



The Honorable Senator Sagebrush

By FRANCIS LYNDE

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CHAPTER III. A FALSE GALL OF MEMORIES.

As a cheerful fate decreed it turned out that Blount was not to have Gantry for a traveling companion beyond Chicago.

On the second day of westward furling the railroad man, whose business followed him wherever he went, had instructions to meet Mr. Hardwick McVicker, his vice president, in the hills north of the following day Blount continued his journey alone.

Twenty-four hours later the expatriated westerner had crossed his Rubicon, otherwise the clay colored stream of the Missouri river, at Omaha, and had entered upon a new scene which ought to have been familiar—should have been and were not, so many and great were the changes wrought during his fourteen years of absence.

In the smoking car he fell into talk with a prosperous looking man whose thin, hawklike face was so out of keeping with the air of prosperity—a lone passenger who had boarded the train at Omaha.

At first their conversation was badly desultory. The hawk faced one, it seemed, was a mine owner whose property, vaguely located somewhere "in the mountains," was involved in litigation. It was the reference to the litigation which first drew Blount beyond the commonplace, the awakened interest being wholly professional.

Oddly enough, since he had never expected to use it, he had specialized somewhat in mining law, and before many miles had been clicked off under the drumming trucks of the Pullman he found himself giving opinions and laying down plans of procedure for the man who, investing in mines, had apparently purchased more trouble than profits.

Into the cleft thus opened by the ax of business the hawk faced man inserted a wedge of cautious inquiry. In addition to his mining properties, he had been making investments in timberlands—had investments, he feared, since the government had lately taken such a decided stand against the cutting of timber in the new forest reserves.

Again Blount was good naturedly helpful. One of his classmates in the law school had been preparing himself to enter the legal branch of the forest service, and Blount had acquired at second hand a working knowledge of the forestry situation in the west and of the legal status of the western timber pirates. Moreover, he had very clear and decided opinions upon the question of the conservation of the nation's timber resources, and he was frank enough to express them emphatically.

If he had been less unsuspecting he might have remarked the quickened attention of the prosperous looking person who seemed so willing to take advice from a chance acquaintance.

"If you were a government man yourself you could hardly put the case stronger," was the smiling commentary of this person, who was as yet nameless to Blount.

"How do you know I am not a government man?" said the expatriate, willing enough to play the game as the cards should fall.

"Because you are not traveling on government transportation," was the shrewd reply.

"You can't tell anything by that," Blount said, laughing. "A good many

drawn to the further side of the campfire to wrangle noisily over what should be done with him. Blount found it difficult to realize that they were actually discussing, as one of the expedients, the propriety of knocking him on the head and stinging his body into the canyon.

The difficulty lay in the crude inhumanity of the thing. Five minutes earlier he had been riding peacefully up the trail, wondering how badly he was lost and how much farther it was to Debbleby. Then, at a sudden turn in the canyon, he had come upon a campfire and had found himself looking into the muzzle of a leveled Winchester.

From that to the unbrooding and the blinding was but a rough and tumble affair and was unaimed and the surprise had been complete, but the incredulities required in the

At the dining car dinner, which was served while the high peaks of the main range were still reflecting the crimson and gold of the sunset, Blount missed his luncheon companion.

Now that he recalled it he remembered that he had seen nothing of the hawk faced man since the early afternoon. But the absence of companionship was a relief rather than a deprivation.

Almost without knowing it he found himself hastening through his dinner so that he might return to the Pullman window. When at length he had the longed for sight of a bunch of cattle, with the solitary night herd hanging by one leg in the saddle to watch the passing train, the call of the west was once more trumpeting in his ears.

At a small timber shipping station well within the mountains where the logs were shot down to the mills in a trough, and the more numerous of the expedients seemed actually about to prevail he thought it was time to try to find out why he was to be effaced.

"I don't want to seem to interfere with any arrangements you gentlemen are making," he called across to the man at the fire, "but if you will kindly tell me why you think it necessary to murder me I should be immensely obliged."

"You know mighty good and well why there's one too many of you on Lost river just at this stage of the game," said the hard faced brigand who had held the Winchester while his two accomplices had unhorsed and bound the victim.

"But I don't," insisted Blount good naturedly. "So far as I know, there is only one of me—on Lost river or anywhere else."

"That'll do for you. It ain't your put in, now," was the gruff decision of the court.

But Blount was too good a lawyer to be silenced that easily. "I am pleased that you might not especially regret the killing of the wrong man, but in the present case I am very sure I should. Who do you think I am?"

"The boss knows who you are, and that's enough for us," said the spokesman of the three highlanders. "The boss?" questioned Blount.

"Yaas; I said the boss. Now hold your jaw."

Blount caught at the word. In a flash the conversation with Gantry flicked into his mind.

"There is only one boss in this state," he said coolly, "and I am very sure he has not given you orders to kill me."

"What's that?" demanded the spokesman.

Blount repeated his bit of information, adding, "Perhaps you'd better ring for a better connection and ask your boss if he wants you to kill the son of his boss?"

At this the tall man came and stood over his prisoner.

"Say, kid, it ain't my night for kiddin', and it hadn't ort to be yours," he remarked grimly. "The boss didn't say you was to be rubbed out—they never do. But I reckon it would save a heap of trouble if you was rubbed out. You don't get over into them woods on Upper Lost creek with no papers to serve on anybody, see?"

A great light dawned upon Blount, and with it came the disconcerting realization of a conviction overthrown. As a theorist he had always scoffed at the idea that corporations, which are creatures of the law, could afford to be open lawbreakers. But here was a very striking refutation of the charitable assumption.

His smoking room companion of the Pullman car was doubtless one of the timber pillagers who had been cutting on the public domain. To such a man an agent of the national forest service was an enemy to be disposed of as expeditiously as possible, and Blount saw that he had only himself to blame, since he had allowed the man to believe that he was a government employe.

Having the clew to the mystery, however, his course was a little easier to steer.

"My name is Blount, and I am the son of ex-Senator David Blount of this state," he asserted. "Now, what are you going to do with me?"

"What's that you say?" grated the outlaw.

"You heard what I said. Go ahead and leave me into the canyon if you are willing to stand for it afterward."

As he was able to determine by holding his watch face up to the moonlight, it was nearly midnight when the silent cavalcade of four turned aside from the main road into an avenue of huge cottonwood trees.

At its head the avenue became a circular driveway, and fronting the driveway a stately house, with a massive Georgian facade and colonnade portico, flung its black shadow across the white gravel of the carriage approach.

There were lights in one wing of the house, and another appeared behind the leader in the entrance hall when the leader of the three highlanders had tramped up the steps and touched the bell push.

Blount had a fleeting glimpse of a black head with a crown of snowy hair, cottonwood trees.

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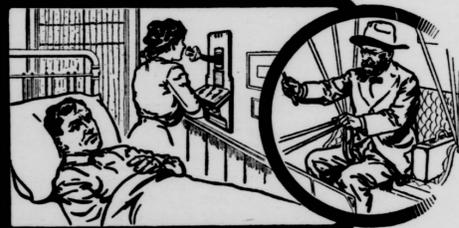
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