

THE FREE TRADERS

By
Victor Rousseau
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WNU Service.

A FIGHT FOR LIFE

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 Siston Lake, which is also Anderson's objective. He overtakes her and the two men with whom he had trekked the night before. She is suspicious of him and the two men are hostile. Pierre and Shorty ride on. Anderson and the girl following. In the hills the road is blown up before and behind the two. Anderson, with his horse, is hurled down the mountain side, senseless. Recovering consciousness, Anderson finds 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 Siston 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. The two plan to make their way to Moravian mission, of which Father McGrath has charge. Their acquaintance ripens into love. The girl remembers that her name is Joyce Pelly. She is daughter of the man Anderson has been sent to arrest. Torn between her love for her father and her regard for Anderson, the girl practically drives him from her. In the forest Anderson stumbles upon the entrance to a gorge and is convinced he has located Pelly's mine.

CHAPTER X—Continued

Lee saw that from the point where he was clinging, there appeared to be a fairly easy descent to the bottom. It was only the upper parts of the cliffs in the gorge that were unscalable. But he could go no further now. Anxiety for Joyce was rising in him. He was half afraid she might do something rash.

In some way Rathway seemed to be associated with Pelly; perhaps he was protecting him. Suppose, then, that the girl had gone back to the Free Traders' headquarters on Siston lake? Or fled into the storm in her frenzy? Suppose they had been followed? Lee remembered his fancy that he had seen an Indian watching them. The Free Traders would surely have been watching the trail at either end of the lake, knowing that sooner or later they must emerge out of the forests.

Then he remembered the shadow in the log house, and this specter in which he had disbelieved, now began to assume in his mind a formidable aspect.

Suddenly, as Lee clung there, he heard a rumbling sound above his head, and a moment later something hurtled past it and smashed upon the ground of the chasm. Looking down, Lee saw the fragments of an enormous boulder lying on the ground immediately beneath him.

He had had a narrow escape. And reluctantly he turned to re-enter the tunnel. But before he had thrust his head and shoulders in, there came another rumble. And this time it was only the little projecting ledge above his head that saved his life.

The boulder struck the edge of it, shot out into the air, and just missing him, smashed to pieces below.

Lee looked up, but the overhanging cliffs shut out the view of everything except the overhanging bushes and the sky.

Whether or not human agency was responsible for the fall of the two boulders, it was certain that the tunnel's mouth did not appear to be a particularly healthy spot at that moment.

And Lee forced his head and shoulders through, and groped for the rock ladder within, bruising his thighs and shins against the edges of the openings. Extending his hands, he felt the smooth surface of the water-worn, interior wall. He grasped the ladder, clung to it, pulled himself up, and found his footing.

And then of a sudden Lee had the unmistakable instinct that he was not alone. There was another living thing within the tunnel!

Though it was absolutely dark, except for the faintest reflection from the interior of the gorge, which filtered up from below, and though Lee could not hear the faintest sound, he felt its presence; by some inner sense that was not hearing, he felt the rhythmic pulsations of its life.

And it was a human being. Lee felt the fog of human hatred flung out toward him. Instinctively he knew the imminence of an encounter under conditions more nerve-racking than any he had ever experienced. He knew for sure now that the fall of the two boulders had been no accident.

He had been watched, he had been seen to enter, and that watcher meant to fight him to the death. And of course it was Pelly!

He did not relish the prospect of a struggle with the crazed old man, one which could hardly end in any other

way than by the death of one of them. It would be a sharp, relentless struggle, in which Lee's disadvantage lay in the fact that he could not be the first to fire.

Lee called: "Is that you, Pelly? I want to talk to you."

No answer came. He strained his eyes upward through the darkness. Colors and wheels of light flashed across his vision and went out.

"Pelly, listen to me!" Lee tried again. "You know what I've come for. You've got no chance. Surrender, and you'll get fair treatment."

Still no answer; and yet Lee could feel that other human personality close to him. He waited, baffled. There was no way to move, save vertically; and there was no possible retreat for him. The ice-smooth granite walls were all about him. The tunnel was a straight, narrow shaft, up and down, from the rocking stone above to that deadly drop below.

