



The Free Traders

By Victor Rousseau

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WNU Service

(Continued from last week)

sure in the ground, a long, irregular, winding chasm, extending indefinitely into the distance, but so narrow as to be merely a lip or crack in the rugged surface of the ground.

It had not been worn by rains or water; it was too deep for that. Probably the limestone, thrust up originally from the earth's inner core, had been sucked down again in some final convulsion, while the granite was still half molten, leaving the granite shell about the chasm.

And in spite of its depth the chasm was so narrow that it almost looked as if a man could have leaped across it.

This was undoubtedly incorrect, the distance between cliff and cliff being only apparently reduced by the dense underbrush that fringed the orifice; but the distance between the walls, which inclined inward toward the summit was less than half that of the base.

It was just such a chasm as a man might step into in a storm, to certain death.

On the floor of this gorge Lee could see a few scrub birches standing primarily erect, seeming to be hardly larger than tree seedlings in a horticultural nursery.

The dense underbrush fringed the sides of the chasm, following it along its edge, until he came to a place where it terminated suddenly in a pile of great rocks of granite outcrop.

Two of these rocks stood up, one on each side of the end of the chasm, like monoliths, although it was clear that they had not been fashioned by human hands. Between them was a third, like a monolith that had been flung down.

Resting on this was an enormous rock and Lee, who had been walking into the face of the wind, stopped and leaned against this stone for a few moments, in order to catch his breath.

To his astonishment the massive boulder seemed about to topple backward under his weight. He felt himself slipping. He turned round, clutched at the stone, and saw it heaving under his gaze like a ship at sea. And then he realized what had happened. The stone was not collapsing, but the pressure of his body had set it in motion.

It came slowly to a standstill. Lee pressed his hand against the boulder, and immediately it was in movement again.

It was a rocking stone, and probably one of the largest in the world. The least touch started it, so delicately was it poised, but a team of horses could not have shifted it from its position.

As the huge, overhanging side tilted, at Lee's touch, he saw a narrow opening underneath it. His first thought was that it was that of some burrowing animal. Then he perceived that the sharp edges of the hole had undoubtedly been made by a spade.

Human hands had made it. Lee stared at it until the stone, returning, hid the opening from view.

He swung the boulder again, and, as it tilted, revealing the hole once more, he flattened himself, face downward, upon the ground underneath. The stone, in its return, just grazed his shoulders.

Lee came to the conclusion that the hole extended downward beneath the base of the great stone, and, lying flat on his face, he pushed it up with his shoulders. The light that came in as it rocked backward showed him a foothold in the granite beneath the strip of mould that covered it—a rock ledge, with gapping blackness below.

Then the stone came back into position again, and nothing was visible. Clinging in the darkness to the edges of the hole, Lee extended a foot downward. The toe of his boot struck a ledge of rock. Crawling down, Lee lowered himself until he felt a second foothold beneath. Below that was a third.

He found himself descending a ladder of rock.

And very carefully he began working his way downward. The granite wall was polished as smooth as glass, each foothold was precariously slippery, and he clung like a bat with hands and knees as he descended. But in a few minutes a dim light began to filter upward from below. Lee's head scraped against rock. The light grew stronger. Flakes of snow whirled in.

Then he emerged into daylight, to find himself clinging to the interior lining of a wall, three-fourths of the way down. The snow was whirling about him, but the wind had ceased, cut off by the precipitous walls of the chasm.

Then Lee understood. He had found an entrance, probably the only one, into the gorge; but someone had preceded him, patiently assisting nature in the creation and enlargement of the steps of that rocky ladder, which had been eroded, during the course of millenniums, by the action of a now dried-up waterfall.

Only water could have hollowed out that course by the play of the leaping torrent on the projections of the granite.

Looking down from where he clung, Lee saw that a thin stream trickled over a sandy ledge in the middle of the gorge below, issuing from one end, where it burst out of the granite, carrying with it the debris of

liful land above—mud, gravel, and sand.

And suddenly the idea occurred to him that in all probability he had stumbled upon old Polly's gold mine.

In which event, what more natural than that Polly was hiding in that inaccessible spot, where he would be absolutely secure against discovery—unless he had incautiously permitted someone to share his secret?

