

PIERRE OF THE NORTH WOODS: A Romance

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Chapter II.

"You do not know the new trapper in the Gulch?" Jacques asked some evenings later when he had stopped to smoke a pipe with Pierre at his cabin.

"Non, I thought mebbe he be your friend," he continued. "He ask so many question what like you look, how you talk, until I say b'gosh you ask more question than a woman—oui," concluding his speech with an emphatic movement of his head as of one who has sounded all the vagaries of the opposite sex.

"And then?"

"And then he say he come out to see you."

"And he will come?" Pierre asked glad to meet a friend of Jacques.

"If M'sieur Pierre does not mind so plenty,' he say and he bow so low and look so solemn that I laugh."

But the visit of which Jacques had spoken was delayed for there followed a week of storm, of snow-flakes swirled into deep windrows until scarcely the tree tops looked forth upon the wastes of snow and the only access to the still world of whiteness was through the shuttered window by which Pierre was glad to escape from his entombment.

"It is the trapper in the valley who will suffer mos'," Jacques remarked, relieved to find Pierre once more in communication with the outer world.

"And you think he will not be safe?" Pierre asked.

"He will most likely starve unless he have plenty to eat in the cabin. There is much snow in the Gulch and the cabin almost buried at any time, is now under one beeg mountain of snow. He is new to the woods."

The danger of the new trapper of Devil's Gulch being thus a certainty Pierre and Jacques set forth to relieve the interned man as speedily as possible. Secure in his woodsman's sense of locality Jacques succeeded in locating the cabin and the work of relief began without delay.

Little by little the Snow King gave ground and when the roof had been cleared the outline of the cabin was disclosed, they burrowed with the dilligence of beavers for the entrance.

Their efforts were at last rewarded. The door swung open admitting the light from above into the semi-darkness of the room.

From the bed of skins in the corner a very weak voice spoke.

"La Diable. Ha' I thought he would come but—M'sieu Diable I haf had so little to eat last week, so very little, I shall be a light burden to you. Ha' Ha' Do you not thank me?"

"Mon Dieu," exclaimed Pierre, advancing into the room. "It is Prosper—Prosper my half-brother," gasping with astonishment.

"The new trapper, thy brother." Jacques said with incredulity.

But Jacques, as he looked upon the face of the entombed trapper perceived that it was thin to emaciation and that the eyes were staring out from their sockets with a wierd ghost-like stare.

The voice of Prosper was so weak that the words were hardly recognizable as his gaze rested upon Pierre.

"Ha' who is this? Le Diable himself—the image of Pierre—fool that he was."

His eyes roamed unseeingly the walls of the room until fastening his gaze upon Jacques he went on:

"I fool them all, the old priest, Madeline, only Pierre he knew, he knew—an' he never tell. They were the simple folk, the infants-in-arms I call them. I grow tired of them and I leave them all. Then I go to visit Pierre and send him back

to the old priest who say he will never forgive me if anything happen to his Pierre and to Madeline, but non, non, I look in at the window and then I cannot go—I turn away in the snow to woods."

Wolfish hunger burned in the eyes of Prosper. In moments of consciousness he begged weakly for food, then lapsing into delirium he talked wildly of Pierre, the priest and Madeline.

Since the cabin was without food both Jacques and Pierre realized that if Prosper's life were to be saved no time must be lost and improvising a stretcher of poles covered with bear skins, crawling, sinking, stumbling under the weight of Prosper they brought him over the ridge and down the trail to Pierre's cabin on the knoll.

Here such aid as a trapper's cabin could afford was administered to Prosper but to the eyes of both watchers it was apparent after a brief time that Prosper was not rallying so far undermined was his strength by exposure and starvation.

On the afternoon of the second day, Jacques, bending over him observed that the delirium had passed and that he was looking about him with the wonder eyes of a child.

"Where is this?" he asked, his voice rising scarcely above a whisper.

Then, "Mon Dieu, Pierre, that you—mais oui, Pierre. I have been dreaming," making an effort to rise.

For a moment the intervening years seemed to slip back and once again as in boyhood Pierre was the protector of Prosper.

"It—it is—I, Prosper," he exclaimed, throwing his arms about the neck of the other.

"Non, non," Prosper cried, weakly repulsing him, "I am not worthy. I—Prosper—I was Le Diable."

There was silence for a few minutes then Prosper whispered: "It was I, Prosper, who stole the money and now Madeline she know—I boast—"

His voice trailed off into weariness and was lost amid the gathering Shadows like a little travelled path amidst the pines in the deep gloom of mountain valleys.

"I—I did—care for her—mon Pierre, but it was you—you that she love always."

The fireplace cast weird shadows throughout the room, strange idly moving shapes that stole across the room like the shadows which slipping from the mountain sides seek the valleys as day declines.

With his remaining strength Prosper sought to break the cord from which the silver cross at his neck hung. He looked meaningly at Pierre who bending over him caught the words:

"The cross—Pierre—the cross of the priest—he send—to you—"

Suddenly his hand was outstretched in greeting and he spoke as one who, looking far into the shadows, sees emerge a familiar form.

"Ah, mon Pere—c'est—toi. Thou hast forgiven Prosp—"

His hand fumbled weakly at the silver cross about his neck.

A pine knot fell clattering to the ashes sending forth its shaft of light to the couch where Pierre knelt by the side of his brother. Jacques glancing at the form of Prosper, perceived that he had slipped away upon the long lone Trail.

L'Envoi:—Thus did Prosper in his death find peace, and Pierre, by the death of Prosper, happiness. And when winter had passed and spring, trailing her mantle of green, stole gypsy-like through the wood ways touching here and there the drooping fingers of the trees until they flushed with buoyant life, Pierre, led by the impulse of his strong young life, journeyed back to St. Anne Du Lac, and Madeline did not wait for him in vain.