

THE FREE TRADERS

By VICTOR ROUSSEAU

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WNU Service.

"AND YOU?"

SYNOPSIS.—Lee Anderson, Royal Canadian Mounted Police sergeant, is sent to Stony range to arrest a man named Pelly for murder. He is also instructed to look after Jim Rathway, reputed head of the "Free Traders," illicit liquor runners. At Little Falls he finds Pelly is credited with having found a gold mine, and is missing. At the hotel appears a girl, obviously out of place in the rough surroundings. A half-breed, Pierre, and a companion, "Shorty," annoy the girl. Anderson interferes in her behalf.

CHAPTER II—Continued

He took refuge in irony. "Well, whadya 'ink of him, boys?" he demanded again of the men, who had formed a close circle around the pair. "He don't fight an' he got de nerve to say 'dat 'll be all' to Pierre Cauchon. No, by gar, I guess you know better dan to fight," he continued, adding a foul epithet; and, grinning, he lurched insolently past toward the bar, shouldering Lee as he passed.

He looked back for an instant to see whether the other would accept the provocation, and, seeing that he showed no signs of doing so, he went on his way with Shorty. The crowd gave Lee the once-over contemptuously. It had no love for the bully, but an individual without the fighting instinct is not supposed to pose as a lady's champion and then back down.

The minds of the prospectors were too obtuse to see that Lee had simply been satisfied with gaining his point and enabling the girl to get away unmolested.

Lee paced the stoop for a while, finished a pipe, and went early to his blankets.

He interested himself in speculating who the girl was. She was almost certainly going to the mission; there could be no other destination. Perhaps he would see her again. He thought of the possibility quite without emotion. He ceased to think of her, and, tired after the day's ride, began to doze.

He was awakened when the men began to stagger into the parlor. Nearly all of them were drunk, some were rolling drunk, and, after sporadic, noisy altercations, they were soon sprawled out like logs all over the floor, and snoring loudly. Several times Lee was obliged to remove heads, arms, and feet from various portions of his anatomy.

He was just falling asleep again when the sound of a name, whispered almost in his ear, startled him into instant wakefulness.

Lee recognized the voice as that of the breed, Pierre Cauchon.

For a moment or two he could not imagine from where the man was speaking. Then he discovered that the voice came from the other side of the large, empty stove which stood at his head, a little out from the wall. His face and Pierre's were separated, therefore, by no more than the circumference of the metal container, though Pierre, of course, did not guess that Lee lay on the other side of it, nor that he would be likely to have any particular interest in what he was saying.

But the name that had startled Lee into wakefulness was that of Pelly. His subconsciousness, alert through slumber, had caught it and communicated the warning.

Before Lee had quite attuned his ears to catch Pierre's remark, Shorty, the other man, broke in:

"You fool, Pierre, you nearly give the game away tonight fer shore. You ain't got no sense at all, buttin' in like that and frightenin' her away. You didn't s'pose she'd got our photy-grafs in her pocket, did ya? The trouble with you is you can't hold yer liquor."

Pierre growled: "I didn't have no chance to say a word before that four-flusher butted in. I wish I'd beat him up now. Mebbe I'll git the beast in the mornin'."

"Well, and why didn't ya? I'll tell ya why. Because you saw he ain't no four-flusher. He's tough, that feller is, an' he was watchin' ya like a cat. Don't ya make no mistake about that. And it's lucky you didn't get no chance to spill what ya was goin' to, or you'd shore have scairt the girl away."

protecting her from the pair of ruffians whenever they made their appearance.

But he could not afford to take any action which would give the clue to his status and activities; and apart from that, he wanted to keep in touch with the two men, in case they could furnish any clue to Pelly's whereabouts—if he were alive.

Some time early in the morning he fell into a restless slumber, from which he was partly aroused by the sound of a horse's hoofs clattering in the yard. He wondered sleepily whether this was an early departure or some belated arrival, and then, turning over, managed to lose consciousness for an hour or two longer.

At last, when further sleep had become impossible, he sat up, struck a match, and looking at his watch, discovered that it was nearly six o'clock.

He threw his blankets over his arm, stepped over the sprawling limbs of the sleepers, and went out to the stable where he watered his horse, afterward kicking his heels about the place until, in the first glimpse of the dawn, the squaw came shuffling into the kitchen.

Lee went in. "Get me a cup of coffee and a piece of bread," he said, putting a fifty-cent piece into her hand. "That'll be enough for me. I've got to be moving."

The woman filled the kettle from a pail of water on the kitchen table. Lee asked:

"You know that girl who came last night?"