And perhaps Joyce knew, and had come up in order to be with him and to procure food supplies for him. Lee

gnashed his teeth at the thought of it. Fortune had played into his hands.

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 Railway seemed to be associated with Polly; perhaps he was protecting him. Suppose, then, that the girl had gone back to the Free Traders' headquarters on Slatop 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, brushing 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 fling 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 Polly!

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, Polly? 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.

"Polly, 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 rocky ledge 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 Polly's pistol and to receive the bullet in his breast. It was absurdity. And once again Lee tried:

"Polly, 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 hollow 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. Heaching back, Lee's fingers closed upon the last inch or two of a wide blade.

The steel appeared to be buried all the way 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, slender 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 were over each other like steel bands. Lee was no match in wrestling; he could only cling on like grim death, feeling his lungs constrict 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 rancorous 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 hold, his assailant put all 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 equislope 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 the other.

(Continued next week.)

IT PAYS TO ADVERTISE

An expert coffee importer says that if he spends a million dollars in advertising coffee and gets an increase in consumption of eight cups a year per person it is good business.

He cites the instance of a young doctor who came to America from Europe with the idea that Americans were not eating enough soup. He went to work in a cannery and began putting up tinned soup. He sold half a million cans the first year.

Then he began advertising, and today his advertising expenses are more than a million dollars annually.

But when he began his sales costs were 20 per cent. Today they are 5 per cent.

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To keep cookies from burning on the bottom, turn the baking pan upside down and bake the cookies on the bottom of the pan.

If you do not like potatoes baked with the skins on, peel them and rub with butter. The outside will, when baked, be a golden brown, and can be eaten with the rest of the potato.

If you have a steel wire that has become rusty, the rust can be removed in the following way: Cover with sweet oil, rub it in well, and let it stand for forty-eight hours; then rub the steel with unslaked lime that has been finely powdered, until all the rust marks have disappeared.

When you are sewing on buttons, place the knot of the thread on the right side of the cloth directly under the button. The thread will be less liable to break and become loosened and the button will remain on longer.

When making juicy pies take a piece of muslin about one inch wide, dip it in hot water, and then fasten it around the edge of the pie pressing firmly so that there is no chance for juice to escape. We all know how disagreeable it is to have fruit juices burning in the oven, besides losing the best part of the pie.—Mrs. W. J. Alexander.

I find a putty knife to be among the handiest of all my kitchen tools, so I try to keep one in my kitchen drawer. The longer you use it the more indispensable it will become to you. When opening a canned fruit it is an excellent instrument with which to loosen the caps. It is perfectly safe and

does not cut the rubber as an ordinary knife does. This is only one of the many uses that make it worth trying.—Mrs. W. J. Alexander.

In planning a spring-time luncheon menu, too much stress cannot be put on the need for variation in form and color. For example, don't serve two creamed or partly liquid foods, as creamed or scalloped potatoes and creamed chicken in the same course. Also avoid serving several foods that have been browned in fat. Seek for variety always, not, of course, to the exclusion of a properly balanced menu, but to a degree that will give the most pleasing effect. Variation in color is an important point to observe, too, unless a definite color scheme is followed throughout the meal.

A little vanilla or a few small leaves of rose geranium in apple jelly gives it a most intriguing flavor that makes everyone who tastes it wonder what it can be.

It is surprising what pleasing effects may be obtained by using some of the dye soaps in washing old curtains. When there is a quantity of discarded curtaining, part of it may be dyed in attractive colors and used with white summer curtains as summer hangings for the kitchen or back bedrooms.

Scissors may be used to cut such uncooked foods as celery, lettuce, radishes, pineapples and marshmallows. This saves time and also one's fingers.

If the boiler is filled through a piece of old hose attached to a nearby faucet, wash day will be much less tiresome. This saves lifting or carrying the water.

An excellent furniture polish is made from equal parts of linseed oil, turpentine, and vinegar. A little on the dust cloth absorbs the dust and at the same time polishes the furniture or woodwork. It does not leave the surface sticky as do many of the prepared polishes.

A distinctive color feature for spring is that color in millinery should harmonize with the color of frock, coat or suit to be worn with the hat.

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