

THE FREE TRADERS

By VICTOR ROUSSEAU

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WNU Service.

CHAPTER XV—Continued

He was hoarse with passion. But as he tried to seize her in his arms again, she drew away suddenly, stopped—and then he saw that she had a hunting knife in her hand.

"Listen to me now, James Rathway," she said, still speaking in the same strained, monotonous tone. "I shall never be yours. I shall kill myself first. I would have fulfilled my compact in the spirit and the letter, had you fulfilled yours. But I didn't trust you. I suspected that you were tricking me—as you were."

"That's a lie. I didn't trick you. Put down that knife!"

"It's not a lie. You tricked me twice. The first time you forced me into a marriage with you by the threat that unless I consented you would betray my father to the police. I married you, and still you betrayed him."

"I did not. Someone else must have done so. Why should I have betrayed him? He was my friend."

"You were the only man who knew his secret. Then the second time, knowing that I would never live with you, you sent me a lying message to lure me up here, saying that you held my father in your power. You knew that nothing else on earth would bring me up to you. And it was a lie, because my father has been dead for months past."

Rathway's face blanched. "I don't believe that story. How do you know?"

"He died in his mine. His body lies at the bottom of it, where he was stricken. If you did not know that he was dead, at least you were lying when you said he was in your power."

"He lies—at the bottom—the bottom of the mine?" Rathway stammered.

"I—I didn't know." He seemed to shake off a sort of stupor. He tried to take her hand.

"Joyce, if I did lie to you, it was only because I love you. God, think of the years I've loved you, Joyce! I've given all my life to the hope of winning you. Isn't a woman touched by the thought of that? All that I've ever done, since that day when I first saw you in your father's house, has been for you. And now I've got you, and you tell me you will never—"

He was pressing toward her, but she held the dagger pointed at him, and he stopped, afraid of the look in her eyes.

"Joyce, don't be foolish. Put that knife away. What do you mean to do?"

"Kill you and then myself, if you lay a hand on me again. I've told you I shall never live with you."

"By heaven, I'll kill him if you go to him!"

"I shall not go to him. That is why I sent him away. I shall go away alone."

"Joyce, listen to sense. Do you realize that you are my wife? That I can hold you by force, and there is no law in the dominion to prohibit me, and no man who would not approve? Joyce, be sensible. If you're still in love with this man, Anderson, I'm willing to wait till you've forgotten him a little. Lord, I've waited long enough for you! But I'll wait longer if I have to."

"Don't you see how foolishly you're acting," he pleaded. "Don't you realize how much better off you're going to be with a husband who is rich and devoted to you? Your father never took a penny out of that mine all these years. There must be a hundred thousand dollars' worth of gold dust there—perhaps a million. Can't you see the old boy working night after night like a beaver, to make you and me rich?"

And he threw back his head and uttered his hyena laugh again. But Joyce said nothing at all, and he added:

"I suppose you know it all belongs to me, as your husband, under the law, and that if you leave me you don't get a penny of it?"

"Well?"

"Well? I thought you mightn't understand. How far from here is the mine?"

"I don't know."

He burst into a spasm of fury. "By heaven, I'm going to make you know! Do you think you're going to keep the secret of my own mine from me? I tell you I meant to have it from the first moment that your father began dropping his hints, the old fool. It was to find out about it that I stayed on with him year after year."

"I've always known that."

Rathway stared at her. He was staggered by the quiet, indifferent manner of her speaking. He had not believed her before. He had been so confident when he sent for her, under the pretext of having her father at his mercy, that she could solve the secret which he had never been able to solve himself.

Yet now it began to occur to him as a probability that Joyce had never known the secret. He had taken too much for granted. If she had not known it when she went south, as had certainly been the case, how could she have learned it since?

And all his plans seemed suddenly defeated.

"You say you don't know where the mine is? Ah, but you told me your father's lying at the bottom of it!" he cried suddenly. "Who found him there?"

"Mr. Anderson."

"He knows, then? Your lover knows and your husband doesn't? D'you mean to say it wasn't you who told him?"

