

The Free Traders

By VICTOR ROUSSEAU

WNU SERVICE

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ADVENTURE, FIGHTING—AND LOVE

He turned his examination first to the cut in her head. He tore strips from his shirt, went down to the water and cleansed them thoroughly; then, returning, he proceeded to wash and bandage it. It was a bad gash from a rock, and she had bled a good deal, which was a good thing, relieving the concussion which had no doubt been the cause of the prolonged insensibility. Having ascertained that she seemed to have received no bodily injuries beyond contusions, Lee examined her limbs. He saw that one knee hung awry. In a moment he had the gaiter off, and discovered that the joint had been dislocated.

It was unnerving, holding that white knee between his hands, so instinct with life, so fragile, delicate, so wonderful when viewed as a piece of mechanism which he was to manipulate like some clumsy journeyman, called in to repair the work of a master.

Fortunately, Lee had assisted at precisely that same operation several times in the field, and, trying to disregard the moans of pain that came from the girl's lips as he proceeded, he fumbled with the displaced bone.

But that struggle was terrible, for the body of itself knows no dignity. Conscious, Lee knew that the girl would neither have flinched nor moaned; but unconscious, she could not control the protests of the body, which had to be restrained by something almost brutal in its frank violence.

But Lee struggled on, feeling the shaft head of the bone scow the edges of the socket under the cap. A final struggle, the weight of his whole body and shoulders thrown to his task—and suddenly it was accomplished.

Here you have the hero and heroine: Lee Anderson, Royal Canadian Mounted Police sergeant, and Joyce Pelly. They have been thrown down a cliff by an explosion of dynamite, set off by the Free Traders. The girl's memory is gone from the shock; they are in a wilderness and are being pursued by the Free Traders, who are bent on killing the hero and recapturing the girl, whom Rathway, their leader, greatly desires. Moreover, Anderson, who has met the girl on the trail by chance, is there to arrest Joyce's father. The Free Traders, wilderness hootch-runners, think he is after them. And Anderson, in rescuing the girl from them, has beaten up Rathway in a fight. So the story starts out with the hero and heroine in difficulties.

Who is the author? Why, Victor Rousseau. And that tells you a lot—among other things, that the adventures of the young couple to date aren't a circumstance to what's coming. The hero is shot at, thrown into a cataract and generally manhandled. The heroine is abducted again by Rathway. But somehow both manage to escape death. And in the end of course the brave deserves the fair and wins her, even if his purpose to arrest the heroine's father might near wrecks the exciting romance.

CHAPTER I

Sergeant Anderson Rides Into Little Falls

Lee Anderson, sergeant in the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, had been leading his horse up the last hill. Now he stopped at the top and lit his pipe, letting the animal snatch a few blades of the sparse grass that grew among the ferns and raspberry brambles beside the cart track.

There were, perhaps, thirty-three or four years to his credit. His rather lined, deeply sunburned face and throat contrasted markedly with the edging of white flesh at the V-top of his open shirt. Lee, in his prospector's clothing, appeared to be typically one of those reserved, quiet, self-contained men whom the north breeds.

His rather heavy horse, a combination of pack and saddle, was well laden behind the rolled blankets that formed a parapet across its shoulders.

Lee inhaled with delight the warm, steamy exhalations of the earth, rich with the added debris of the year. He turned and looked forward, beyond the settlement of Little Falls, lying at the foot of the slope in front of him, the last of the settlements on his side of Stony range.

It was an unkempt, untidy little place, created by the advent of the lumber companies a few years before, and straggling among the knee-high stumps of what had been virgin forest within the decade.

After his belated return from France, only to find the old Northwest mounted, of which he had been a member, merged in the new Dominion body, Lee himself had been stationed at Manitowish. He had been in the police eight years before the war. It was the only life that appealed to him. His service had expired during his term at the front, but his first act of returning had been to rejoin.

Inspector Crawley had sent for him a few days later.

"Anderson," he said, "I want you to be ready to start for Stony range in the morning to pick up a man named Pelly. He's on the list of 'wanted'—headed at for some time, in fact. I guess you don't know anything about the case, though."

"No, sir. It must have happened while I was in France."

"Oh, it happened a deuce of a time before you went to France, Anderson. Twenty-five years ago, more or less. Might have left the poor devil alone, especially as he's been a fugitive so long. But it's murder, Sergeant, and—well, the new police have got to show themselves just as efficient blood hounds as the old force. The papers in the case have just come through Ottawa."

"This man Pelly appears to have killed a man in Toronto in the nineties for insulting his wife. Those details are not given. It appears a

tip came down some time ago that Pelly had been living in the Siston lake region, on the other side of Stony range, for a good many years. Pelly appears to have got wind of this and made a quick getaway. Now the word's come in that he's been seen in the district. May be true or false.

"Probably it won't be possible to convict now. If it is possible, I don't suppose he'll get much of a sentence. But headquarters are anxious that we should establish our prestige by getting after him—to show that we're on the job as our predecessors were. I want you to ride in, and, if he's alive, pick him up and bring him back with you."

Anderson saluted. He was about to leave the office when the inspector called him back.

