

The Free Traders

By
Victor Rousseau
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WNU Service.

I LOVE 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. The girl sets out for Slaton Lake, which is also Anderson's objective. He overtakes her and the two men with whom he had trouble the night before. She is suspicious of him and the two men are hostile. Pierre and Shorty ride on. Anderson and the girl follow. In the hills the road is blown up, before and behind the two. Anderson, with his horse, is hurled down the mountain side, senseless. Discovering the girl has disappeared, but he concludes she is alive and probably in the power of Pierre and Shorty. On foot he makes his way to Slaton Lake. There he finds his companion of the day before, and Rathway, with a girl, Estelle, a former sweetheart of Anderson's, who had abused his confidence and almost wrecked his life. Rathway strikes Estelle, and after a fight Anderson, with Estelle's help, escapes with the girl. Anderson's companion's mind is clouded and she is suffering with a dislocated knee. Anderson sets the knee and makes the girl as comfortable as possible. He has a broken rib.

CHAPTER VII—Continued

"Where am I? What has happened?" she asked.

Lee saw at once that she had no consciousness of anything that had occurred since the catastrophe, and probably it would be some time before the memory of that came back to her. He must protect her against the shock of the realization until she was able to bear it.

how the future had ceased to trouble her. "It's so glorious to be in the woods again, and at this time of the year above everything. It's such a long time since I was in the woods before. I've been living in a big city, you know—nothing but blocks of houses and asphalt and stone. I felt like a prisoner there."

And Lee wondered again at her acquiescence in this new turn of fate.

"Now—may I wash that cut in your head and tie it for you?"

"Yes, doctor," she smiled at him.

He boiled the bandage, washed the cut in boiled water, and retied the strip of cotton about it. The girl was still too weak to talk very much. But it was the most wonderful thing that had ever happened to him, sitting there with her in that intimate companionship, forgetting that she had been at odds with him, putting aside all the memories of conflict, forgetting, too, that she was a woman, seeing in her only a comrade.

After awhile Lee made some cakes in the ashes of the fire, and cooked some bacon. The girl was able to eat a little, and he felt his appetite returning. Undoubtedly he had gone through the worst of it. Again they sat in silence, till the girl said:

"Do you know, I have forgotten your name!"

He had not told her, but he said, "Lee Anderson."

Anderson was a common enough name in the district, and would convey nothing to her.

And as she seemed still to be fretting or puzzling, Lee laid his hand on hers and said:

"You mustn't worry. We shall go on just as soon as it's possible to."

"That's just what I've been wondering about," she answered. "It's very



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silly of me, but—where is it that we are going?"

And, as Lee looked at her in astonishment, she went on:

"It's curious, you know, Mr. Anderson, but I don't seem exactly to remember where we met, either, or why I left that place—where was it? That big city whose name's slipped my memory for the moment. Nor why we came to the woods—came back to the woods, you know," she corrected.

"And then, who am I? I had my name on the tip of my tongue a moment ago, and I'll know soon, I suppose, but it's—just now it all seems to be confused, somehow." And then Lee realized that her memory of the past was completely obliterated.

CHAPTER VIII

While Memory Slept

No, the girl had not completely forgotten, for it was not exactly a blank to her. She had a vague recollection of a number of things, but everything appeared to be shadowy and confused, and when she tried to piece it together, the fragments slipped out of her grasp.

It was in names and places that the lapse chiefly occurred, including her own identity, and it was this fact that gave Lee cause for meditation.

She had lived in the forests in childhood, she seemed to recall a visit to them of recent years; at any rate, she had all the woodcraft of one to whom the forest was home. She had been educated in a convent, she thought, and had been living for several years in a large city, studying.

She thought she had been studying to be a medical missionary among the Indians.

Thus she was not cut off from that association of habits, tastes, and experiences that goes to make the personality; she did not feel that she had lost very much, and it was always as if she were upon the point of remembering everything.

Out of this vague, blurred dream she had awakened to find herself in the woods with Lee, without the knowl-

edge of how or why she had come there.

It might have been the concussion from the fall, but Lee, after pondering over the case, decided that it was much more like a case of shell-shock, and that the injury to her head had been only a contributing cause.

He made her a crutch next morning, and by the afternoon, she felt well enough to hobble a few steps about the camp. The accident which had temporarily ungendered her memory, seemed to have wrought a strange change in her nature. She was no longer wildly anxious to push on to her destination; she accepted Lee as a fact in her life, and showed how completely she trusted him, despite the intimacy in which they were both living.

He was sure that her memory would suddenly come back to her completely. And, memory did come back in dreams, as with shell-shocked patients, but only to vanish with the waking.

At night Lee, lying near her beneath another rough shelter of boughs that he had made for himself, would hear her tossing and moaning, and occasionally uttering fragments of unintelligible sentences.

Day merged into day. Lee's rib was healing well, and the girl was beginning to set her foot to the ground. At first she was dependent upon him in nearly everything. He helped her to take her first steps without the crutch, leaning upon his shoulder. They were always together.

