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The Free Traders



By Victor Rousseau

WNU SERVICE

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No answer came. He strained his eyes upward through the darkness. Colors and wheels of light flashed across his vision and went out.

"Pelly, 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 rocking stone 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 Pelly's pistol and to receive the bullet in his breast. It was absurdity. And once again Lee tried:

"Pelly, you'd better give up. I can shoot you from here. Surrender, and—"

He did not end that sentence. For, as he hung 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 head 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. Reaching back, Lee's fingers closed upon the last inch or two of a wide blade.

The steel appeared to be buried almost 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 fell into unconsciousness.

He caught at two long, sinewy 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 moved 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 hissing hoarsely from the lungs with raucous 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 backwards 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 equipoise 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.

Then, feeling the clutch relaxing, Lee let go his hold, and, standing straight up on the rung, brought both fists into play. No human being could have stood up against that fearful punishment—Lee's fists were wet with blood. The grasp about him relaxed. He redoubled the fury of his blows—and suddenly found that he was hammering at the bare face of the rock.

His assailant was gone. Faintly Lee heard the scraping of his feet on the upper ledges of the rock ladder.

Then, feeling cautiously above him, Lee continued his ascent, until at length there came a tiny glimmer of light from above, changing into a sudden glare as of high noon. The tunnel was empty. The glare decreased to a glimmer. Lee understood what it meant. His assailant had tilted back the rocking stone and fled. In another moment or two Lee was beneath the stone. He flattened himself



He Flattened Himself on the Ground and Drew His Automatic.

self upon the ground and drew his automatic. He fired one shot, and, before the echoes had died away, had pushed the stone back and emerged, pistol in hand.

The glare had been only in contrast to the dark of the tunnel. Outside it was melancholy twilight. Lee emerged into a solitary, snowbound world. There was no sign of his antagonist, who had evidently had enough for the present.

Lee looked down at the fragments of shirt that remained to him, expecting to find himself soaked in blood. He was astonished to see only a thin thread on his chest. He tore the rag open.

There was only a scratch on the skin from the knife-point, but there was a spreading bruise under the thick coils of Joyce's hair, in which the knife blade had become entangled.

The blow, struck immediately over the heart, would have killed him instantly but for that. Lee raised the tresses reverently to his lips. And with a deep feeling of tenderness toward the girl, he began to make his way through the twilight toward the log house.

He was torn between apprehension the way ye do—ye can peddle them whur ye please, but ye'll leave my lassies and weans alone, or I'll mak Siston lake too hot to hold ye."

"Father McGrath—" Lee tried again. "Will ye fight, mon to mon, ye damned Free Trader? Will ye fight or wrestle w' 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' yersel' 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—" Lee held out his arms.

"Dinna speak to him, Mees Pelly. I understand he's helped 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 wouldna thenk he'd sold himself to his maister. 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 word to you. I owe you a great deal. I accept your word that when you met 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—"

"But," 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—"

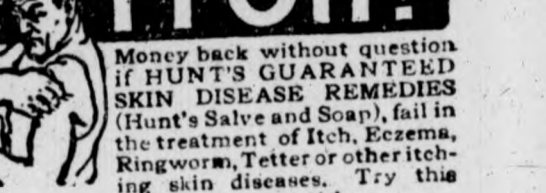
"That's what I wanted to speak about," said Lee. "As I understand it, this killing was committed years ago, a whole generation ago. It was more or less justified. If your father is brought to trial and convicted, it will almost certainly be for manslaughter. His sentence will be a nominal one. Quite 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 will 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 trapped, 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. 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 its consideration brought with it the fear that Joyce might have been attacked as well. Lee quickened 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 fled into the snow, 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 cumbersomely 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 incipient paunch. 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 yersel' off, ye damned Free Trader," he said softly, "or I'll blow ye into Kingdom Come!" (CONTINUED NEXT WEEK.)



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