

The Honor of the Big Snows

By James Oliver Curwood

CHAPTER IX.

The New Agent and His Son.

Jan thrust a hand inside his coat and clutched at the papers that Jean de Gravois had read. Then he drew them forth slowly and held them crumpled in his fingers, while for many minutes he stared straight out into the gray gloom of the treeless plain.

His eyes shifted. They went from rock to rock and from tree to tree until at last they rested upon a giant spruce which hung out over the precipitous wall of the ridge, its thick top beehiving and sighing to the black rocks that shot up out of the snow 500 feet below. Mince had told Jan its story. In the first autumn of the wo-



He Thrust in the Papers, Crowded Them Down and Filled the Hole With Chunks of Bark.

man's life at Lac Bain he and Perce had climbed the old spruce, lopping off its branches until only the black cap remained, and after that it was known far and wide as the "lobstick" of Cummins' wife. It was a voiceless companion which signified that all the honor and love known to the wilderness people had been given to her.

To it went Jan, the papers still held in his hand. He had seen a pair of whisky jacks stored food in the butt of the tree two or three summers before, and now his fingers groped for the hole. When he found it he thrust in the papers, crowded them down and filled the hole with chunks of bark.

"Always my sister, and never anything more to Jan Thoreau," he said gently in French as if he were speaking to a spirit in the old tree. "That is the honor of these snows; it is what the great God means us to be. I swear that Jan Thoreau will never do wrong to the little Melisse." With a face white and set in its determination he turned slowly away from the tree.

When he came into the cabin for breakfast next morning Jan's face showed signs of the struggle through which he had gone. Cummins had already finished, and he found Melisse alone. Her hair was brushed back in its old, smooth way, and when she heard him she flung her long braid over her shoulder, so that it fell down in front of her. He saw the movement, and smiled his thanks without speaking.

"You don't look well, Jan," she said anxiously. "You are pale, and your eyes are bloodshot."

"I am not feeling right," he admitted, trying to appear cheerful, "but this coffee will make a new man of me. You make the best coffee in the world, Melisse."

"What are you going to do today, Brother Jan?" she asked.

"Drive out on the Churchill trail. Ledge wants supplies, and he's too busy with his trap lines to come in."

"Will you take me?"

"I'm afraid not, Melisse. It's a twelve mile run and a heavy load."

"Very well. I'll get ready immediately."

She jumped up from the table, darting a look at him with her eyes, and ran to her room.

"It's too far, Melisse," he called after her. "It's too far, and I've a heavy load."

"Didn't I take that twenty mile run with you over to— Oh, dear! Jan, have you seen my new skin cap?"



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"It's out here, hanging on the wall," replied Jan, falling into her humor despite himself. "But I say, Melisse—"

"Are the dogs ready?" she called. "If they're not I'll be dressed before you can harness them, Jan."

"They'll be here within fifteen minutes," he replied, surrendering to her.

Her merry face, laughing triumph at him through the partly open door, destroyed the last vestige of his opposition, and he left her with something of his old cheerfulness of manner, whistling a gay forest tune as he hurried toward the store.

When he returned with the team Melisse was waiting for him, a gray thing of silvery lynx fur, with her cheeks, lips and eyes aglow, her trim little feet clad in soft caribou boots that came to her knees, and with a bunch of the brilliant bakneesh fastened jauntily in her cap.

"I've made room for you," he said in greeting, pointing to the sledge.

"Which I'm not going to fill for five miles at least," declared Melisse. "Isn't it a glorious morning, Jan? I feel as if I can run from here to Ledge's."

With a crack of his whip and a shout, Jan swung the dogs across the open, with Melisse running lightly at his side. From their cabin Jean and Iowaka called out shrill adieus.

"The day is not far off when they two will be as you and I, my Iowaka," said Jan in his poetic Cree. "I wager you'll find it will be before her next birthday."

And Melisse was saying:

"I wonder if there are many people as happy as Jean and Iowaka?"

She caught her breath, and Jan cracked on the dogs in a spurt that left her panting, a full dozen rods behind him. With a wild halloo he stopped the team and waited.

"That's unfair, Jan! You'll have to put me on the sledge."

He tucked her in among the furs, and the dogs strained at their traces, with Jan's whip curling and snapping over their backs, until they were leaping swiftly and with unbroken rhythm of motion over the smooth trail. Then Jan gathered in his whip and ran close to the leader, his moccasined feet taking the short, quick, light steps of the trained forest runner, his chest thrown a little out, his eyes upon the twisting trail ahead.

Mile after mile slipped behind, and not until they reached the mountain on which he had fought the missionary did Jan bring his dogs to a walk. Melisse jumped from the sledge and ran quickly to his side.

"I can beat you to the top now!" she cried. "If you catch me— There was the old witching challenge in her eyes.

She sped up the side of the ridge. Panting and breathless, Jan pursued with the dogs. Her advantage was too great for him to overcome this time, and she stood laughing down at him when he came to the top of the ridge.

"You're as pretty as a fairy, Melisse!" he exclaimed, his eyes shining with admiration. "Prettier than the fairy in the book!"

"Thank you, brother mine! I believe you do still love me a little."

"More than ever in my life," replied Jan quickly, though he tried to hold his tongue.