It was impossible to rush the other, impossible to do anything except to clamber stiffly up those slippery rungs of rock, expecting every instant to hear the roar of Pelly's pistol and to receive the bullet in his breast. It was absurdity. And once again Lee tried:

"Pelly, you'd better give up. I can shoot you from here. Surrender, and—"

He did not end that sentence. For, as he clung there, in a moment the thing above him had materialized into life, action, fury. A bellow burst from its throat, and the sound, compressed within the shaft, and deflected from wall to wall, sounded like the roar of some prehistoric monster.

And a heavy body was precipitated against him with a force that all but dislodged him. For an instant Lee struggled wildly to retain his balance—and then there came a blow over the heart that knocked the wind out of him.

Lee's hand encountered an enormous hand at his chest. Within that hand he felt the hilt of a knife. Reaching back, Lee's fingers closed upon the last inch or two of a wide blade.

The steel appeared to be buried almost to the extremity within his body.

There was no sense of a stab, but for an instant Lee felt a deadly faintness overcome him, and again he reeled and clutched for foothold. Then he had torn the hand away, plucked out the knife, and hurled it down through the darkness of the tunnel into the gorge below.

The next instant he was fighting the most desperate battle of his life to win through the tunnel before he bled into unconsciousness.

He caught at two long, sinewy arms that clutched his body in the endeavor to fling him down; and, holding on by their knees and feet, the two wrestled in complete silence.

It was a man—the thing that held Lee, but it seemed more like a monster, for the naked arms were covered with thick hair, underneath which the sinews moved over each other like steel bands. Lee was no match in wrestling; he could only cling on like grim death, feeling his lungs constricted under that pressure, and expecting every moment to feel his injured rib crack in his side.

His left hand encountered a groove in the rocky rung above him, and, gripping it, determined that nothing should tear his hold away, with his right fist he began hammering his assailant's face and body incessantly.

His blows rebounded from the great chest as if it were of rubber, and each blow sent the breath issuing hoarsely from the lungs with raucous wheezing that filled the tunnel.

If the other could have got Lee's left hand, he might have torn him from his hold, but, as if unaware of his strength into the endeavor to force breath from his body and twist him backward; while Lee, clinging on desperately, continued to batter the face and body.

Although it was impossible to draw back his arm far enough to deliver a blow with full force, Lee's lower position gave him the advantage of equipping over his strange assailant, and enabled him to administer fearful punishment.

For a minute or two it was problematic whether Lee could withstand the strain long enough to conquer. The great shoulders swung Lee from side to side in the shaft like a child, and all the while Lee, believing himself seriously, if not fatally wounded, fought on with the mechanical action of a piston, dashing his fists into his opponent's face until at last groans began to burst from his throat.

Then, feeling the clutch relaxing, Lee let go his hold, and, standing straight up on the rung, brought both fists into play. No human being could have stood up against that fearful punishment. Lee's fists were wet with blood. The grasp about him relaxed. He redoubled the fury of his blows—and suddenly found that he was hammering at the bare face of the rock.

His assailant was gone. Faintly Lee heard the scraping of his feet on the upper ledges of the rock ladder.

Then, feeling cautiously above him, Lee continued his ascent, until at length there came a tiny glimmer of light from above, changing into a sudden glare as of high noon.

The tunnel was empty.

The glare decreased to a glimmer. Lee understood what it meant. His assailant had tilted back the rocking stone and fled.

In another moment or two Lee was

beneath the stone. He flattened himself upon the ground and drew his automatic. He fired one shot, and, before the echoes had died away, had pushed the stone back and emerged, pistol in hand.

The glare had been only in contrast to the dark of the tunnel. Outside it was melancholy twilight. Lee emerged into a solitary, snowbound world. There was no sign of his antagonist, who had evidently had enough for the present.

Lee looked down at the fragments of shirt that remained to him, expecting to find himself soaked in blood. He was astonished to see only a thin thread on his chest. He tore the rag open.

There was only a scratch on the skin from the knife-point, but there was a spreading bruise—under the thick coils of Joyce's hair, in which the knife blade had become entangled.