It was so wonderful a companionship. It was that comradeship of which Lee had always dreamed. And it was the more wonderful, perhaps, because the girl's severance from the past gave it a sort of unreality, as if it were a little piece of paradise which they had snatched for themselves out of the sum total of human happiness.

Soon she began to assume charge of the camp and the cooking. And Lee, lying at her feet, listening while she talked, or lying awake at night beneath her shelter, in the dread of hearing her moan, came at last to realize that his feeling for her was becoming something more than the mere enjoyment of her companionship.

He loved her, he sometimes admitted to himself; and when a word or glance of his would send the blood manning into her cheek, he dared to think that his love was returned. And now he cared no longer whether her memory of the past ever came back to her. Almost better to let her live in ignorance of all that had distressed her.

He began to dread the inevitable day when remembrance would come to blot out their paradise. Only a little incident would be needed, some little shock that would knit the ravaged ends of memory, and then—

Then what would lie before them? Another thing to be apprehended was the day, so near now, when they must leave their woodland paradise. Autumn had returned wonderfully, but there was a sharper tang in the air each morning, everything was dead and ice formed every night upon the noot beneath their little spring.

And it seemed now as if Lee's search for Pelly would have to be prolonged through the winter months. If his inquiries at the mission proved fruitless, it would mean returning to Little Falls for a sleigh and dogs.

Then there was the matter of the Free Traders.

Lee would find his hands full soon enough.

"Do you know, Lee," said the girl one day, "I often feel as if I were on the very verge of remembering. And when I wake in the morning, just for an instant I feel a different person, as if I had remembered. And I am afraid of remembering. It is as if remembrance would bring back something terrible with it. Who am I?"

"You are just you," said Lee, smiling. "That's enough for me."

"Where did we meet?"

"In the range."

"I was alone? And then I had an accident and was thrown from my horse? And you, too? It is so strange. I know that I lived in a large city not long ago, and that I was so glad to get back to the woods. But where was I riding? That's the big problem that we have to solve, isn't it?"

She looked at him earnestly. "Lee," she said solemnly, "sometimes I hope I never shall remember."

She made no plans, leaving everything to Lee, and nothing was decided. By the middle of the second week, she could walk fairly well, her strength had come back, and the little period of elysium was drawing to its end. It was inevitable that the problem should be faced.

For the first time she had accompanied Lee as far as the lake shore. There had been no signs of the Free Traders, and Lee was convinced that they had long since abandoned all hope of finding them. It was a wonderful evening. There was a haze of Indian summer in the November air, there was still a touch of fire in the leaves of birch and maple; the west was radiant with the sunset clouds.

And, standing there beside her, Lee knew at last—knew for sure that this love was eternal, and the former love only the pale shadow that it had cast before it. He turned toward her and read the same knowledge in her eyes.

"Dear," he said.

lips met. And they looked at each other in all the thrill and glory and surprise of it. It was all so simple, so incredibly dear and true.

"You, woman of mine, without a name, who have come to me out of nowhere because I wanted you! How long have you known?"

"I've known almost since the beginning that if you cared as much as I do, Lee, you must love me more than I thought it possible to love."

He looked at her incredulously, and between them the pale wrath of Estelle floated for just a moment. He had trusted her. He had vowed never to trust again in any woman.

Then it was dissipated in the sunshine of their love. "Do you care enough to trust yourself to me and take the chance of what the future may bring to us?"

"I love you enough to trust you altogether, Lee," she answered.

But there was just the shadow of a little fear in her eyes. "Oh, my dear, I am afraid, awfully afraid of the time when—when I remember. Do you know that since I knew I loved you, and thought you cared for me, I have sometimes prayed that I may never remember? I have been afraid of what may be lying in wait for us, waiting to overwhelm us, as if it grudged our happiness."

"You must not let yourself grow morbid." But Lee, too, felt the wings of that shadow of fear beat past him. "There is nobody else?" he asked.

"We shall not find that we have been tricked like that? It would be unbearable."

"No, no! I'm sure of that, Lee; surer than that I stand here, that I have never loved anybody else. I know that so well, Lee; for if there had been, I should have felt it by instinct, however deep down within me the memory of him lay buried. No, love isn't like that; it doesn't lose itself like that. There is nobody but you—never anybody but you."

"But what I'm afraid of is that something else, something terrible may come between us."

"There's nothing else that could separate us."

"If you were engaged?" Lee would no sooner have deliberately stolen another man's sweetheart than his wife. To him love was a thing of eternity. It was either a very young man's view or a very idealistic one; yet there are men of mature minds who hold that doctrine; that was why the affair of Estelle had broken his life.

"Suppose I had become engaged to someone I didn't love, Lee?"

"You couldn't. You don't think"—she felt thrilled by the consternation in his voice—"that you—you have, dearest?"

"No, I—I'm sure I haven't. But," she persisted, "I just felt curious to know what we would do, in case."

"Oh, then—why, I suppose we'd have to go to him and tell him that we loved each other, and then, of course, he would release you," answered Lee, looking troubled. "Still, we don't have to think of that possibility, dear, do we?"

