



The Free Traders

By Victor Rousseau

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(Continued from last week)

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 his consideration brought with it the fear that Joyce might have been attacked as well. He hurried his footsteps through the storm, which was now subsiding, though the snow still fell steadily. He blamed himself bitterly for having left the girl. Surely the strength of that love and tenderness he felt toward her would reach her, and she would respond!

And he planned what he would say to her. He would advise her that it was improbable that her father would receive anything but a nominal sentence, that he might even go free, that in the absence of witnesses a conviction might prove impossible. His best course would be to surrender. Lee began to grow more hopeful.

The log house came into sight, standing bare and bleak in the snowy wilderness. There was no light within. Lee's alarm increased. He hurried to the door, he called, but no answer came. He struck a match. By the tiny light he saw that the kitchen and the adjacent room were empty.

And he began going from room to room, striking matches and calling her, and knowing all the while the futility of it. Joyce was not in the house.

She had "now, and desperately weary as he was after his encounter, Lee had no alternative but to take up the quest. She could not have gone far, but she must have been in a state of desperation to have gone out into that storm. Which way? The falling snow had surely long since obliterated her footprints.

He made his way down toward the trail beside the river. Only two ways were possible: one ran toward the mission, nine or ten miles away, the other in the opposite direction to the Free Traders' headquarters.

But suddenly Lee's hopes and spirits leaped up confidently. Stooping, he traced the tracks of a sleigh along the trail. It had been drawn by a single horse, and it was going in the direction of the mission.

There was only one reasonable inference. Father McGrath must have been passing, perhaps he had met Joyce, and he had taken her with him. 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 cumbrously at every step. But a great load was removed from his mind; the future now looked rosy.

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 inclined forehead. 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 ye self off, ye damned Free Trader," he said softly, "or I'll blow ye into Kingdom Come!"

of your time, if you could be doing my mission.

"I've made my compact with your minister, as I'd make a compact with the evil one himself, to protect my mine. 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 whar ye will—aye, an' I dinna doot the gu'p Lord will score it again ye too, for shamin' His good corn whiskey by meekin' in your feathery wood alcohol one way ye do—ye can peddle them whar ye please, but ye'll leave my liquor and weans alone, or I'll mak' Sinton like too hot to hold ye."

"Father McGrath—" Lee tried again.

"Will ye fight, man to man, ye damned Free Trader? Will ye fight or wrestle wi' 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' ye self 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—"

"Dinna speak to him, Mees Pelly. I understand he's the worst ye—aye, there's good in the worst 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 stomp of inequity hasn't come upon his face yet. Ye wouldn't thenk he'd sold himself to his minister. 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 work to you. I owe you a great deal. I accept your word that when you meet me in the range you did not know who I was, that you did not pursue my acquaintance because I was the daughter of the man whom it was your duty to apprehend. I—I bear you no ill-will for having to do your duty."

"Then, Joyce—"

"That," 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 brought to trial and convicted, it will quite 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 would 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 tramped, 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 on, 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.

"He would not touch the hoard of gold which he claimed to possess—we had never believed in it—but he had made money by his furs. I was to be well educated. I spent three years at the convent, and then went to a missionary training school, to study medicine, because it had always been my dream to teach the Indian and half-breed children in this district.

And then—"

She stopped and looked at him doubtfully. Father McGrath strode toward them.

"He's gettin' round ye!" he cried. "I can see the softens' in your face, Mees Pelly."

"No, no, Father!" cried Joyce sharply. "Leave us a few minutes more!"

Father McGrath withdrew, muttering, after a doubtful glance at her.

"And then—and then—I can't remember, Lee," Joyce continued.

"There's a blank, a terrible blank in my mind still. The next thing I remember I was riding north alone, to save my father, because that devil Rathway had betrayed him. But how was I to save him? That I don't know. I remember that I was half-crazed with anxiety. I remember seeing you at a hotel, and those two dreadful men.

"And—they had some power over me, and I wanted you to help me, and dared not ask you—I didn't know what to do. Once, in my despair, I begged you to kill Rathway, to save my father. But how could that have saved him, when he was already betrayed?"

She looked at Lee in anguish. "Oh, I don't understand!" she cried. "If I could remember! It was something terrible, something that I could never go through again."

"Do you think," asked Lee, "that you had pledged yourself to marry Rathway in order to save your father's life?"

"I—I couldn't have. No, never, Lee!" She trembled. Lee stepped to her.

"Joyce, darling Joyce, nothing has changed. You are still mine."

"Lee, it can't be. My father stands between us—we'll always stand—"

"Joyce, I've been thinking of something on the way here tonight. We both wish to do what is best for your father. Let us work together. Marry me!"