"Me not know um," the squaw grunted, as she set the kettle on the stove.

"Don't know what time she's leavin', I suppose?"

"Girl um gone. Gone at four o'clock," grunted the squaw.

Lee whistled softly. That was her horse that he had heard, then. She was losing no time, whatever her business and destination might be. Lee figured while the coffee came to the boil, and had just gulped down a cupful and taken a few bites at the bread and butter which the woman gave him when the landlord came sleepily in, and Lee took the opportunity of settling his bill.

"Well, you're shore off early," grumbled the fat proprietor. "Say, she beat you to it, though?"

"Who is she?" Lee inquired.

"Blamed if I know. Nobody hereabouts seems to know her. But she's, Little Falls ain't more'n three or four year old! Guess she's the gal of one of the old-timers back from school or college, or she'll be goin' up to the Moravian mission, like as not. Yes, sir, that shore must be it. She wouldn't be goin' to any of them hooch-runners up to Siston lake."

"So they say. A cunning look came into his eyes. "I guess we ain't boherin' our heads none about that Free Trader outfit since they're there to stay. No, sir, it don't do to know too much about Captain Carcajou, now that the police is in with him."

force carries on the tradition of the old North-West; it does not return without its man.

Siston lake was admirably adapted for the needs of the Free Traders. It was at the extreme northern limits of the range, or a little beyond, and the head of a lake and river system by which communication could be had by water north to Fort Churchill or York Factory or west as far as Lake Athabasca.

The York boat, laden to the gunwale with supplies of liquor, could push anywhere along the thousands of lakes and streams, acting as mother boat in turn to the canoe, with one or more cases. And over all this vast, ill-defined district the hooch-runner had almost unlimited sway, proving a serious rival to the legitimate trading interests, since he carried his poison into the Indian's camping grounds and took his pick of the choicest furs.

His trade embraced a viceroy. All along the fringe of white settlement it was active. It had sprung up like a fungus overnight, during the disorganization of the police in consequence of the war and the readjustment. The gang were steadily embittering the relations between whites and reds, which had been amicable almost since the advent of the first pioneer.

Whichever district the girl was bound for, it was impossible to mistake the course that she would take initially. In front of Lee lay a long backbone of mountain, with only a single pass into the interior over a range of many miles.

Scanning the valley carefully, Lee saw, about a mile beyond the pass, a thin curl of smoke rising into the still air.

Satisfied that he had the girl in sight, Lee hesitated for a while, undecided whether to ride up to her, or to camp where he was, keeping a lookout for Pierre and Shorty. In the end he decided that the better course would be to make himself known, and accordingly he descended the slope and followed the trail along the bank of the river until he reached the camp.

The girl had already set up her tent, her horse was tethered near the stream, and she was cooking her dinner at a fire which she had made. She looked very trim and business-



She Looked Very Trim and Business-like With Her Sleeves Rolled Up to Her Elbows and Her Air of Being Completely at Home in These Surroundings.

like with her sleeves rolled up to her elbows and her air of being completely at home in these surroundings.

As Lee jumped from his horse she started, then looked at him with an expression of calm which was an attempt to conceal a very obvious trepidation.

"Good evening," he called. "I'm travelling your way, and saw your camp fire, so took the liberty of joining you, if there's no objection."

She stared hard at him as if his advent were some long expected blow that had suddenly fallen. For a few moments she seemed under the influence of an all-potential fear. Then mastering it, she answered with the same affectation of indifference:

"You can camp where you like, of course. The range is free for all."

Lee, a little staggered at the unwillingness of this invitation, decided that it would be better for the present not to alarm her with any explanations and proceeded to pitch his tent near hers. While he was unloading his pack and watering his horse, the girl went on with her meal, without paying any attention to him.

In a hurried manner, repeated his companion's gestures. For several moments the light of the camp fire silhouetted the calm faces of the girl and Lee and the vindictive, scowling ones of the two men.

Then Pierre leaped to the ground. "By gar, it's de fester dat tell me 'dat'll be all,'" he shouted. "What you 'ink you're doing here, you d—n four-flusher?"

"Maybe the same as you," said Lee. "Ho, ho, dat's good!" roared the breed. "You 'ink we take you in as pardner, hein'?"

"Wouldn't go with you, I've got my own hand to play," Lee answered. "You won't play it here, then?" belittled Shorty.

Oaths poured from his lips. "Pack and vamose!" yelled Pierre. The two advanced on Lee with belligerent gestures.