The blow, struck immediately over the heart, would have killed him instantly but for that. Lee raised the tresses reverently to his lips. And with a deep feeling of tenderness toward the girl, he began to make his way through the twilight toward the log house.

He was torn between apprehension for her and speculation as to his assailant. His first thought had been that the man was Pelly. But now he began to doubt this. An old man might have had his assailant's strength—he would not have had the endurance. But stronger still was the conviction that that monstrous form which had attacked him in the shaft could never have been the father of Joyce.

Yet who but Pelly knew the secret of the mine?

The problem was at present insoluble, but its consideration brought with it the fear that Joyce might have been attacked as well. Lee quickened his footsteps through the storm.

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He Flattened Himself on the Ground and Drew His Automatic.

Lee took up the long walk immediately. The snow was deep, progress was difficult without snowshoes, and the frost had already crusted the surface, so that his feet sank in unboundedly at every step. But a great load was removed from his mind; the future now looked rosate.

At last the mission came into sight—a group of log huts clustered about a larger one on a low elevation, surrounded by the forest. Lights gleamed pleasantly inside them. A horse was neighing in some stables. Over the largest hut a wooden cross stood out against the background of the sea-gray sky.

Lee strode up the ascent, hesitated as to which hut to approach, stood irresolute for a moment in the open space at the crest of the little hill. Then, as he waited, the door of one of them was flung open, and a man in a mackinaw and lumberman's boots stepped out toward him. Under his arm he held a rifle. He presented it at Lee's breast.

He looked to be about fifty years of age, or a little older. He had a round, smooth face as soft as a babe's, an incipient paunch. A silver cross hung from his mackinaw. A jolly-looking priest; but the eyes within the face were steel-gray and ice cold. He stopped two paces distant.

"Take yerse' off, ye damned Free Trader," he said softly, "or I'll blow ye into Kingdom Come!"

CHAPTER XI

"If You Find My Father"

Lee spoke quietly. "I want to see Miss Pelly."

"Aye, ye want to see Mees Pelly? But ye canna see her and ye willa see her."

"Will you give Miss Pelly my message?"

"Will ye tak' yerse' awa'?"

"No!"

McGrath flung down the rifle. "Come on, then; come on, ye swine of a hooch peddler!" he shouted, brandishing his fists.

Lee flung up his arm just in time to protect himself against a straight right that would have knocked him senseless. Next moment Father McGrath's arms were locked around him, holding him as if in a vise.

"Will ye tak' yerse' awa' before I'm tempted to forget my calling?" the father panted.

"Father McGrath—"

"I'll ha' no dealing w' ye and your nest of inequity. I'm no afraid of all the Free Traders that Iver come out of h—l. I'll send ye back to the de'il before your time, if ye come meddling w' my mission."

"I've made my compact w' your maister, as I'd mak' a compact w' the evil one himself, to protect my bairns. Mebbe ye're a new hand—I don't remember your face—so I'll remind ye of it. Ye're to be free to peddle your filthy liquors whaur ye weel—aye, an' I dinna doot the guld Lord will score it again ye too, for shamin'! His gorn whuskey by meexin' in your feithful wood alcohol the way ye do—ye can peddle them whur ye please, but ye'll leave my lasses and wrens alone, or I'll mak' Siston lake too hot to hold ye."

"Father McGrath—" Lee tried again.

"Will ye fight, mon to mon, ye damned Free Trader? Will ye fight or wrestle w' me?"

"I'd be glad to, Father, but just now one of my ribs is broken. When I get better, perhaps—"

Father McGrath released him. "Ye're speakin' the truth? Well, then, tak' yerse' off. Ye canna see Mees Pelly—"

A light footstep sounded beside him. Joyce stood there. Lee swung toward her.

"I came to make sure you were safe. Joyce—" Lee held out his arms.

"Dinna speak to him, Mees Pelly. I understand he's helped ye—aye, there's good in the wurst of us—but he'll get around ye, Mees Pelly. Go back!"

"Father, there's something I want to say to him," Joyce answered in a low voice.