"Stop a moment, Sergeant. You can guess that this man Pelly was probably betrayed by someone with a grudge against him. I suppose you know that the Free Traders opened up at Siston lake during the war?"

The Free Traders, as Anderson knew, were a gang of liquor men, organized from Montreal, and sending its agents far and wide into the Indian lands, debauching and corrupting. The Free Traders dealt in human souls as well as fur and whisky; they were the most iniquitous thing that had so far entered the northern territories.

"There's a man named Jim Rathway who seems to be handling their work for 'em up there. Ten to one his gang's mixed up with this Pelly matter in some way. Perhaps they're out for Pelly's head because he wouldn't stand in with 'em. On the other hand there's the chance that he's in with 'em and someone else tipped us off. In that case you'll find yourself up against the organization."

"This Rathway's believed to have been running liquor under various aliases for years, and there's ugly rumor about happenings at an Indian camp in the Far North, where the Free Traders have another post at Lake Misquash. They've got to be a big factor during the years of the war—so big that we're not going to tackle 'em until we're ready to launch a general campaign against 'em."

"You'll remember not to butt in if you find 'em selling liquor, but pick up Pelly as quietly as possible, and take notes, if you get the chance, on what's going on at Siston lake."

"You've got carte blanche, and you'll take a covering warrant from the stipendiary to use in any way you see fit. And take all the time you want, because there'll be nothing doing till spring. But don't let 'em get wise to your job. So you'll leave your uniform behind you, Sergeant, and conduct your inquiries as inconspicuously as possible. And in a case like this, one man's better than two. That's why I'm sending you alone."

"Finally, you'll bear in mind that

Pelly's arrest comes first. Soon as you locate him, bring him out of the range."

At dawn Lee was upon the road. There had been rumors—recurrent rumors of a gold find in Stony range that summer, but the nearer Lee got to the range the less explicit the news became.

He passed a number of men on their way south, morose and sullen, but ready enough to pour out their grievance that a summer's prospecting had failed to show even a trace of color anywhere.

Lee had listened to their stories and then gone on, leaving the impression that he was a prospector on a belated journey to the range.

And now at last the range lay in front of him, uplifting its wild peaks into the glory of the autumn sunset. Lee felt his heart uplifted too. This was life at its most zestful—the world spaces, and the hunting of the king of all created beings—Man.

So, leading his horse, Lee passed down the long slope toward the settlement of Little Falls. Soon he was abreast of the first shacks, set in the clearings among the stumps. Then came rows of uniformly ugly wooden cottages, a small mission church with a tin roof, a bank, and a small hotel announcing itself by a dilapidated shingle.

Lee fastened his horse to the hitching post in front and entered. On the right of the interior passage was the dining-room, on the left the parlor, with the furniture piled up in corners and the floor strewn with duff-bags and blankets.

A passage ran past a flight of rickety stairs, and from a room at the end of this came the clamor of voices. Here Lee found the bar, packed tight, and running wide open. Behind the mahogany stood a fat and cynical-looking landlord.

"How about a room and stabling for the night?" asked Lee.

The landlord slid a schooner of beer from one end of the bar to the middle, and turned to Lee, his fat body quivering, apparently with mirth, though his face did not relax anything of its solemn, cynical aspect.

"Stabling? You said it. Room? You can have six foot by four of the parlor floor, stranger," he answered.

"Pretty full, eh?"

"Fuller 'n b—'s full of fire-logs."

"Logging crews signing up?"

"Loggin', nothin'. Town's full of these here fool guys that's been prospectin' Stony range all summer. Got cold feet all to one and all quit together. Feeling pretty sore over it, I guess. Ya ain't aiming to start for the range yerself this time of year?"

"I guess there'll be time to wash a few pans of dirt," answered Lee.

"Then maybe I'll board my horse here and trap a bit this winter."

He led his horse into the stable, gave it some corn and raked out a

suspicious ment, beans, and potatoes that had apparently been 'frozen to death in bed.

Lee, who had taken a seat opposite the door, surveyed the other guests with that quiet watchfulness which was a part of his nature as well as of his training. For the most part he summed them up as being of the average prospector type.

Among them, however, appeared to be a few of those hard-bitten characters who are to be found in every gold rush. Most of them had been drinking hard, and all seemed embittered by their experiences of the summer. They were freely cursing their ill-luck.

Lee's attention was first drawn to the two men who were seated opposite him by the fact that they took no part in this chorus of denunciation. A glance showed him that they were not prospectors, and that the understanding between them was an intimate one.

One was a short, thick-set, muscular red-haired man, with one of the hardest and most repulsive faces that Lee had ever seen. The other, apparently his partner, was a huge half-breed with a great muscular torso covered with black hair, and long gorilla-like arms.

"Ef I had that guy here what started that yarn about the gold in Stony range—" began a man on Lee's right.

"Ah, for the love of Mike, cut out that spiel, Bill!" shouted another across the table. "D'you think you're the only real fool's ben summerin' in the range?"

"Old Pelly never found no gold mine. He was cracked about it. Ef he had, wouldn't others have got wise to it, with half the district hangin' about the range spyin' on him?"

