

BAREE

Son of Kazan

By JAMES OLIVER CURWOOD

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WNU Service

The stream was not more than a hundred feet in width, but it cost Baree close to a losing struggle to get across it. Until he dragged himself out on the opposite shore, the extent of his injuries was not impressed upon him fully. One hind leg, for the time, was useless; his forward left shoulder was laid open to the bone; his head and body were torn and cut; and as he dragged himself slowly away from the stream, the trail he left in the snow was a red path of blood. It trickled from his panting jaws, between which his tongue was bleeding; it ran down his legs and flanks and belly, and it dripped from his ears, one of which was slit clean for two inches as though cut with a knife. His instincts were dazed, his perception of things clouded as if by a veil drawn close over his eyes. Half dead, he dragged himself on until by chance he came to a clump of dwarf spruce. Into this he struggled, and then he dropped exhausted.

All that night and until noon the next day Baree lay without moving. The fever burned in his blood; it flamed high and swift toward death; then it ebbed slowly, and life conquered. At noon he came forth. He was weak, and he wobbled on his legs. His hind leg still dragged, and he was racked with pain. But it was a splendid day. The sun was warm; the snow was thawing, the sky was like a great blue sea; and the floods of life coursed warmly through Baree's veins. But now, for all time, his desires were changed, and his great quest at an end.

A red ferocity grew in Baree's eyes as he snarled in the direction of last night's fight with the wolves. They were no longer his people. They were no longer of his blood. Never again could the hunt-call lure him or the voice of the pack rouse the old longing. In him there was a thing new-born, an undying hatred for the wolf, a hatred that was to grow in him until it became like a disease in his vitals, a thing ever present and insistent, demanding vengeance on their kind. Last night he had gone to them a comrade. Today he was an outcast. Cut and maimed, bearing with him scars for all time, he had learned his lesson of the wilderness. Tomorrow, and the next day, and for days after that with a new purpose, he would remember the lesson well.

Chapter X

At the cabin on the Gray Loon, on the fourth night of Baree's absence, Pierrot was smoking his pipe after a great supper of caribou tenderloin he had brought in from the trail, and Nepeese was listening to his tale of the remarkable shot he had made, when a sound at the door interrupted them. Nepeese opened it, and Baree came in. Three days and nights of hunger in which he could not hunt because of the leg that dragged had put on him the marks of starvation. Battle-scarred and covered with dried blood-clots that still clung tenaciously to his long hair, he was a sight that drew at last a long breath from Nepeese. A queer smile was growing in Pierrot's face as he leaned forward in his chair; and then slowly rising to his feet, and looking closer, he said to Nepeese:

"Ventre Saint Gris! Oul, he has been to the pack, Nepeese, and the pack turned on him. It was not a two-wolf fight—non! It was the pack. He is cut and torn in fifty places. And—mon Dieu, he is alive!"

In Pierrot's voice there was growing wonder and amazement. He was incredulous, and yet he could not disbelieve what his eyes told him. What had happened was nothing short of a miracle, and for a time he uttered not a word more but remained staring in silence while Nepeese spoke from her astonishment to give Baree doctoring and food. After the pain and hunger and treachery of his adventure, it was a wonderful homecoming for Baree. He slept that night at the foot of the Willow's bed. The next morning it was the cool caress of his tongue on her hand that awakened her.

With this day they resumed the comradeship interrupted by Baree's temporary desertion. The attachment was greater than ever on Baree's part. It was he who had run away from the Willow, who had deserted her at the call of the pack, and it seemed at times as though he sensed the depths of his perfidy and was striving to make amends. There was indubitably a very great change in him. He hung to Nepeese like a shadow. Instead of sleeping at night in the spruce shelter Pierrot made for him, he made himself a little hollow in the earth close to the cabin door. Pierrot thought that he understood, and Nepeese

mought that she understood more; but in reality the key to the mystery remained with Baree himself. He no longer played as he had played before he went off alone into the forest. He did not chase sticks, or run until he was winded, for the pure joy of running. His puppyishness was gone. In its place was a great worship and a rankling bitterness, a love for the girl and a hatred for the pack and all that it stood for.

Whenever he heard the wolf-howl, it brought an angry snarl into his throat, and he would bare his fangs until even Pierrot would draw a little away from him. But a touch of the girl's hand would quiet him.

In a week or two the heavier snows came, and Pierrot began making his trips over the trap-lines. Nepeese had entered into a thrilling bargain with him this winter. Pierrot had taken her into partnership. Every fifth trap every fifth deadfall, and every fifth poison-bait was to be her own, and what they caught or killed was to bring a bit nearer to realization a wonderful dream that was growing in the Willow's soul. Pierrot had promised, if they had great luck that winter, they would go down together on the last snows to Nelson House and buy the little old organ that was for sale there; and if the organ was sold, they would work another winter, and get a new one.