"Aye, but he's got a smooth tongue, and the sump of inequity hasn't come upon his face yet. Ye wouldna thenk he'd sold hisself to his maister. If ye must speak to him, I'll just stand by, and if I see he's getting 'round ye I'll send him about his business."

With which the doughty father took up his post just out of hearing, glaring at Lee and prepared for instantaneous intervention. Joyce stepped forward.

"Lee, I—I'm sorry for what I said to you this afternoon. It was partly the shock of awakening, I think. I was unjust to you, and unjust, too, in coming here without trying to get word to you. I owe you a great deal. I accept your word that when you met me in the range you did not know who I was, that you did not pursue me in acquaintance because I was the daughter of the man who was your duty to apprehend. I—I bear you no ill-will for having to do your duty."

"Then, Joyce—"

"But," she said solemnly, "you will see how my father's safety, perhaps his life, stands between us. We can only be enemies—at least, until—"

"That's what I wanted to speak about," said Lee. "As I understand it, this killing was committed years ago, a whole generation ago. It was more or less justified. If your father is brought to trial and convicted, it will almost certainly be for manslaughter.

His sentence will be a nominal one. Quite probably it will be impossible to produce the witnesses required to convict at all. In such case he will go free.

"He has acted ill-advisedly. He should never have fled. His best course will be to surrender. He will find himself a free man in a little while. Instead of a hunted outlaw. Will you unite with me in persuading him to surrender?"

She shook her head. "We always told him that—my mother and I," she answered. "But the thing had crazed him, he hated civilization after it happened. He was insane upon that subject. He will never surrender."

"Let me try to picture to you what happened, and the treachery and faithlessness that have always pursued him. When my father fled from the law he came here and settled with my mother. I was born here. For a long time we were very happy. My father trapped, and in those days this was one of the richest fur districts in Canada.

"But my father was an educated man, and in his heart he was always chafing against his exile. He always cherished the hope some day to take us south where I could be educated properly. Then in an evil day he fancied he had discovered a gold mine.

"It became a mania with him. He would tell no one where it was, except Jacques Leboeuf, an old servant, whom he trusted. They used to go off by night and work it together. My father was always talking about the gold he had collected. He wanted to develop the mine, to sell it for a fortune, but he was always afraid of being discovered, and he put it off and put it off; and neither my mother nor I ever believed in the mine.

"Then in an evil day a man called Rathway came up. He was a small whisky peddler. He had committed some crime against the Indians. He had been beaten, pursued, and was half dead when my father saved him from their vengeance. He took him in and fed and protected him. Rathway learned of the mine, and was always searching for it, but neither my father nor Leboeuf would tell him where it was. Once he tried to spy on them, and Leboeuf had him by the throat and would have killed him if my father had not intervened in time.

"My mother died. Rathway grew fat and consequential, lived here, helped my father with his traps, and, though for a long time my father did not know it, continued debauching the Indians with his whisky. When I was a girl of seventeen he began to take notice of me. He said he loved me. I didn't know much about love, but I knew I hated him. Then one day my father came in from the woods just in time to protect me from him, and he shot Rathway through the arm.

"He was aiming again to shoot him through the heart, for he was terrible when his anger was roused, when Rathway, standing facing him, with his arm dripping blood, coolly told him he knew that my father had committed one murder already, and that the facts were in his possession, written down and left for safety with a friend in the south. The change in my father was dreadful. He dropped his rifle, he seemed almost demented. His fears for my future, conflicting with his fears for the present and his fears of Rathway, broke his will.

"After that, Rathway stayed on and, and they were always talking together, and Rathway threatened my father, but still my father refused to show him the mine, in spite of his threats. My father wanted all of the gold for me—it was his mania.

"Once Leboeuf came to my father and offered to kill Rathway, but my father refused, and Leboeuf, who was devoted to him, never thought of disobeying his strict command.

"That happened before the Free Traders were organized in Montreal, but already the hooch sellers were getting together. They had established a number of posts, one of them at Lake Misquash, miles away, a week's journey north of here. Rathway went to Lake Misquash to confer with them. As soon as he was gone, my father seized the opportunity to send me away south to a convent, to be educated.

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