"I've told him nothing, because I know nothing. He found the mine and found my father's body there. He hasn't told the secret to me, and I don't want to know."

An extraordinary look came over Rathway's face, the look of the fox, the wolverene. He seemed to reflect—and suddenly he pounced.

In an instant he had gripped Joyce by the arms, imprisoning the hand that held the knife. With a laugh he tore the hand open, took out the knife, and thrust it into his belt. He strained the girl against him.

"I've had enough of this nonsense, my dearie!" he cried triumphantly. "You're going to make that lover of yours tell you the secret of the mine. You'll do it when you've learned to love me. And, by heaven, I'm going to make you!"

She screamed and beat furiously at his face, impotent in his grasp. They wrestled to and fro. So violent was the girl's resistance that for a moment

Rathway's voice grew louder. Lee saw the hunched figure gesticulating, the sneer on Rathway's face. Lee drew a bead. He might as well end the business after all.

But before Lee's finger tightened on the trigger, a hand upon his shoulder made him leap to his feet and start up, his rifle clubbed, ready to strike. He thought Rathway's men had surprised him.

But to his amazement it was a woman standing at his side; then in that cloaked and hooded figure that confronted him he recognized—Estelle once more.

She looked at him fixedly; she was deeply agitated, and caught at her breath before she was able to find her voice.

"You fool!" she exclaimed bitterly. "You fool! You had her in your hands and you let Jim Rathway take her away from you! You couldn't hold her—and now I come upon you to find you planning a cold-blooded cowardly murder—you, a policeman!"

At that something broke in Lee's heart. The realization of the act he planned came over him. He would have killed Rathway as heedlessly as any bloodthirsty forest beast. But Estelle's reference to the police touched his pride.

He let the rifle drop, grounding the butt.

"Listen to what I've got to tell you, Lee. I love him. Do you understand that? I suppose you think it's not my nature to love. But it is! It was you who couldn't hold my love. I hated and despised you. I never knew how much I loved James Rathway till I found out how much I hated you that morning when you came to our camp and struck him down so treacherously."

"Oh, yes, I have love and passion, and constancy in my nature, Lee Anderson. It was only you who couldn't draw them out!"

Her voice was vibrant, hoarse with passion.

"That girl will make a fool of you too, Lee Anderson, just as I did," she cried. "You'd be made a fool of anywhere, by any woman!"

But her words passed Lee by like the wind.

"I could have killed you that morning, as I could kill you now, only—I love James Rathway. And he'll love me again when you take this new attraction away out of his sight, where he can't find her. I thought you'd got away—but here you are, back again with her, and all the work's got to be done over again."

"I was crouching near, and I overheard your dialogue, you and she, and the priest, and James Rathway. You gave her up—the woman you love—because she'd stood up before the altar with the man she hated and called herself his wife. I'd hold the woman I loved, were I a man, against God Himself, and all his cohorts!"

"Oh, if only I could find words to hurt you, Lee Anderson, to pierce that tough skin of yours! But I haven't time. Listen to me, now! You don't have to commit murder to get her. You fool, you blind fool, shall I tell you?"

She laughed with taunting menace. "Shall I tell you, Lee Anderson?" she repeated.

And suddenly came the sound of Joyce, screaming within the house. There came the noise of a struggle.

Even as Lee turned, Joyce was running along the passage toward the door. Instantly Estelle glided away into the shadows.

Joyce flung the door open; and then Rathway caught her from behind and swung her back toward him. His black beard hung over her face.

"Lee! Lee! Come to me!"

Joyce ceased to struggle.

"Here!" answered Lee, and dashed his fists into Rathway's face, sending him staggering.

Rathway howled and felt for his pistol. Lee was upon him, pinning his arms to his sides, before he could draw it. But Rathway's men came hurrying along the passage. In an instant there was a furious melee. Lee tripped over a leg thrust out, fell heavily upon his back, and struggled in vain under the weight of his four adversaries.

Quickly he was reduced to helplessness, his limbs held firmly. Momentarily he ceased to struggle, nursing his strength for a more violent effort.

He looked up into the grinning faces, at Rathway, standing over him, leering, arms outstretched, gasping for breath and consciousness.

