

The Free Traders

By Victor Rousseau

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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 companion's ear. And once, 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 others, did not like the look of the little red-haired man.

The conversation drifted. By two 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 kinnikinnick 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



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.

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 purty well filled up so far as rooms is concerned. But the wife's over to Old Landlord for a few days, an' I guess you c'n have our room till she comes home. It's the best room on the right at the top of the stairs. You jest 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 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 unembarrassed 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 ears as if to restrain him.

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

Suddenly the breed shook off the others' grip and lurched forward, planting himself in front of the girl, his hand 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 shodding 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 'lak 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 'lank 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 deliberately 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 posing 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.

He took refuge in irony. "Well, whadya 'lank 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 faint 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 little, 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 hands, 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 Polly. His subconsciousness, alert through slumber, had caught it and commented 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 photographs 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 be at him up now. Mebbe I'll git the chance in the morning."

"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 scarted the girl away."

"You listen here," he continued. "You keep out of this to-morrow till she's gone, and then we c'n ride hard and ketch up with her at sundown and explain that we're friends of born."

Their voices became inarticulate. Lee strained his ears to catch the import of their conversation, but he could hear nothing but the low whisper of their voices.

"Well, I guess you're right, Shorty," said Pierre after a while. "We got to see she don't give us de slip, though."

Shorty snickered and whispered something to which the other clucked approval.

"She can't, neither," he said. "There's only one way into the range, an' when we got her there we got her where we want her."

No more was said, and soon the morning from the other side of the

stove indicated that the pair had succumbed to sleep. But all desire for sleep was banished from Lee's brain.

There was the alternative of two courses of action: he could warn the girl in the morning, placing himself at her disposition; or he could keep her more or less in sight during his journey the following day, with a view to 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 Polly'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?"

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

"Don't know what time she's leaving, 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 fidgeted 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 shucks, 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."

"That's Rathway's joint, isn't it?"

"So they say." A cunning look came into his eyes. "I guess we ain't botherin' 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."

Lee almost betrayed himself as he struggled not to display his indignation. "You mean the R. C. M. P.'s been bought by that scum in Montreal?" he demanded.

"That's what they're sayin' in these here parts. See here, stranger, ef that ain't so, why don't they git after that Captain Carcajou as they call him? You heard what he did to that camp of Indians last summer? Shore! Well, I ain't sayin' nothin' and I ain't speakin' fer myself, you understand. I'm only sayin' what other folks say. Why, there's two of Rathway's gang in this here hotel."

"You mean the big breed and the red-headed man?"

"Shore I do." The landlord winked at him. "Hooch-runners from Siston lake."

"What're they doing here?" asked Lee.

"I guess they ain't here for no good. That's why I was wishin' you'd had the sand to stand up to 'em last night, boy!"

CHAPTER III

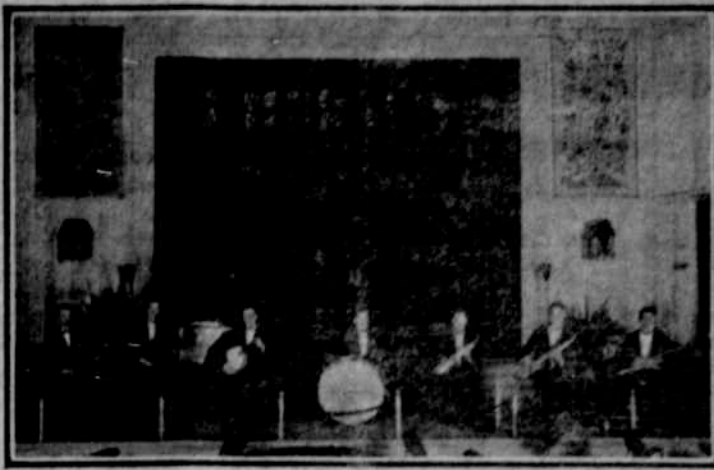
An Unwelcome Guardian

Lee rode off hot with indignation at the landlord's innuendo about the R. C. M. P. But this soon yielded to anxiety about the girl. The disclosure that the two men were from Siston lake and the recollection of the conversation he had overheard, convinced him that they were planning to kidnap and convey her there.

Such a plan would seem inconceivable but Lee knew that the gang, believing their organization firmly entrenched in power, would stop at very little. Other things equally sinister had been done by them.

(Continued next week.)

POPULAR ORCHESTRA TO APPEAR



Charles Woodhouse Dance Players

Charles Woodhouse Dance Players, under the direction of G. Albert Hachlen, will be featured at the Modern Woodmen's benefit dance at Huber, Saturday, Feb. 28th. This orchestra is composed of Portland young men who are musicians of rare ability. They have appeared at Multnomah and Tigard and have proven very popular at both places. This organization has broadcast several musical programs from Radio K. G. W., the Portland Oregonian, and has furnished music for many prominent events, all of which have given this well-known group an enviable reputation.

BIBLE THOUGHT FOR TODAY

March 1

A new commandment I give unto you, That ye love one another: as I have loved you, that ye also love one another. By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another.—John 13:34,35.

March 2

Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind; and thy neighbor as thyself.—Luke 10:27, 28.

March 3

The wolf, also, shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; and the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; and a little child shall lead them.—Isaiah 11:6.

March 4

For the Lord God is a sun and a shield: the Lord will give grace and glory; no good thing will he withhold from them that walk uprightly.—Psalm 81:11.

March 5

Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him.—1 John 2:15.

March 6

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made.—John 1:1,3.

March 7

Take no thought saying, What shall we eat? or, What shall we drink? or, Wherewithal shall we be clothed? But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you.—Matthew 6:31, 33.

QUESTIONS AND BIBLE ANSWERS

March 1

What power worketh within?—Phil. 2:13.

March 2

Whence cometh judgment?—Prov. 24:26.

March 3

What should fathers do?—Eph. 6:4.

March 4

What does God do for those that trust?—Prov. 30:5.

March 5

What shall we keep in remembrance?—Prov. 3:1.

March 6

On what virtues should we constantly think?—Phil. 4:8.

March 7

In what word is the whole law fulfilled?—Galatians 5:14.

ALFALFA WITHSTANDS WINTER FREEZE

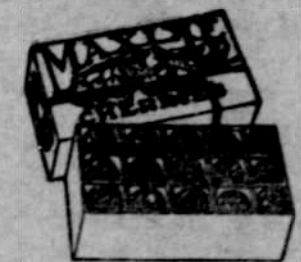
Alfalfa is one crop which has apparently come through the winter freezes one hundred per cent, except on some very wet land which should never have been seeded to alfalfa in the first place. On this wet land there has been more or less heaving and lifting of the plants.

Orders for Grimm seed are still being filled. There is quite a variation in the price of Grimm alfalfa seed, and also a corresponding variation in the germination.

The better quality of seed has usually a high germination percentage, and the lower quality as low as fifty per cent germination.

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