"Nobody knows what happened to him, do they?"

"Jest disappeared. Mebbe he had a stroke in the woods or somethin'. Nobody's seen nor heard of him this good while past."

Lee absorbed this conversation without feeling that he had got very far. Pelly had discovered a problematical gold mine, Pelly had disappeared; it began to seem probable that the report of his return was false. If these men had been prospecting the range all the summer, it was probable that if Pelly had returned to the vicinity they would have heard of it. In which case someone would have corrected the statement that nothing was known about it.

While he listened Lee noticed that the two men opposite him were likewise taking in every word. The big breed was obviously under the influence of liquor, and his little companion was not only watching the company but also watching him. At times he would turn and whisper in his close scrutiny of the company, he turned his gaze on Lee.

For a moment Lee felt chilled by the eyes of the little red-haired man. They were pale grey, glassy, venomous. They looked like a snake's eyes, Lee, though his gaze was as steady as the other's, did not like the look of the little red-haired man.

The conversation drifted. By twos and threes the men began to make their way back to the bar. Lee had risen from the table and left the dining-room, intending to take a smoke on the stoop, when he heard a feminine voice, and found himself staring in surprise at a girl who had just come in and was in conversation with the landlord.

For this was not in the least the type of girl whom one might look for in such a place as Little Falls.

CHAPTER II

A Girl Rides Into the Range

She was perhaps two or three and twenty, slender, of medium height, with clear, grey, fearless eyes, and hair of pale brown with gold flecks in it, coiled up loosely about her head.

Her open mackinaw revealed an almost boyish figure, slender and long-waisted. She wore corduroy breeches and riding gaiters; and there was about her that hardy definable, but unmistakable air of breeding that crops out in such unexpected places along the Anglo-Saxon frontier.

From a respectful distance the men were staring at her, each asking Lee's unspoken question as to what such a girl was doing in Little Falls.

That she was riding into the range was evident. Had she been riding out, the men would have known of her. But—whose daughter was she?

There was no one in the now deserted range to whom she could be going. The only possible destination might be the Moravian mission on the other side. But—there were no women at the mission.

"Well, ya see, Miss," the fat landlord was saying, "we're party well filled up so far as rooms is concerned. But the wife's over to Old Landing fer a few days, an' I guess you can hev our room till she comes home. It's the first room on the right at the top of the stairs. You just walk up and make yourself comfortable, Miss,

and I'll take your horse into the stable and see that he gets fed and watered. And supper's ready."

"Thank you, but I had mine on the road. And I shall be going on early in the morning."

By now the crowd of ex-prospectors had formed a wide circle about the girl, standing as far as the passage would permit, staring and scrutinizing her frankly, and looking sheepishly away whenever her embarrassed glance fell upon any of them. Lee, hearing a muttering behind him, turned, to see the big breed staring at the girl and whispering excitedly to his companion. His red-headed partner was tugging at his arm as if to restrain him.

"You d—n fool, Pierre!" Lee heard him expostulate.

Suddenly the breed shook off the other's grip and lurches forward. Planting himself in front of the girl,



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he leaned toward her, with an expression on his face that brought the blood into her cheeks.

Before he could utter a word, however, Lee stepped quietly into the breach with that instinctive air of authority which he retained, despite the shedding of his uniform.

"That'll be all," he said crisply.

The breed turned on him and broke into a string of oaths.

"Say, whadya mean?" he shouted. "You don't know me. He don't know who he's talking to, eh, Shorty? I'm Pierre Cauchon." He doubled a brawny forearm. "Say, young feller, you see dis? Dere ain't no man either side of de range can say 'dat'll be all' to Pierre Cauchon. You tink you can fight, mebbe?"

Lee, mindful of the rigid code of conduct that bound him, shook his head.

"I never fight if I can help it," he answered.

The two men snickered, and there came a murmur of disgust from the crowd, which, till that moment, had been decidedly favorable to Lee.

The breed turned about. "He never fight if he can help it," he jeered. "You hear dat, boys?" He turned to Lee again. "Mebbe you like to set up de drinks, den?" he inquired blandly.

"I don't drink," answered Lee with complete equanimity.

"Well, whadya tink of dat?" cried Pierre to the crowd again. "He don't fight an' he don't drink. You sure are one d—n four-flusher," he grinned belligerently in Lee's face.

Lee, relieved to see, without turning his head, that the girl had taken the opportunity to slip away, returned Pierre's glare calmly. The breed was poisoning himself ready to strike, but something in Lee's aspect, some uncertainty, the inability to size him up, checked him. Perhaps he sensed how quickly Lee's right arm, hanging negligently before him, would rise to the defensive; perhaps he did not like the look of Lee's left.

Looks as if the sergeant was in for a tough time. And who is the girl he has befriended?

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

Homemade Lancet

A good surgical needle of the lancet type for home use can be made from a large darning needle. The point is ground and whittled to the shape of a spearhead, which gives a keen, penetrating and cutting edge, says Popular Science Monthly. A cork pushed on the eye end serves as a handle. Before using the needle, sterilize the point by holding it in the flame of a gas jet or match.

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