This plan gave Nepeese an enthusiastic and tireless interest in the trap-line. Pierrot impressed on her that it made a comrade and co-worker of her on the trail. That was his scheme: to keep her with him when he was away from the cabin. He knew that Gush McTaggart would come again to the Gray Loon, probably more than once during the winter. He had swift dogs, and it was a short journey. And when McTaggart came, Nepeese must not be at the cabin—alone.

Pierrot's trap-line swung into the north and west, covering in all a matter of fifty miles, with an average of two traps, one deadfall, and a poison-bait to each mile. Halfway over this line Pierrot had built a small log cabin, and at the end of it another, so that a day's work meant twenty-five miles. This was easy for Pierrot, and not hard on Nepeese after the first few days.

All through October and November they made the trips regularly, making the round every six days, which gave one day of rest at the cabin on the Gray Loon and another day in the cabin at the end of the trail. They were splendid months. Fur was thick, and it was steadily cold without bad storm. Nepeese not only carried a small pack on her shoulders in order that Pierrot's load might be lighter, but she trained Baree to bear tiny shoulder-panniers which she manufactured. In these panniers Baree carried the bait.

In at least a third of the total number of traps set there was always what Pierrot called trash—rabbits, owls, whisky-jacks, jays, and squirrels. These, with the skin or feathers stripped off, made up the bulk of the bait for the traps ahead.

One afternoon early in December, as they were returning to the Gray Loon, Pierrot stopped suddenly a dozen paces ahead of Nepeese and stared at the snow. A strange snow-trail had joined their own and was heading toward the cabin. For half a minute Pierrot was silent and scarcely moved a muscle as he stared. The trail came straight out of the north—and off there was Lac Bain. Also they were the marks of large snowshoes, and the stride indicated was that of a tall man. Before Pierrot had spoken, Nepeese had guessed what they meant.

"M'sieu the Factor from Lac Bain!" she said.

Baree was sniffing suspiciously at the strange trail. They heard the low growl in his throat, and Pierrot's shoulders stiffened.

"Yes, the M'sieu," he said.

The Willow's heart beat more swiftly as they went on. She was not afraid of McTaggart, not physically afraid; and yet something rose up in her breast and choked her at thought of his presence on the Gray Loon. Why was he there? It was not necessary for Pierrot to answer the question, even had she given voice to it. She knew. The Factor from Lac Bain had no business there—except to see her. The blood burned red in her cheeks as she thought again of that minute on the edge of the chasm when he had almost crushed her in his arms. Would he try that again?

Pierrot, deep in his own somber thoughts, scarcely heard the strange laugh that came suddenly from her lips. Nepeese was listening to the growl that was again in Baree's throat. It was a low but terrible sound. When half a mile from the cabin, she unslung the panniers from his shoulders and carried them herself. Ten minutes later they saw a man advancing to meet them.

It was not McTaggart. Pierrot recognized him, and with an audible breath of relief waved his hand. It was DeBar, who trapped in the Barren Country north of Lac Bain. Pierrot knew him well. They had exchanged fox-poison. They were friends and there was pleasure in the grip of their hands. DeBar stared then at Nepeese.

"Tonnerre, she has grown into a woman!" he cried, and like a woman Nepeese looked at him straight, with the color deepening in her cheeks as he bowed low with a courtesy that dated back a couple of centuries beyond the trap-line.

DeBar lost no time in explaining his mission, and before they reached the cabin Pierrot and Nepeese knew why

he had come. When the Factor on Lac Bain was leaving on a journey in five days, and he had sent DeBar as a special messenger to request Pierrot to come up to assist the clerk and the half-breed storekeeper in his absence. Pierrot made no comment at first. But he was thinking. Why had Gush McTaggart sent for him? Why had he not chosen some one nearer? Not until a fire was crackling in the sheet-iron stove in the cabin, and Nepeese was busily engaged getting supper, did he voice these questions to the fox-hunter.

DeBar shrugged his shoulders.

"He asked me, at first, if I could stay. But I have a wife with a bad lung, Pierrot. It was caught by frost last winter, and I dare not leave her long alone. He has great faith in you. Besides, you know all the trappers on the Company's books at Lac Bain. So he sent for you, and begs you not to worry about your fur-lines, as he will pay you double what you would catch in the time you are at the Post."

"And—Nepeese?" said Pierrot. "M'sieu expects me to bring her?"

From the stove the Willow bent her head to listen, and her heart leaped free again at DeBar's answer.

"He said nothing about that. But surely—it will be a great change for 'le m'selle."

Pierrot nodded.

"Possibly, Netootam."

They discussed the matter no more that night. But for hours Pierrot was still, thinking, and a hundred times he asked himself the same question: Why had McTaggart sent for him? It must be, he told himself finally, that M'sieu had sent for him because he wanted to win over the father of Nepeese and gain the friendship of Nepeese herself. For this was undoubtedly a very great honor that the Factor was conferring on him. And yet, deep down in his heart, he was filled with suspicion.