As they went on to Ledge's he found that the joyousness of the morning

Author of "The Danger Trail"

was giving way again to the old gloom, and heartache. "Brother Jan, Brother Jan, Brother Jan!" The words pounded themselves incessantly in his brain until they seemed to keep time with his steps beside the sledge.

Ledge was stripping the hair fat from a fox skin when the team pulled up in front of his cabin. When he saw the daughter of the factor at Lac Bain with Jan he jumped briskly to his feet, flung his cap through the door of the shack and began bowing and scraping to her with all his might.

Melisse laughed merrily as Ledge continued to bow before her, rattling away in a delighted torrent of French.

"Ah, these are my great-grandchildren, M'selle Melisse," he said. Then he turned to Jan. "Did you meet the strange team?"

"We met no team."

Ledge looked puzzled. Half a mile away the top of a snow covered ridge was visible from the cabin. He pointed to it.

"An hour ago I saw it going westward along the mountain—three men and six dogs. Whom have you out from Lac Bain?"

"No one," replied Jan. "It must have been the new agent from Churchill. We expect him early this winter. Shall we hurry back, Melisse, and see if he has brought our books and violin strings?"

"You must have dinner with me," objected Ledge.

Jan caught a quick signal from Melisse.

"Not today, Ledge. It's early and we have a lunch for the trail. What do you say, Melisse?"

"If you're not tired, Jan."

"Tired?"

He tossed the last package from the sledge and crunched his long whip over the dogs' backs as they both cried out their farewell to the little Frenchman.

"Tired?" he repeated, running close beside her as the team swung lightly back into the trail and laughing down into her face. "How could I ever get

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"Is she not worth it?" cried Jean in rapture. "You are welcome to every look that you can get, Jan Thoreau. But the foreigner—I will skin him alive and spit him with the devil thorn if he so much as peeps at her out of the wrong way of his eye."

Croisset shrugged his shoulders. "There are two of the foreigners at Nelson House, and two on the Whodana, and one."

An hour later Jan went slowly across the open to Cummins' cabin. As he paused for an instant at the door he heard a laugh that was strange to him, and when he opened it to enter he stood perplexed and undecided. Melisse had risen from the table at the sound of his approach, and his eyes quickly passed from her flushed face to the young man who was sitting opposite her. He caught a nervous tremor in her voice when she said:

"Mr. Dixon, this is my brother, Jan."

The stranger jumped to his feet and held out a hand.

"I'm glad to know you, Cummins."

"Thoreau," corrected Jan quietly, as he took the extended hand. "Jan Thoreau."

"Oh, I beg your pardon. I thought"—He turned inquiringly to Melisse. The flush deepened in her cheeks as she began to gather up the dishes.

"We are of no relation," continued Jan, something impelling him to speak words with cool precision. "Only we have lived under the same roof since she was a baby, and so we have come to be like brother and sister."

"Miss Melisse has been telling me about your run this morning," exclaimed the young Englishman, his face reddening slightly as he detected the girl's embarrassment. "I wish I had seen it."

"There will be plenty of it very soon," replied Jan, caught by the frankness of the other's manner. "Our runners will be going out among the trappers within a fortnight."

"And will they take me?"

"You may go with me if you can run. I leave the day after tomorrow."

"Thanks," said Dixon, moving toward the door.

Melisse did not lift her head as he went out. Faintly she said:

"I've kept your dinner for you, Jan. Why didn't you come sooner?"

"I had dinner with Gravois," he replied. "Jean said that you would hardly be prepared for five, Melisse, so I accepted his invitation."

He took down from the wall a fur sledge coat, in which Melisse had mended a rent a day or two before, and, throwing it over his arm, turned to leave.

"Jan?"

He faced her slowly, knowing that in spite of himself there was a strangeness in his manner which she would not understand.

"Why are you going away the day after tomorrow—two weeks before the others? You didn't tell me."

"I'm going a hundred miles into the south," he answered.

"Over the Nelson House trail?"

"Yes."

"Oh!" Her lips curled slightly as she looked at him. Then she laughed, and a bright spot leaped into either cheek.

"I understand, brother," she said softly. "Pardon me for questioning you so. I had forgotten that the MacVeigh girl lives on the Nelson trail. Iowaka says that she is as sweet as a wild flower. I wish you would have her come up and visit us some time, Jan."

Jan's face went red, then white, but Melisse saw only the first effect of her random shot and was briskly gathering up the dishes.

"I turn off into the Cree lake country before I reach MacVeigh's," he was on the point of saying, but the words hung upon his lips, and he remained silent.

A few minutes later he was talking with Jean de Gravois. The little Frenchman's face was ominously dark, and he puffed furiously upon his pipe when Jan told him why he was leaving at once for the south.

"Tumbling away!" he repeated for the tenth time in French, his thin lips curling in a sneer. "I am sorry that I gave you my oath, Jan Thoreau, else I would go myself and tell Melisse what I read in the papers. Fish! Why can't you forget?"

"I may—some day," said Jan. "That is why I am going into the south two weeks early, and I shall be gone until after the big frost. If I remain here another week I shall tell Melisse, and then—"

He shrugged his shoulders despairingly.

"And then what?"

"I should go away forever."

Jan snapped his fingers with a low laugh.

"Then remain another week, Jan Thoreau, and if it turns out as you say I swear I will abandon my two Iowakas and little Jean to the wolves!"

"I am going the day after tomorrow."

The next morning Iowaka complained to Melisse that Gravois was as surly as a bear.

(to be continued)

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