"Of course not, Lee," she answered.

But again he saw that she knifed her brows in perplexity, and he knew that she was thinking, thinking, trying to reunite those ravelled strands of memory.

"You don't live in the range, Lee, do you?" asked the girl presently.

"No, I live at Manistee. That's a long distance away. I've just come here on business."

"Won't you tell me what your business is?"

Lee hesitated. "Well, it's secret in a way, though I'm not under any pledge." His instincts were to tell her, and yet the training of eight years seemed to seal his lips against her.

"You see, I'm acting for others."

"Why, then of course I wouldn't ask you to tell me, Lee," she answered.

"Only I have a curious sort of feeling that your business may be bound up with me in some way, that perhaps it means your going into danger."

"I don't think there's much danger attached to it."

But she caught that "much" with alarm. "A little danger, Lee? You know, I couldn't bear you being exposed to danger. But—what is there beyond the range? You see, I've been talking to you about the range ever since I first heard you speak of it, and yet I don't really know where we are. It's curious, too, because for the first week after my illness, I didn't seem to care. Is there a city beyond the range?"

"No, thank God, all the cities lie behind us. Nothing but forest."

"Till you return, no matter how long, Lee," she answered simply.

"Even if you remembered? No matter what you remember?"

"Even if I should remember. But, Lee"—the note of fear came into her voice again—"when the time comes that I remember, I want you with me. I am so oppressed sometimes—when I awake in the morning, always. I seem to have been traveling in my dreams all night in horrible places, among hateful people. I seem to have some terrible duty laid upon me, something that I must carry out, although it kills me. And then—I awake to you."

"But one thing I know beyond everything in the world, and that is that there could never have been anyone but you, Lee, dearest; never in the whole world. So take me, Lee, and shield me with your love, and be all in this world to me, for I shall never love anyone but you."

"I'll take you to the mission, dear, and when I come back, I shall take you south with me, and you shall forget all your fears," answered Lee.

So they put their troubles aside, and all the uncertainties of the future, and were sublimely happy in their love.

Yet, happy as he was, Lee realized that he would be well for them when he had placed her in the care of Father McGrath at the mission. Only then would the load of anxiety be removed from him.

CHAPTER IX

Joyce Comes Home

In the middle of the night a wild storm sprang up, bringing with it a driving snow. Its violence blew down their two shelters—almost simultaneously, involving them in a debris of boughs and branches.

They made light of their troubles. Lee succeeded in getting some sort of protection up, and the remainder of that night they crouched beneath it, happy, in spite of the snow that piled up all about them.

When morning came, they looked out on a white world. It was freezing hard, and the spring had dwindled to a thread in a basin of ice.

Lee very quickly had a fire burning and tea ready. But it looked as if winter had come to stay. They had had a rude awakening from their paradise. It seemed essential to push on as soon as possible.

In fact, without snowshoes they were likely to find themselves seriously inconvenienced in the event of a heavy fall. Lee meant to prosecute his inquiries at the mission, and, in case nothing came of these, to go to Little Falls, load up, and then return.

"I'm sure I'm well enough to start today, Lee," said the girl that morning, as they discussed the situation. "We could start off slowly, you see, and then if it did snow heavily, it would be much more of a strain on me later on, without snowshoes, than now, when the traveling is easy, wouldn't it? So we ought to try to get to the mission within a day or two."

Lee agreed, and they decided to push on slowly that day by the trail beside the lake. The mission was near the head of the lake, about two days' journey away.

Most of the contents of the pack were left behind. Lee had to travel as light as possible; but fortunately, his rib was fairly set, and the tight bandage which he wore around it eliminated serious danger of its breaking again.

When they stopped for the noon meal they had several miles to their credit. The girl's knee had given her no trouble, and both were jubilant.

That day they covered a good fifteen miles—almost a short day's journey. When they camped, the girl said:

"Do you know, Lee, I am almost certain that I have passed this way before. It all looks somehow familiar to me, and yet somehow as if I'd seen it in a dream. You remember that big rock we passed in the middle of the stream? Well, I had a feeling all the time that we should come to it as we rounded the bend."

"And you have no idea whether you ever lived in this region or not?" he asked.

"No, dear. I'm inclined to think, though, that I may have done so. Perhaps I was at school at that very mission you spoke of. If I was, someone there will be sure to recognize me. I've got a feeling that I was studying in some big city—Montreal or Winnipeg, perhaps, to take up medical mission work here."

"Well, it's a case of true love, all right. But when the girl remembers who she is and learns Anderson's mission—then what?"

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

Production of Tea

The tea plant is cultivated in two varieties in China—Thea bohea and thea varides in the provinces of Kwang-Tung, Fu-Kien and Che-Kiang. The tea plantations are usually formed in a deep rich loam, never on low lands, but on low hilly slopes. The leaves are gathered three times, in the middle of April, in the beginning of May and when the leaves again are nearly formed. The first gathering yields the finest and most delicate tea, but with considerable injury to the plant.

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