

*Foiling the “Free Trader”*

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# FOILING the "FREE TRADER"

*By Kathrene and Robert E. Pinkerton*

ILLUSTRATED BY HARRY C. EDWARDS

**H**ad there been a passer-by he would not have seen anything unusual in the little procession of two men and ten dogs. One man broke trail, plodding steadily in the deep, soft snow. His team labored behind him while at the tail of the toboggan came the second man, walking easily with his snowshoes in the well-beaten trench, his dogs making equally light work of it at the rear.

It was only by following the procession hour after hour and day after day that the extraordinary relations of the first and second divisions of the cavalcade could be ascertained. Three hours before daylight they were under way. Until after complete darkness came there was no thought of camp. Yet in all that time not a word was spoken, not a change was made in the order of march. Always the white man did the heavy work of breaking trail. Always the halfbreed followed leisurely, easily.

At night the peculiarity of the relations between the two men was accentuated. The white man would stop and begin to make camp. For a few moments the halfbreed would stand at the head of his team, filling and lighting his pipe, apparently undecided as to whether he would go on. When the white man had shoveled out a campsite with his snowshoes his companion would suddenly become active in his own preparations for the night. In a short time two fires would be lighting up the dark forest, two frying pans would be sending forth odors that served to keep ten dogs from a well-earned rest.

In common these men possessed the wilderness, the illimited expanse of ghastly white and sombre green, the long nights and the short days, the intense cold and the utter cheerlessness. Beyond that they shared nothing. The labor of trail breaking, the meagre delight of a pipe and a chat at the end of a hard day, the half comfort of the hour beside a common fire, the insistent duties of camp making, in none of these did they participate equally.

**A**fter a week of it Wheeler, the white man, began to display evidences of irritation. Adam Thunderbird, the halfbreed, never displayed evidences of anything. Day after day he plodded in Wheeler's trail, keeping always just so far behind, stopping always when Wheeler stopped for the two midday meals, camping always so close he could easily have tossed a piece of bannock into the white man's frying-pan.

Adam never spoke, never seemed to know that Wheeler was near him. He gave no sign that he appreciated the comparative ease of the broken trail, and yet day in and day out he never permitted the white man to get more than one hundred feet from him.

In the beginning Wheeler had been contemptuous of Adam's presence, though he understood perfectly why he was followed. For two years he had been running opposition to the Spirit Lake Post of the Hudson's Bay Company. He was succeeding. He was getting fur, and two post-managers had failed to stop him.

Now, in his third winter, the free-trader had a new opponent at Spirit Lake in Johnnie Upham, a young Englishman. Contemptuous of this outsider, who was still serving his apprenticeship, Wheeler had branched out after more fur and already had made one successful trip to the hunters' wigwams with a dog train.

Adam's presence behind him a few hours after his start on the second trip had occasioned only surprise that the H. B. C. people should have learned his plans. He knew the trick. Adam was to follow him. Hunters, in the pretence of this old employee of the company, would become alarmed and refuse to sell him their fur. They would feel that they could not afford to incur the displeasure of the great, permanent trading organization, upon the good favor of which so much of their comfort depended.

Wheeler was scornful of this influence over the Indians. He believed he had undermined it, that the Indians no longer stood in awe of the great company.

**T**he eighth day out he learned his mistake. In the afternoon he struck a fresh trail and followed it. Adam began to drop behind so that when Wheeler reached a wigwam the halfbreed was not in sight.

An Indian came out. After a quick glance around, Wheeler slipped a flask from beneath his skin-coat. The Indian drank. They talked. At last the

hunter entered the wigwam and returned with a fisher skin.

As the free-trader reached for the pelt the Indian heard the sound of dog-bells and looked up to see Adam plodding slowly toward the camp. Instantly the skin was whisked inside the wigwam.



*He spent a half-hour shouting imprecations at Adam.*

Wheeler turned and cursed the halfbreed, but Adam, apparently still oblivious to everything about him, calmly laid his snowshoes on a drift, sat upon them and began to fill his pipe. He was so close that Wheeler, to keep

his words secret, was forced to whisper to the Indian. The white man argued, pleaded, tapped the flask beneath his coat, but to no avail. The Indian shook his head, glanced furtively at Adam and at last retired within the wigwam.

Wheeler kicked at his dogs savagely as he strode ahead to resume the work of breaking trail. A moment later Adam was in motion behind him, and that night they camped as before.

