

The Free Traders

By Victor Rousseau
WNU SERVICE

(Continued from last week)

Lee ran back across the promontory, once more, heedless of his companions' shouts behind him. He dashed along a little trail that ran into the heart of the reeds, flinging the dry stalks right and left, as one parts a hanging screen of beads.

For a few moments he felt the ground hard beneath his feet. Then the little path ended. He tried on quaking knees. He pushed on. Again a path seemed to open before him. Again it closed. The head-high reeds were all about him now, the musk held him, and he went floundering in the mud like a mired caribou.

He struggled on, sometimes sinking knee deep in the swamp. He dashed his rifle against the rattling reeds, swinging it around and around his head, in the effort to beat them down and discover what lay before him. But they rose resilient from the ground like armed sentinels and in the dark

he could see nothing.

He shouted Joyce's name, and now, bewildered, he began to crouch blindly in his tracks among the reeds, dashing them down as if they were human enemies. Yet all the while, though he was ignorant of it, chance was directing him, circuitously, toward the hut in which Joyce sat.

Rathway, the moment that he recovered from the shock of hearing Lee's voice at the head of the attack, hurried to the cabin. Estelle met him.

"Put out that light!" Rathway snarled.

"It's him!" he half-whispered. "And I thought he was dead!"

"Listen to me, now!" He began talking swiftly under his breath. "Estelle, creep closer to him. She listened as if he hypnotized her."

"You mean that Jim? You swear to love that girl behind?"

"I swear it, Stella. I've got the gold caked near the motor boat. Everything's ready, and I've had a fresh drum of gasoline put in."

They heard Lee calling again.

"Now, Stella!" Rathway whispered. Stella slipped from the hut and hurried a little distance along the path.

Lee, struggling in the swamp, suddenly heard Joyce imploring close at hand out of the darkness, in a voice of anguish:

"Lee! Lee! Come to me! Help me!"

"Joyce! Joyce! It's I! It's Lee!"

And suddenly he stopped. The instinct of treachery came to him before he realized that this was not Joyce, who called. Estelle, the niece, Estelle with Joyce's voice, lured him to destruction.

Out of the dark a blow descended on his head, sending him reeling forward. He struggled in Rathway's arms.

Fiercely they fought in the cabin doorway.

Then Lee was seized from behind.

A kick from behind sent him sprawling on the floor. He felt himself being plied. A noise, was slipped about his neck, strangling him until he was no longer capable of resistance. Hopes were fastened around his body and legs. A gag was thrust in his mouth. He was helpless as a trussed chicken.

Then the room leaped into light, and he saw Shorty fastening the ends of the rope to a beam, and Rathway standing over him.

A moan came from Joyce's lips, and her body strained against its bonds. Rathway looked at her and uttered his hyena laugh.

Taking the lighted candle from the table, he set it down in a bowl beneath the sill. A thin coil of smoke quickly began to spread upward. Within a minute the tinder-dry thin boards of the hut were covered with running flames. Smoke began to fill the interior.

Rathway waited till he was sure the hut was well alight, then he dashed the bond that tied Joyce to the bed, picked up the struggling girl, and carried her down the path as easily as a child, in spite of her resistance.

As he neared the neck a spire of flame shot up from the hut behind him.

He was half way to the water when a figure, silent and tense as a cat, leaped at him from among the reeds. It was Leboeuf, tracking Lee. Rathway, by instinct alone, sprang sideways just in time to save himself. Leboeuf fell sprawling in the morass. Estelle and Shorty were waiting beside the motor boat among the reeds.

Rathway had reached the side of the boat before Estelle recognized Joyce in his arms. She sprang toward him with a cry, but Rathway coolly placed the girl in the bottom, and quickly fastened the ends of the rope about the seat. The boat, wedged in the sand, only tilted a little as Joyce struggled.

"Jim, what does it mean? You swore—you swore you'd leave her in the hut," screamed Estelle frantically.

Rathway swore at her. She ran at him like a fury, and he dealt her a blow in the face that struck her to the ground.

She got up dazed, staggered toward him, and stood still as the bright spire of light burst upward from the burning hut. At the same instant a single pistol shot came from the end of the promontory, followed by a sudden outcry.

"Hold that d—n she-wolf for a moment, Shorty," said Rathway, coolly, and as Shorty threw himself upon Estelle, who had begun to scream frantically again, he turned aside, found the bag of gold, and, lifting it in his arms, staggered to the boat, and, with a mighty heave, raised it over the gunwale and placed it in the bottom.

With a mighty heave of his shoulders he pushed the motor boat into the water.

The shouting on the promontory broke into a yell. Figures came running toward them; then, at Estelle's screams, they doubled back again. Only Rathway had not seen Shorty, gasping as he wrestled with Estelle.

"What'll I do with her?" Shorty gasped.

Rathway regarded the pair complacently. Everything was his; one instant now and every care would have fallen from his shoulders. And there was that d—n woman screaming!

Shorty dealt Estelle a blow that sent her staggering back. He swung around to Rathway.