Rathway pulled his pistol and covered Lee. "Pierre! Shorty! Kr—er! You're witnesses that you saw this man spying outside this house."

They assented. Pierre grinned, Shorty swore, spat, and scowled, and Lee saw the half-healed scar of his pistol butt upon his cheek.

"You saw him assault me," Rathway continued. "Well, Anderson, I guess if I choose to shoot you like the dog you are, the law wouldn't have much to say about it. But I'll be reasonable. Get back to your quarters!" he snarled to his aides, and the three men in surprise released Lee and went down the passage.

Lee leaped to his feet, confronting Rathway resolutely, but puzzled. Rathway held him covered.

"You must want my wife mighty bad to come back like a fox at night in the hope of picking her up under my nose, Anderson," said Rathway.



"Joyce, Don't Be Foolish. Put That Knife Away. What Do You Mean to Do?"

or two she held Rathway at bay, beating her fists in his face again and again, and drawing blood from his nose and lips.

The fury of her resistance only made her the more desirable in his eyes. He held her fast now, her arms forced to her sides again, his bloodshot eyes leering into hers, his black beard sweeping her cheek.

In the room they had taken at the rear of the house the three men, who were drinking and playing cards, hearing the girl's screams and the sounds of the struggle, burst into mirth, and came tiptoeing along the passage.

Joyce, making one final, desperate effort, broke once more out of Rathway's arms, burst through the door, and ran screaming along the passage. She got the front door open.

"Lee! Lee! Come to me!" she cried in wild abandonment.

Then Rathway's arms closed about her from behind, and Joyce ceased to struggle.

CHAPTER XVI

Joyce or a Gold Mine

Lee did not go as far as the forest, which loomed out of the distance beyond the ridges of broken ground. He waited some little distance away, until the priest's sleigh had gone. Then he went quietly back toward the log house.

Lights burned inside. A strip of cloth had been pinned before the window of the largest room—the one in which Lee had camped with Joyce for a brief hour upon that afternoon of their arrival. This was the room that Lee had selected in his mind for their occupancy during their brief honeymoon.

But not the least spasm twisted Lee's face at the realization that another had supplanted him in that relationship with Joyce. There are some phases of emotion so tense that they appear to neutralize themselves by destroying their own manifestations.

Lee's expression showed not the smallest deviation from the normal now. It was quiet, dispassionate, and very cold. Softly Lee approached the window and, stooping, looked between the frame and the curtain of cloth.

The window on this side had a piece missing out of the corner, and over the little gap some one had pasted a piece of paper. With the barrel of his rifle Lee quietly made a small hole in it.

From there he could catch glimpses of the two figures. He heard their voices. He was in no hurry. He was waiting till they chose to finish their conversation. Then, in due time, Rathway would stand in a line with his sights and he would make an end of him.

And the wild turmoil in Lee's heart seemed divorced from his brain, which remained impassive and cold and steady as the piece of mechanism in his hands.

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"You must want my wife mighty bad to come back like a fox at night in the hope of picking her up under my nose, Anderson," said Rathway.

"Well, I'm a business man, and I guess anyone can get most anything he wants if he wants it bad enough to be willing to pay the price for it. Maybe you can get her at the price, Anderson."

"Pelly's gold mine belongs to me under the law. She tells me you've found it and are holding the secret of it. All right. The price is Pelly's gold mine. The woman for the mine."

"What d'you say to that, Anderson?" Rathway was trembling with eagerness. "I was willing to overlook the past and take her back, but if she doesn't want me and does want you, I guess I can't hold her against her will. So I'm ready to take my mine instead and close the bargain. What d'you say to it, Anderson?"

Lee suspected some trick, but the anxiety on Rathway's face, the trembling tones of his voice showed that his avarice was a stronger passion than that for Joyce. And, despite the vileness of the proposal, Lee realized that in no other way could Joyce be saved.

He knew that even then Rathway was contemplating treachery, but there was nothing else to do. If he refused, Rathway would shoot him in cold blood—and the law would justify him.

"I must speak to Miss Pelly first."