When DeBar was about to leave the next morning, Pierrot said:

"Tell M'sieu that I will leave for Lac Bain the day after tomorrow."

After DeBar had gone, he said to Nepeese:

"And you shall remain here, ma cherie. I will not take you to Lac



"Tell M'sieu That I Will Leave, the Day After Tomorrow."

Bain. I have had a dream that M'sieu will not go on a journey, but that he has lied, and that he will be sick when I arrive at the post. And yet, if it should happen that you care to go—"

Nepeese straightened suddenly, like a reed that has been caught by the wind.

"Non!" she cried, so fiercely that Pierrot laughed, and rubbed his hands.

So it happened that on the second day after the fox-hunter's visit Pierrot left for Lac Bain, with Nepeese in the door waving him good-by until he was out of sight.

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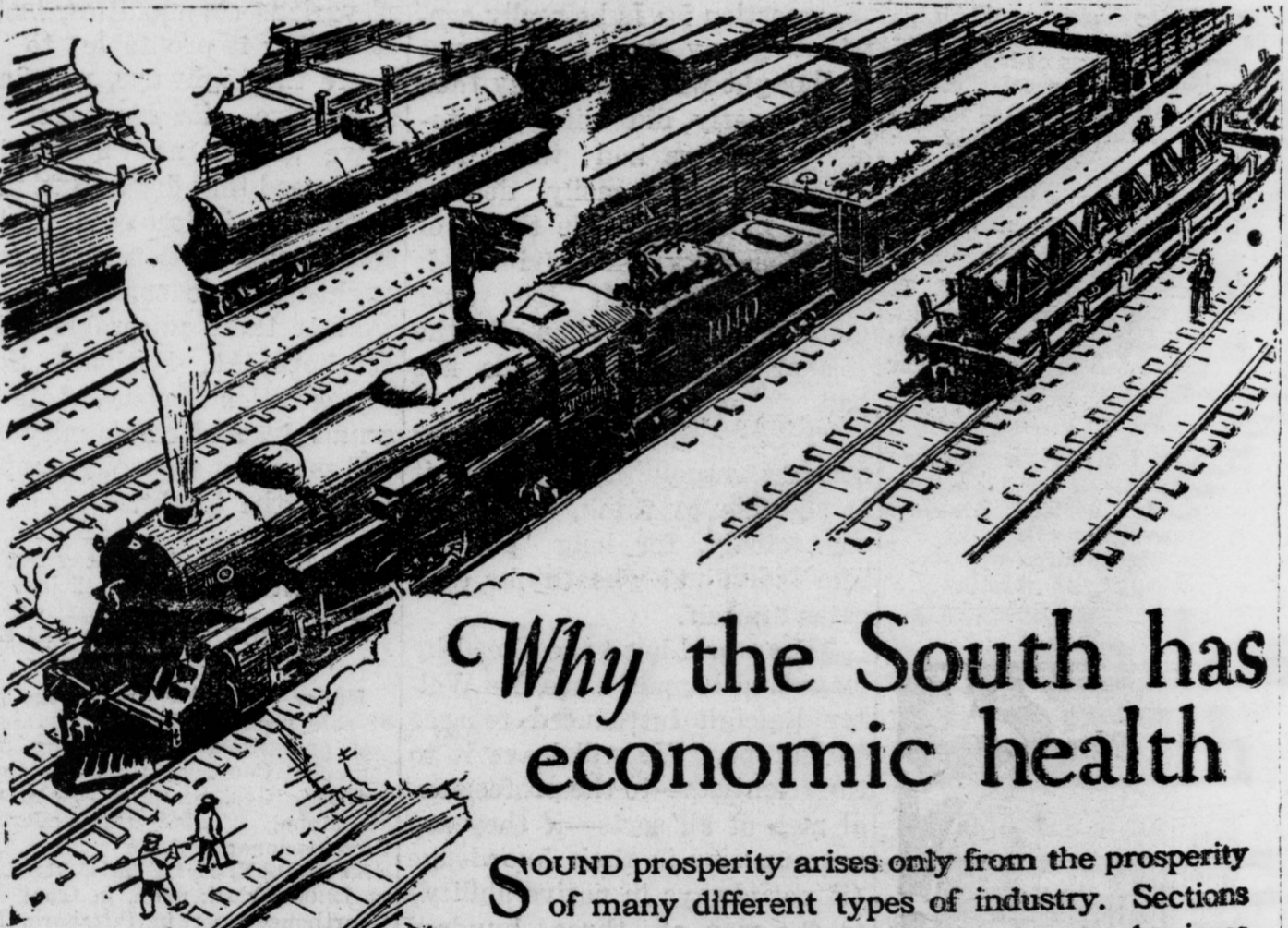
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