In the next four days Wheeler stopped at four wigwams. Each time the same thing occurred. Adam sat down and smoked. Wheeler argued. The Indian shook his head and retreated within his home. At the fifth wigwam Wheeler made camp. Adam did the same. Wheeler went into the wigwam after supper. Adam stood just outside the door. When the white man appeared, maddened and cursing, he struck the halfbreed and toppled him backward into a big drift. Adam crawled out, shook off the snow and silently followed Wheeler to their twin camping spot.

When they went on the next day Wheeler's irritation was more pronounced. He cursed and struck at his dogs. He pushed on rapidly with savage thrusts of his snowshoes for a time and then relapsed into sullen plodding. After camp was made that night he spent a half-hour shouting imprecations at Adam. He called him every name he could bring to memory or invent, became as vile as his imagination would permit. Through it all Adam sat beside his fire, smoking, looking into the flames, occasionally turning a steaming sock that he had hung to dry.

The halfbreed's silence drove Wheeler to a last outburst of wrath which culminated in his rising and hurling a stick of wood at the stolid figure in the other camp. It grazed the forelock of Adam's hair, wrenched his pipe from between his teeth and drove it into the snowbank beyond. But Adam did not move or turn his head.

The next night Wheeler pleaded, argued, coaxed, lured.

"I'll double what the Hudson's Bay Company pays you," he said. "Yes, I'll give you three times as much, and good grub besides. What do you get from them but a net to catch your fish and some snares to catch your rabbits? And they call it rations! What have you after working for them for forty years but the clothes on your back? Three winters with me and we'll both retire and never have to work again."

Adam did not look up from the fire.

"But look at what you are doing to me," Wheeler begged. "My last cent is sunk in this thing. If you follow me any farther I'm going to run out of

grub. I won't be able to get back. You're going to starve me, man, if you don't quit."

When there was no reply Wheeler brought out a wallet and counted off a number of bills.

"Here," he called, waving them at Adam, "take this and turn back in the morning. Here's two hundred dollars. I'll give you that much to quit. Go back to Upham and tell him you lost me in a snowstorm. Tell him anything, that I've quit or you drove me out. Here! I'll make it three hundred. What do you say?"

**F**or a half-hour Wheeler kept it up, but not once did Adam raise his head or look toward the other fire. In the morning he dogged at Wheeler's heels and at night he camped beside him. The next day they passed one wigwam with the same results as before. At night Wheeler's face was black but he was silent. He stalked through his camp duties, glowered over his after-supper pipe, but he gave no heed whatever to the halfbreed.

And then for the first time since he had taken up the white man's trail Adam spoke.

"You not so friendly to-night, Mr. Wheeler," he said with an ingratiating smile. "You do not talk. Come! Pass a bottle. Let's forget the day."

"I haven't any bottle and you know it!" retorted the white man angrily.

"Not a bottle, may be, but a little keg, there on the toboggan."

Wheeler, startled, glanced uneasily at Adam.

"It's a great help to the trader, the whisky," continued the halfbreed. "The Indian get soft as the new snow with the whisky in him. Come, give us a little drink."

For a moment Wheeler appraised the Hudson's Bay Company employee. Then he turned to his toboggan and smiled as he bent over it.

"Sure. I'll give you a drink, Adam," he called in extravagant good nature. "I don't hold anything against you. It's that devil of an Upham that sent you out to follow me. You're only obeying orders. I know how it is. Come on. We'll both have a drink."

He had been undoing the lashings of his toboggan and brought out a small keg.

"Come on," he repeated as he glanced at Adam.

The halfbreed had not risen but he grinned derisively.

“Thanks, Mr. Wheeler,” he laughed. “I thought it was a little keg there on the toboggan but I wanted to be more sure. I always knew you the kind of man that gives whisky to the Indian and then cheats him. They’re all like you, the free-traders. Upham sent me after you, yes, but I like to follow a man like you, Mr. Wheeler. I like to see him try to get the Indian’s fur with whisky, and I like to be there and shake my head and leave a message in the snow that Mr. Upham tell me to give to the Indians.

“You been here two years. The Hudson’s Bay been here two hundred. The Indian know that, and he knows that the Hudson’s Bay Company be here two hundred more, while you will go like the snow in spring.

“But it is not long now, Mr. Wheeler. For two nights you give the dogs half a fish. Pretty soon quarter of a fish. It’s a long way out, Mr. Wheeler. It gets longer every day.”

The taunt, and the trap into which Adam had led him added to the mounting irritation and despair of the previous two weeks, drove Wheeler into ungovernable rage.