"There's no Miss Pelly here," Rathway snarled. "If you mean Mrs. Rathway, you can have five minutes' talk with her to make up your mind. And if you don't accept, or try any tricks on me, by heaven, it's your last minute!"

Lee nodded, took Joyce by the arm, and drew her inside the room. Rathway stood in the doorway, covering him with his pistol, but Lee quietly closed the door on him, and Rathway accepted the situation. Lee went back to the girl.

"Joyce! Joyce, darling!"

"Oh, Lee, I can't bear it. I thought I could, but it's impossible. Oh, take me away, Lee! Help me now as you offered to help me on the range, though we can never be anything to each other. Take me somewhere to safety, where I need never see that man again, or think of him, or of this place, or—ever remember anything of the past."

She clung to him, sobbing in terror and loneliness. Lee, holding her, raised her hands to his lips.

"Joyce, dearest, I'll do as he proposes, then. I'll show him the mine, and then I'll take you away somewhere south, where you need never think of him or of this place again. And if that wretched marriage can't be annulled, I'll be contented to be your brother for the rest of our lives, dear."

He flung the door open. Rathway was standing uneasily behind it, and Lee felt pretty sure that he had been trying to listen with his ear to the ill-fitting jamb.

"I've decided to accept your proposition, Rathway," said Lee. "The terms are these: I guarantee nothing as to the mine; merely to conduct you to the place where Pelly worked for gold. I'll show you the secret entrance. This lady will accompany us, and you will leave your men behind. And we'll go unarmed."

"But I shall carry Mr. Anderson's pistol," Joyce interposed calmly, "and

self discovered during his years of fruitless effort to follow old Pelly; and there was no sign of the three.

It occurred to Lee, besides, that Rathway was not likely to wish the entrance to the mine to be known to any of his aides.

Rathway was looking uneasily about him. "It's in the gorge, then?" he muttered. And, throwing off all pretense of concealment, "There's no way down. I've walked round and round the d-d place a thousand times."

Lee tilted back the stone and showed Rathway the hole beneath it. Rathway stared at it in amazement, uttering an oath as the stone came back into position.

"I shall go first," Lee said, "and light the candle. Miss Pelly—" Rathway muttered, but Lee could not bring himself to call her by the man's name—"will please follow me. You, Rathway, will come last."

Lee pushed the stone back, lay down on the ground, and, after showing the girl how to elevate it from beneath, descended. When his feet were on the first rung of the ladder, he lit the candle. In a moment Joyce appeared, and then Rathway behind her, clinging to the opening and looking down with uneasy suspicion.

"Hold tight to the rocks," Lee called. "It's slippery, and if you lose your hold there's a deadly drop below."

He led the way down, shifting the candle from hand to hand alternately as he descended, to illuminate the way for Joyce, until he reached the bottom office. Then he began slowly to complete the descent, instructing Joyce where to put her hands and feet, guiding her, and bracing himself against the cliff, ready to sustain her weight in case of a slip. However, all three reached the floor of the gorge without accident.

Rathway muttered, looking about him. In the moonlight Lee saw that he was dripping with perspiration. He was trembling with excitement.

Lee said eight fatal words: "The rock marks the entrance to the tunnel."

Rathway looked at it and nodded.

"I had some difficulty in finding it before," Lee added. He turned to the girl. "Joyce dear, I'm going to show Rathway something that I think it would be better for you not to see. Will you wait where you are for a few minutes? We won't go out of your sight."

"Very well, Lee," the girl answered quietly. She had understood what Lee meant immediately. Lee took Rathway through the laurel tangles and showed him Pelly's remains. He showed him the initials on the handle of the revolver.

Rathway stood dumbly staring at the skeleton. He was trembling even more violently than before.

"He must have fallen from the cliff," said Lee, indicating the broken bones.

"Aye, but where's your proof that it's Pelly?" Rathway burst out suddenly. "Why, man, there isn't a court in the land would admit that skeleton as proof that Pelly was dead. That's as like as not the body of his Indian, carrying Pelly's revolver."

Lee obeyed the instinct not to tell Rathway that Leboeuf was alive.