"Good bye, Shorty," said Rathway softly, and shot him through the head.

The body tumbled and dropped at Estelle's feet. Rathway leaped into the boat, pushing it from the shore. As Estelle ran into the water he felt her with an oath.

Next moment he was at the engine, and the put-put began. The boat shot out into the lake. The rattle of the motor was like music in Rathway's ears. He held the craft steady with out difficulty against Joyce's incessant efforts to overturn it. Seeing that she had too much leeway, he stooped and tightened the rope that bound her to the seat.

On the margin of the lake Estelle stood with arms raised to the brightening sky, screaming as if she were demented. Suddenly she turned and disappeared among the reeds that fringed the shore.

Behind the promontory the hut was going up in a vast sheet of flame.

Rathway chuckled. All his fears had disappeared forever. He looked at Joyce, who was now lying quiet in the bottom of the boat. He looked at the gold. The girl and the gold! He said that over and over. Already he was far out upon the breast of the lake, and the promontory was dwindling behind him.

He looked at the drum of gasoline in the bow, tried to lift it, and assured himself that it was full. He smiled. Nothing could thwart his plans. He bent over Joyce.

"It's all ended, dearie," he said. "Soon as you nod to show you're willing to work with me, I'll unfasten you."

Joyce did not nod, and he continued: "You know I don't want to hurt you, dear. Just nod to show you won't try to upset the boat, and I'll set you free."

Joyce took no notice. Rathway took the gag out of her mouth. But, though he had been prepared for an outburst of invective, such as he would have expected from Estelle, she did not utter a word.

Rathway knew the navigation of every river and stream within a radius of a hundred miles. At his motor boat shot down the short arm of the lake the promontory disappeared from view. And it seemed to him that a long chapter in his life was closed forever.

He spoke to Joyce again, and perhaps a little element of selfishness in the man made his appeal pathetic: "Joyce, if you'll let me unfasten you and not try to upset the boat, I promise you I'll not harm you or try to touch you—not till you want me to."

But Joyce made no response, and Rathway, perplexed, loosened her bonds sufficiently to protect her from injury to the circulation, without enabling her to take any rash action

unhesitatingly, she took no advantage of this, but lay with her blazing eyes fixed full upon his face. Rathway grew more uncomfortable. He could not bear to meet Joyce's eyes.

And, ironically, in the midst of his triumph there came to him memories of other days—happy days—with Estelle, in the first flush of their union. She had betrayed another man to go to him, but she had never betrayed him. They had loved each other. Even Rathway had loved.

For the first time he thought almost with a pang that he would never see Estelle again.

He looked about him at the eternal forest, drooping from the uplands toward the brink of the lake. He was already safe. There was a trail along the lake's edge, but it was impossible for any one to catch up with him—if there were any one to follow—for two hours yet.

He drove the motor boat ashore. He put his equipment on the bank. He collected wood to cook some food. He stooped over Joyce and raised her in his arms to carry her ashore. She offered no resistance now, only her eyes, blazing with scorn, stared steadily into his. And with a new access of passion he crushed her to his breast.

"You little devil!" he whispered. "You little devil, you had me scared. And I love you all the more for it!"

Then, lifting up his eyes, Rathway saw something that sent all his dreams and hopes crashing to the ground.

Half a mile distant, topping a little bare space among the trees, he saw two riders trotting along the trail toward him. At that distance it was impossible to distinguish them.

He set Joyce down, and looking at them, burst into furious oaths. His horses! Yes, he had forgotten them! Two riders—and how many more behind them? How many men had that d—n Anderson brought with him?

(To be continued next week)

Household Dept.

VALUABLE HOUSEHOLD RECIPES AND SUGGESTIONS

Cucumber Relish—Chop with a knife or put through the food-chopper two pounds of cucumbers, one pound of onions, and four pounds green tomatoes. Put all these in a colander after chopping and sprinkle with half a pound of salt and let them drain all night. In the morning add to the vegetables one ounce of peppercorns, two ounces of chili-peppers, one ounce whole cloves, two ounces of bruised ginger and the same of mustard-seed, a blade or two of mace, then cover all with vinegar. Boil this all up slowly to the consistency of pulp, and press through a sieve. Put it in small bottles and add a couple of cloves and a chili to each bottle. Seal tightly.

Prune Pudding—Stew prunes until soft, remove the pits, then force the fruit through a sieve. To two large cupfuls of the pulp add the same amount of bread crumbs, previously soaked in milk, add two table-spoonfuls of molasses, a generous cupful of brown sugar mixed with one teaspoonful of ground cinnamon, and two cupfuls of hot milk. Mix all

thoroughly, heat on the top of the stove to the boiling point, then bake for an hour in a moderate oven.

French Prune Jam—Scald the prunes until the skins can be slipped off, and take out the seed. Grind and heat three

large cups of the fruit in a flat pan and add two and one-half cups of warmed sugar. When it begins to thicken add two small oranges that have been run through the grinder and cook slowly until rather thick. This makes a delicious amber-colored jam.

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