Lee held up his hand as the fists threatened him. "Didn't I tell you I don't fight?" he drawled deceptively. "You don't fight? By gar, you're goin' to fight dis time or git!" yelled Pierre. "You 'fraid of gittin' whipped, eh?"

"That's about the size of it," laughed Lee. "That's why I shoot instead—quick and straight and sure, gentlemen!"

His right hand made a movement in his coat pocket, but his automatic was in the holster at the back of his hip, and there was nothing in the pocket more lethal than his pipe.

But Pierre, who was nearest, changed color. The man was a cur at heart, as Lee had suspected. He leaped back with a snarl. Shorty stepped back, too, though not quite so violently, and the two, withdrawing out of range, proceeded to hold a whispered colloquy, at the end of which, turning away without another word to Lee, they proceeded to set up their camp at a little distance.

Lee turned to the girl, who had stood a silent spectator of the scene.

"I ought to have explained, perhaps," he said. "You recognized that man who insulted you last night. A little later I happened to overhear the pair of them speaking of a plan they had formed for intercepting you tonight. I didn't want to alarm you, in case they failed to appear, but that is why I proposed to camp beside you. I think they are unscrupulous customers, and you've probably reached the same decision after the scene that has just taken place."

"Thank you, but I assure you that I am quite capable of protecting myself," answered the girl, and Lee saw her fingers stray toward a service-size revolver holster at her belt.

"Of course I don't want to intrude," said Lee. "But as long as these men are here, I think I ought to remain."

She took a step or two toward him, looking at him fixedly. "Who and what are you?" she demanded with quivering lips. "How am I to know that you are not those men's friend, that this is not all part of an arranged plan?"

"I am not a friend, or associate of those men," answered Lee indignantly. "I never saw either of them until one of them insulted you in the hotel yesterday evening. I know that they are planning to do you some harm."

"Well, and—you?" she asked, trying to keep her voice steady.

Very deliberately Lee drew his automatic from his belt. He had no doubt that Pierre and Shorty were planning mischief; most probably they meant to attack him as a preliminary to overpowering the girl.

And he lay watching them and grimly waiting for their stealthy onset. He felt more than a match for the pair of them.

Minutes went by, however. The pair seemed an unconscionable time making their arrangements, and all the while the discussion, which was just audible without being intelligible, went on. Lee wondered how long he had been lying there. It was too dark to see his watch. He wondered why they had not waited till morning, when there would be a better chance of taking him unawares.

At last the black shadows separated. One of them was coming toward him with stealthy footsteps. Lee guessed that it was Shorty, the more courageous of the two.

The figure came slowly on. Lee aimed the automatic, his finger steadied on the trigger. He would fire as soon as it made the first hostile movement, as soon as it raised its weapon to cover him.

And then, in amazement, he let the muzzle of his automatic drop. For the figure was not coming toward him, it was going toward the girl's tent.

And it was the girl herself! Had she then some secret understanding with the two ruffians, and had the episode of the evening at the hotel been a performance staged for some particular purpose?

That might almost have appeared credible, but for the conversation that Lee had overheard beside the stove. In the light of that, Lee had to dismiss the credibility of his surmise.

The only possible explanation at which he could arrive was that the girl had gone to the confederates with his own story, had taxed them, and, of course had been persuaded that his tale was false. Probably they had convinced her that they were friends, and that he had designs upon her.

Myrtified and humiliated, Lee went to sleep at last with his ears attuned for any unexpected sound or movement and the automatic within his immediate grasp. Long practice with prisoners whom he had brought single-handed out of the wilds had given him the faculty of sleeping in as complete watchfulness as a wild animal; no enemy could surprise him while he dozed.

But there was no need for these precautions for nothing disturbed him, and it was the sun, blinking on the edge of the horizon, that awakened him the next morning.

The girl was already cooking her breakfast outside her tent when he emerged, and she returned his salutation with a stiff little bow, keeping her face averted.

Lee attended to his horse and then prepared his breakfast. He had finished before Pierre and Shorty came on the scene. They looked as if they had been drinking heavily the night before, but they made no movement toward either him or the girl until the horses were loaded and ready to start, the girl briefly declining Lee's assistance and handling her own gear like an expert.

Then Shorty came up to Lee.

"See here, pardner, what's the great idea?" he asked, in a tone that was meant to be conciliatory. "My pardner and me was wonderin' if we couldn't fix up this little misunderstanding."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning as how my pardner and me don't mean no harm to this young lady. We're on a prospectin' trip, and nacherally we don't want no outsiders buttin' in on our property."

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