"Lee, it can't be—not till—"

But she swayed toward him. In a moment they would have been in each other's arms. It was a bellow from Father McGrath, whom they had forgotten, that forced them guiltily apart.

"He's got 'round ye, and I know 'twould come about," he cried. "Get ye back to your devil's work—"

"Oh, Father," cried Joyce, half sobbing and half laughing, "this isn't one of Rathway's gang. I've tried to tell you—"

"Aye, and ye told me that ye wouldn't see him, and noo ye'd have bussed him if I hadn't stopped ye!"

Low was thought best to say nothing to Joyce about his discovery of the mine, but he meant to make a thorough search of the gorge for Pelly. Failing him, he meant to discover his deil's agents—"

"Listen to me, now!" said Lee, taking Father McGrath by the arm. And, ignoring the good priest's impulsive interruptions, he told him their story. Before he was half way through, Father McGrath was listening in profound, perplexed astonishment.

"Father, I want Joyce to marry me," cried Lee. "Once she is mine, we can face the future together, whatever it may bring forward. There is no real antagonism—"

Father McGrath shook his head in perplexity. "I can't understand it," he said. "I ken but little of what's been happening here. I'm a new man in the district. It seems as if I'd know Mr. Pelly himself, ye see. I canna imagine what Mees Pelly intended to do when she was coming up to see her father. Was it your intention to warn him, do you think?" he asked the girl. "Or was it something more?"

Joyce could not answer him, and Lee saw how it distressed her to try to remember. It was from that cry of the problem that the mind had withdrawn itself, refusing to remember.

"Ye were going to the Free Traders?" Father McGrath persisted. "Oh, I don't know—I don't know!" cried Joyce in agony.

Father McGrath cleared his throat and delivered his deliberated opinion. "It's my opinion," he said, "that until we discover Mr. Pelly, or learn that he's dead or awa' fra' the district, it wadna be advisable for ye and Mees Pelly to marry unless her memory comes back to her. Mebbe I'm too consalvative, but a while ago she hated ye—"

"Father, I never hated him!" cried Joyce indignantly.

"And I'm no' in favor of these queer chances," said Father McGrath. Joyce sided with him. "Lee, dear est, until one of those two things happens, we must just wait," she said. "But if you find my father—and I'm convinced now that it would be for the best—well, then, I'll marry you if you want me, Lee."

And this time there was no Father McGrath to interfere with them, for the good priest was patting the head of an Indian baby at the door of one of the huts.

And, late though the hour was, Lee declining the father's offer of hospitality for the night, set off for the log house again. He wanted to be alone with his aching heart in the silence.

He reached his destination some time in the small hours, and, careless of possible attack by the mysterious wanderer whom himself down in one of the rooms, and lay like a log until awakened by the sunlight streaming in.

Jumping up, completely rested and restored, he ran down to the river, plunged into the ice-cold waters, raced back over the frozen snow, and dressed.

Joyce was to remain at the mission until Lee knew definitely whether or not her father was in the district. Before leaving the night before, Lee had drawn the father into a trap, and had learned from him that she would not be in danger from the Free Traders. The father had been compelled, he said, much against his will, to come to an understanding with them, by which he undertook not to attempt to interfere with their operations provided his women and babies were left alone. The board of missions was a power that the Free Traders were not anxious to tackle. Father McGrath, hating the necessity of making terms with Rathway, had felt nevertheless that he was doing the only thing possible under the circumstances, until the government made a move to wipe out the organization. He assured Lee that Rathway and his men would not dare to molest Joyce, and, furthermore, that he would protect her with his life if necessary.

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He Had No Doubt That Pelly's Gold Mine Lay in the Chasm.

mysterious assailant, in the belief that he could provide him with the clue he needed.

He had no doubt that Pelly's gold mine lay in the chasm.

After having breakfasted he made his way to the rocking stone, and slipped quietly into the tunnel. Striking a match or two, and assuring himself that it was empty, he descended, and within a minute or two had reached the lower office, and found himself again clinging to the interior wall of the chasm.

Here the artificial excavation of the rungs ended, but there was a fairly easy descent down the lower portion of the cliffs, which afforded plenty of hold for the hands and feet. Lee quickly scrambled down, and, swinging free of the wall, found himself standing at the bottom of the gorge, whose inclining walls shut him off completely from the sight of any one above. Only by standing in the very center of the defile could he see the summit of the cliffs, with their dense covering of scrub.

(To be continued next week)

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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 will see her."

"Will you give Miss Pelly my message?"

"Will ye tak' yersel' awa'?"

"No!"

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

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' yersel' awa' before I'm tempted to forget my calling?" the father panted.

"Father McGrath—"

"I'll ha' no denialing wi' ye and your nest of inequity. I'm no afraid of all the Free Traders that iver come on o' h—I'll send ye back to the deil

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