

PIERRE OF THE NORTH WOODS: A Romance

(By Robert B. Forsyth, Cranbrook and Victoria, B.C.)

Beneath the hunter's snow-shoes the snow flattened out into web-like tracks. All about him was the deep silence of the North Land. The thrust of the wind sweeping through pine and fir was keen and sure as the bite of the serpent, and Pierre flung his arms smartly across his body to quicken the blood flow.

He came over the hill with the easy swinging stride of the chasseur of the forest, his huge sinewy form swaying now to one side, now to the other with the rhythm of the movement. Little jets of powdery snow caught in the grasp of the netted framework were tossed outward and fell in miniature drifts on either side.

The eve greens brushed him slightly as he passed with the familiarity of friendliness. From his lips the snatch of an old French river song came gaily, under the spell of a bracing atmosphere and the exhilaration of tingling muscles in regular movement.

A slight jar interrupted the rhythm of his walk as when one encounters an obstacle unseen—and a vague sense of falling and of snow dashed quickly into his face as he lurched earthward. Then a rabbit white as the snow around him, surprised and frightened went flying down the trail. Yet as he stooped to tighten the lacings of the snow-shoe he was conscious of danger, the lurking spirit of Fear that hides in the silent places of the North.

He raised his rifle as the furry arched Thing sprang through the air, hissing its hate. Caught in mid-air by the answering bullet it rolled at his feet, its claws clenched to tear and its jaws gaping wide with the cry of battle.

"Sacre!" he exclaimed as he brushed from his hunting coat the snow which had clung to it. "Pierre ol' friend, that was close, by gar."

The lynx gave one last convulsive struggle and lay still.

"Fine, mon ami," a voice exclaimed at his side. He felt the warm slap of a friendly hand on his shoulder. Turning, he looked into the face of His Majesty's mail-carrier smiling into his own.

"Mebbee, if he haf struck one beeg blow, Pierre would not now be speaking to yourself, my fren'."

"For which I mus' tank the bon Dieu," the other exclaimed earnestly. "For in that case I should not haf met you, my comrade, and hees Majesty's mail, she would be returned."

Pierre grasped the hand of Jacques. "You do me one service in two, my fren', and now you shall be my guest. Tres bien."

"At any rate it is the Yule-tide," returned the other, "and two is more happy than one."

Together they passed over the trail to Pierre's cabin.

The fireplace, rudely constructed and patterned, soon sent forth its glow of welcome to the guest. The appetizing odor of bear-steak as it sizzled over the fire and the pungent aroma of black coffee added their note of welcome and good cheer.

For Pierre it was a festive occasion. The pledge to each other's health after the meal, the spirals of tobacco smoke thick as a coast fog that floated lazily to the unhewn logs above, and more than all the opportunity for "man talk" so often denied the voyageur of the woods knit together these rugged souls of strength closer than even the soul of David to Jonathan. Little by little Pierre resumed the role of narrator while Jacques listened.

There were tales of the logging-camps of the Ottawa that he told and of the big log-boom in the spring, and he the rider of the King log and not least the shooting of the rapids that made Jacques of New Brunswick tremble with excitement and

envy, the recitation ending in one significant "Bravo" from the listener. But always, like the scent which the questing hound pursues, the trail led back to the little French village where Father La Joie and Madeline, the daughter of the notary, lived.

"Madeline," interrupted Jacques, in the spirit of badinage, "that is the French for baggage."

"Pooh," replied Pierre, not in the least ruffled. "Your French is none too good, I fear, mon ami. You have only the—what the English call—the patois."

At this sally they both laughed, and for a moment Jacques affected great indignation. But Jacques would know more of Madeline remarking that as a subject she did not seem to lack interest to his friend.

Then Pierre painted for him in his picturesque language an oval face of olive tint framed in masses of reddish brown hair, lips as red as the ripe cherry in her father's garden, her lustrous brown-black eye, the lithe girlish figure and above all the half-demure, half-coy manner of her people. This was Madeline.

"Just lak the apple bloom," Jacques commented when Pierre had finished.

"And did you leave her for—for thees?" he asked, pointing with dramatic force to the four corners of the cabin.

"Non, non, mon Jacques," Pierre replied. "It was on account of my half-brother, Prosper, and Madeline."

"She like him too much?" Jacques asked.

"Oui, oui, mon ami, she like him too much. Mais oui, oui he was mechant—my half-brother, but she—she trust him," Pierre faltered.

"For why?" Jacques asked, eager to hear the story meanwhile lighting a taper to replenish the coals in his pipe-bowl.

Then little by little the whole tale of Pierre's flight from his native village became clear as the simply told narrative proceeded.

They had grown up together in the little Quebec village, Madeline, Prosper and Pierre, and because Pierre was the stronger in body had assumed the care of his younger half-brother. Always they had played together, they three, and as Pierre grew older he set himself to making snares for rabbit and mink, for he would be a hunter, and once he had donned his father's rigging, belt, leggings, hunting coat and all, and marched across the meadow to play house under the elms where Madeline had laid out her shelves of broken delf and surprised her at play with her cups and saucers.

"You are almost a man," she had said, surveying him proudly, and he walked home with head erect and with all the glory of the real hunter.

Then had come the First Communion and the long row of white-robed youth who knelt to receive the Bishop's benediction, but only Prosper had come late. He remembered Madeline as she knelt with prayer book and missal all in white, sweet as the opening apple-blossom, and her responses to the priest, low and mild as the west wind. Once he had dared as they knelt side by side to touch her hand and Madeline had smiled shyly and something in the manner of Father La Joie, a slight inclination of the head perhaps, but something had seemed to motion assent.

And just then Prosper, tardy and over-clumsy with haste, wedged himself between them and they had given him space; but the incident had not passed from mind.

"He will do you some harm," Gran'mere La Pointe had commented on the following day, when Pierre had brought her a mess of game. "It is the bad luck he bring you, no doubt," and Gran'mere knew.