"Besides," Rathway went on, "as for C. P.—Well, that might mean anything Charles Patrick, or Clarence Peel. There used to be a Clarence Peel in this district who disappeared. I swear that's the truth, Anderson. Any old timer will tell you that I'm not lying to you. No, no, Anderson, you can't prove that's the body of old Pelly, just from those initials."

Lee wondered at Rathway's agitation. The man seemed quite beside himself. He twined his fingers in his black beard, and shambled away with his peculiar hunched slouch. Lee led him to the cross above the little grave.

"I think that's proof," he said quietly.

But Rathway, clenching and unclenching his fists, said nothing. Lee went back, calling Joyce, and they proceeded in the direction of the cave. Lee pointed out the pans and cradle, and the proofs of dynamiting.

"Aye, but the gold—where's the gold?" Rathway demanded.

"I have seen none," answered Lee, "and, if you remember, I made no guarantee as to it."

"How do I know you haven't taken it away?" Rathway shouted. "Aye, you may have stolen my gold as you stole my wife. You may be planning to take my wife and my gold away together."

Lee looked at him in amazement, for Rathway was nearly crazed by some passion, probably, Lee thought, the anticipation of obtaining the treasure of old Pelly.

"I've taken no gold and I've seen none," he answered. "I must again remind you of our agreement, Rathway."

Rathway pulled himself together with an effort. "Aye, that's all right," he answered. "This looks like Pelly's mine. Let's look inside. Have you been inside, Anderson?"

"I've only explored the entrance," Lee answered. "I brought no candle with me last time I was here."

Relighting the candle, he preceded Rathway within. The sound of the distant roaring came immediately to their ears. By the candle light Lee saw fresh footprints on the sands. They were made by a man wearing moccasins, no doubt Leboeuf. He did not call Rathway's attention to them, and Rathway, absorbed with his eagerness to find the treasure, noticed nothing. Lee wondered, however, what the Indian had been doing in the cavern.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

Lee leaped to his feet, confronting Rathway resolutely, but puzzled. Rathway held him covered.

"You must want my wife mighty bad to come back like a fox at night in the hope of picking her up under my nose, Anderson," said Rathway.

"Here!" Answered Lee, and Dashed His Fists into Rathway's Face, Sending Him Staggering.

I shall see that the terms are fairly carried out."

Rathway shot a look of hatred at her. "I've no objection to that either," he answered, shrugging his shoulders nonchalantly.

"At sunrise, then—" Lee began.

At sunrise? God, man, do you suppose I'm going to wait till sunrise?" shouted Rathway. He took off his belt containing his pistol, and laid it on the floor. "We'll start at once."

Lee handed Joyce his pistol, then, going into the room, extinguished the candle, brought it out, and slipped it into his pocket, and the three set out immediately. When they reached the rocking stone Lee looked back, scanning the country carefully in case Rathway's aides were following them. He had expected treachery, but it was quite impossible for any spy to approach near enough to discover the entrance under the stone without being observed as Rathway had him-

self discovered during his years of fruitless effort to follow old Pelly; and there was no sign of the three.

It occurred to Lee, besides, that Rathway was not likely to wish the entrance to the mine to be known to any of his aides.

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Rathway shot a look of hatred at her. "I've no objection to that either," he answered, shrugging his shoulders nonchalantly.

"At sunrise, then—" Lee began.

At sunrise? God, man, do you suppose I'm going to wait till sunrise?" shouted Rathway. He took off his belt containing his pistol, and laid it on the floor. "We'll start at once."

Lee handed Joyce his pistol, then, going into the room, extinguished the candle, brought it out, and slipped it into his pocket, and the three set out immediately. When they reached the rocking stone Lee looked back, scanning the country carefully in case Rathway's aides were following them. He had expected treachery, but it was quite impossible for any spy to approach near enough to discover the entrance under the stone without being observed as Rathway had him-

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It occurred to Lee, besides, that Rathway was not likely to wish the entrance to the mine to be known to any of his aides.

Rathway was looking uneasily about him. "It's in the gorge, then?" he muttered. And, throwing off all pretense of concealment, "There's no way down. I've walked round and round the d-d place a thousand times."

