he heard the cry, and only once. Then the night grew still. He crouched down near the door.

Joan found him there, still watchful, still listening, when she awoke in the early morning. She came to open the door for him, and in a moment he was gone