“You black dog!” he shrieked as he shook his fist at Adam. “Take it upon your own head. You’ve gone too far. This is the last night you’ll sit there grinning at me You’ll not be tagging me to-morrow, not if I have to fill you full of lead.”

At the threat Adam looked up with a smile.

“May be so,” he answered quietly, “but you never get the fur.”

**T**hree hours before his usual time Wheeler was on his way the next morning. He broke camp hurriedly, furtively, without lighting a fire or eating. Stealthily he led his dogs up out of the swamp onto a great lake, the surface of which had been packed hard by wind and cold. It was not necessary for him to wear snowshoes. The lightened toboggan left barely a trace. He ran on and on, sometimes riding, the dogs always urged into a lope, their driver continually glancing over his shoulder.

The second night he reached the other end of the lake, seventy-five miles away. He made camp, cooked his first good meal in two days, smoked a pipe and turned in.

An hour later, while there was still some light from his camp-fire, he was wakened by the growling of his dogs. He threw off his robe and reached for



his rifle.

“No use, Wheeler,” came a quiet voice from the darkness. “Drop it! Stand up!”

“What do you want, Upham, waking a man up this way in the night?” demanded the free-trader.

“I want you and I’ve got you,” retorted the Spirit Lake Post manager as he walked into the circle of light, his rifle cocked and ready and two halfbreed servants at his heels. “I want you for killing Adam Thunderbird and I’m going to turn you over to the police.”

“But I didn’t kill him,” protested Wheeler in a panic.

“You’ve played a bad game ever since you came in here,” continued Johnnie as if he had not heard. “I’ve tried to get something on you, for I knew you peddled whisky. But now I’ve got something that will put you out of the way for good.”

“But I never killed him! He sat there beside his fire when I went to sleep. In the morning he was gone.”

“Don’t talk nonsense!” retorted Johnnie. “We got there in time to see all the tracks. You camped beside Crooked Rapids. You got water from where the ice hadn’t formed. So did Adam. Yesterday morning you went down at the same time. When he bent over you shoved him in. The tracks told it as plainly as if it had been written in the snow. These men saw it and the three of us will send you over.”

“I didn’t!” shouted Wheeler frantically. “He must have gone after water before I got up and slipped in.”

“That might do if it were not for one thing. Before you turned in that night you threatened to kill Adam, said you would fill him full of lead.”

Wheeler had been rapidly approaching hysteria, but Johnnie’s statement, true even to the words, had a sobering effect. He regained control of himself and there was a sneer on his lips as he spoke.

“You might say that, Upham, but you can’t make the police believe you’re a mind-reader.”

“They don’t have to believe I am. Adam wrote me a note telling of it, of how you threatened him, and I found it in his grub box. A jury doesn’t want anything better than that.”

In the week they spent returning to Spirit Lake Post Wheeler continued to protest his innocence. Johnnie Upham maintained an unbroken silence after the capture, but his very reticence served to add to the free-trader's desperation. Twice he attempted to escape, but the others were always watching.

On their arrival at the post Johnnie led the way at once to the Indian house.

"Put him in there," he commanded his two men. "There's a lock on the door that will hold him to-night. In the morning we'll start him to Savant House and the mounted police."

"His dogs?" asked one of the employees.

"Tie them up here for now. Get your supper and take care of them afterwards."

Johnnie crossed to the dwelling house, where he changed into fresh, dry clothes, washed away the grime of a winter trip and had his supper. When he was smoking in the sitting-room an hour later one of the dog drivers entered.

"That Wheeler gone," he announced quietly. "He get out of the window and take his dogs and go."

Johnnie smiled, stretched his legs and puffed contentedly at his pipe.

"Well, we've been on the trail for three weeks and I'm glad we don't have any more of it," he said. "And he'll never come back to this part of the country. I wouldn't have done that if he had played a clean game. But his whisky and the rest made him a menace to the Indians as well as to the Company."

There was a movement in the dark hall and Johnnie looked up.

"Come in, Adam," he called. "You ought to be on the stage. You played the part like a professional."

"You make that old trick a good one," grinned the halfbreed. "He get no fur, he get nothing. He lose all he got."

"And I honestly think he's come to believe he killed you," added Johnnie. "He was bushy. The bush got him, the bush and the way you plagued him. Go over to the store in the morning and tell Emile you are to pick out a suit of clothes for yourself."

THE END

## TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

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[The end of *Foiling the "Free Trader"* by Kathrene Pinkerton and Robert E. Pinkerton]