Lee tilted back the stone and showed Rathway the hole beneath it. Rathway stared at it in amazement, uttering an oath as the stone came back into position.

"I shall go first," Lee said, "and light the candle. Miss Pelly—" Rathway muttered, but Lee could not bring himself to call her by the man's name—"will please follow me. You, Rathway, will come last."

Lee pushed the stone back, lay down on the ground, and, after showing the girl how to elevate it from beneath, descended. When his feet were on the first rung of the ladder, he lit the candle. In a moment Joyce appeared, and then Rathway behind her, clinging to the opening and looking down with uneasy suspicion.

"Hold tight to the rocks," Lee called. "It's slippery, and if you lose your hold there's a deadly drop below."

He led the way down, shifting the candle from hand to hand alternately as he descended, to illuminate the way for Joyce, until he reached the bottom office. Then he began slowly to complete the descent, instructing Joyce where to put her hands and feet, guiding her, and bracing himself against the cliff, ready to sustain her weight in case of a slip. However, all three reached the floor of the gorge without accident.

Rathway muttered, looking about him. In the moonlight Lee saw that he was dripping with perspiration. He was trembling with excitement.

Lee said eight fatal words: "The rock marks the entrance to the tunnel."

Rathway looked at it and nodded.

"I had some difficulty in finding it before," Lee added. He turned to the girl. "Joyce dear, I'm going to show Rathway something that I think it would be better for you not to see. Will you wait where you are for a few minutes? We won't go out of your sight."

"Very well, Lee," the girl answered quietly. She had understood what Lee meant immediately. Lee took Rathway through the laurel tangles and showed him Pelly's remains. He showed him the initials on the handle of the revolver.

Rathway stood dumbly staring at the skeleton. He was trembling even more violently than before.

"He must have fallen from the cliff," said Lee, indicating the broken bones.

"Aye, but where's your proof that it's Pelly?" Rathway burst out suddenly. "Why, man, there isn't a court in the land would admit that skeleton as proof that Pelly was dead. That's as like as not the body of his Indian, carrying Pelly's revolver."

Lee obeyed the instinct not to tell Rathway that Leboeuf was alive.

"Besides," Rathway went on, "as for C. P.—Well, that might mean anything Charles Patrick, or Clarence Peel. There used to be a Clarence Peel in this district who disappeared. I swear that's the truth, Anderson. Any old timer will tell you that I'm not lying to you. No, no, Anderson, you can't prove that's the body of old Pelly, just from those initials."

Lee wondered at Rathway's agitation. The man seemed quite beside himself. He twined his fingers in his black beard, and shambled away with his peculiar hunched slouch. Lee led him to the cross above the little grave.

"I think that's proof," he said quietly.

But Rathway, clenching and unclenching his fists, said nothing. Lee went back, calling Joyce, and they proceeded in the direction of the cave. Lee pointed out the pans and cradle, and the proofs of dynamiting.

"Aye, but the gold—where's the gold?" Rathway demanded.

"I have seen none," answered Lee, "and, if you remember, I made no guarantee as to it."

"How do I know you haven't taken it away?" Rathway shouted. "Aye, you may have stolen my gold as you stole my wife. You may be planning to take my wife and my gold away together."

Lee looked at him in amazement, for Rathway was nearly crazed by some passion, probably, Lee thought, the anticipation of obtaining the treasure of old Pelly.

"I've taken no gold and I've seen none," he answered. "I must again remind you of our agreement, Rathway."

Rathway pulled himself together with an effort. "Aye, that's all right," he answered. "This looks like Pelly's mine. Let's look inside. Have you been inside, Anderson?"

"I've only explored the entrance," Lee answered. "I brought no candle with me last time I was here."

Relighting the candle, he preceded Rathway within. The sound of the distant roaring came immediately to their ears. By the candle light Lee saw fresh footprints on the sands. They were made by a man wearing moccasins, no doubt Leboeuf. He did not call Rathway's attention to them, and Rathway, absorbed with his eagerness to find the treasure, noticed nothing. Lee wondered, however, what the Indian had been doing in the cavern.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

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