

The Free Traders

Victor Rousseau

WNU SERVICE

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(Continued from last week)
From where they lurked they could see figures moving against the background of fire in the direction of the neck.

Gripping their pistols they crouched motionless, tense with excitement. But of a sudden other figures appeared, moving toward the outliners. They heard a sharp "Hands up!" followed by an oath, cries, the charge of firearms.

And Hathway, trembling like an aspen leaf, stared into Shorty's face. "It's him! He—he's come back," he babbled in superstitious terror.

CHAPTER XX

Estelle Betrays Lee

All day, with hardly an interval for food and rest, Lee, McGrath, and Leboeuf pursued their way along the

trail toward the Free Traders' headquarters. The Indian went on at a tireless pace, McGrath, with aching, blistered feet, negated all suggestions for a rest; each step that Leboeuf, who had taken command, enforced, was adding to him.



They Heard a Sharp "Hands Up," Followed by an Oath, Cries, the Discharge of Firearms.

...set off, and still they pursued their course through the darkness, until, passing in single file along the track through the woods, known to the Indian, they reached the promontory well before morning.

As they approached the neck they saw figures stealing toward them. Thinking that their presence had been discovered Lee sprang forward with his challenge.

It was the man Kramer who, under the impression that Lee was Hathway, fired as the words left his lips. Lee fired back, both missed, but a bullet from Leboeuf's rifle passed through Kramer's breast and with a strangled cry the man pitched forward into the lake across the broken parapet.

A scattering fusillade from both sides followed. Then Lee, Leboeuf, and Father McGrath were across the neck among the gang, and laying them about with their rifle butts.

"That's for ye, ye thief!" Lee heard the priest shout, as he felled the tall ruffian with a blow. "That's for ye, ye swindlin' hooch peddler, meekin' your feethy hooch in w' gold liquor. And is that yeerast, Sweeney. That's what I promised ye lang syne when I caught ye near the meeson!"

Crash, thudded his rifle stock upon a head. Father McGrath, in fact, seemed to be making in a good deal of private vengeance with the crusade. At every thud a man dropped, and as he smote right and left, ousting his companions from the fray, a sort of war chant broke from his lips.

But the rally was only a momentary one. Having emptied their pistols, Hathway's men streamed away in flight across the promontory, to be brought up and cornered at the further end. Then, at Lee's demand, arms were flung up, and pistols went clattering down.

It was not until now that the gang appeared to realize that it was not

Rathway who had turned the tables. The slight of Lee took what spirit remained from them. Two of the men were slightly wounded, two were half dazed by McGrath's blows, and all were injured in one way or another; none of them had any more fight in them.

Lee scanned their faces. "Where's Rathway?" he shouted.

They exchanged glances. Whirling as they were to give up their leader, with or without compensation, the same thought had occurred simultaneously to each of them, that to betray Rathway meant giving up all chances of a share in the gold.

And as long as the hut remained undiscovered that chance always existed.

Impatient of their evasion, Lee dashed out of the hut into which Leboeuf McGrath and he had herded them, searching for Joyce. He ran into the hut adjacent, then raced across the promontory to the huts near the neck. But Joyce was not in either of these.

There re-appeared the central store house, and, running toward it, Lee dealt a succession of furious blows against the door with his rifle stock. It cracked, splintered and fell off its hinges.

McGrath was at his side. The priest struck a match, and by the light of the tiny flare it could be seen that the interior of the place was empty.

Lee swung his rifle butt furiously, knocking over barrels and boxes in the vain hope that Rathway, at least, was hiding behind them. But he was not there. Shaking off the priest, who sought to detain him, Lee ran back to the hut in which the men were herded.

"Where is she?" he shouted, leveling his rifle at Pierre's face.

"In the hut across the neck," Pierre babbled, gray with the terror of death. (To be continued next week)

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