The Honorable Senator Sagebrush

By FRANCIS LYNDE

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CHAPTER X.

IN THE HERBARIUM.

THE Weatherfords, millionaire [illegible] people and so newly rich that the crisp bank notes fairly crackled when Mrs. Weatherford spent them, kept their hackeyed and literal state in a castle like house in Mesa circle, the most expensive if not the most aristocratic no thoroughfare of the capital city.

Weatherford, the father, egged on by Mrs. Weatherford, had political aspirations pointing toward a United States senatorship, the election to which would fall within the duty of the next legislature.

The mine owner himself would willingly have dodged, but the ambitious wife was inexorable. There were two grown daughters and a growing son, and it was for these that Mrs. Weatherford was socially ambitious.

The reception, for which the senator's wife had driven her guest thirty miles through the dust of the sagebrush hills, was one of the moves in Mrs. Weatherford's private campaign.

From room to room in the vast house a curiously assorted throng of the hidden ones worked its way as the jam and crush permitted.

It was a mark of the newness of the Weatherford riches that the glass and iron greenhouse, built out as an extension of one of the drawing rooms, was called "the herbarium." It was a reproduction on a generous scale of a tropical garden.

The senator's party of three was fashionably late at the function in Mesa circle, but in the crush filling the spacious drawing rooms the hostess and her long line of receiving assistants were still on duty.

Having successfully passed the line with her husband and Patricia, little Mrs. Blount looked about her, saw Mr. Richard Gantry, signaled to him with her eyes and, with the traffic manager for her center rush to wedge a way through the crowded rooms, was presently lost to sight—at least from Miss Anners' point of view.

Whether she knew it or not, from the moment of her appearance at the hostess' end of the long receiving line the senator's wife had been marked and followed in her slow progress through the crowded rooms by a prosperous looking gentleman, whose hawk-like eyes never lost sight of her.

When his quarry stopped, as she did frequently, to chat with one or another of the guests the man with the eager eyes circled nervously and once or twice seemed about to make the opportunity which was so slow in making itself.

But it was not until the little lady in the claret colored party gown had drifted, still with a hand on Gantry's arm, in among the palm and banana trees that the bird of prey person made his swoop. A moment later Gantry had taken his commands and was disappearing in the direction of the refreshment tables, and the little lady was saying, "Dear me, Mr. Hathaway, you almost startled me!"

"Did I?" said the lumber king rather grimly, as if he meant the query to be apologetic. "I am sorry. I didn't mean to, but Mrs. Gordon said I would find you here, and so I took the liberty of—er—following you. I'm needing a little straightening out, you know, and—er—would you mind letting me talk business with you for a minute or two, Mrs. Blount?"

"Certainly not, if you can talk business in such a place as this," she said, making room for him on the rustic settee.

"Perhaps it isn't business; perhaps it's only politics," he resumed. "First, I wish you'd tell me what I've been doing to get myself into your bad books."

She laughed easily. "Who said you had been doing anything?" she asked.

"The senator," he answered shortly. "He said I would have to make my peace with you. I want to be put next in this pigs in clover railroad puzzle. Our contract with the Transcontinental is about to expire, and I'd like to get it renewed on the same terms as before."

"Well," she said ingenuously, "why don't you do it?"

"I can't," he blustered. "Everybody has suddenly grown mysterious. Kittredge, the general superintendent, doesn't seem to remember that we ever had any contract, and Gantry is just as bad. And when I go to the senator he tells me I must make my peace with you. I can't understand what everybody is driving at. I've got something to sell that the railroad company needs. Where's the hitch? You can put me next. Why can't I get my contract renewed?"

The little lady was opening and shutting her fan slowly. "What was your contract?" she asked innocently.

"If I thought you didn't know I wouldn't tell you," he said bluntly. "It's a rebate rate east and west from all of our sawmills, and it was given us two years ago, a few days before election."

"And the consideration?" she asked, looking up quickly.

"You know that, too, Mrs. Blount. It was the swinging of the solid employees' vote of the Twin Buttes Lumber company over to the railroad ticket."

"And you wish to make the same arrangement again?" she asked.

"Exactly. We've got to have that preferential rate or go out of business."

"Why, Mr. McVickar, verbally. Of course there was nothing put down in black or white, but the railroad folks did their part, and we did ours."

"A gentleman's agreement," she commented. "You have tried Mr. McVickar again?"

"Yes. He referred me to Gantry."

"And what did Mr. Gantry say?"

"I couldn't get him to say anything with any sense in it. The most I could get out of him was that I would have to see the boss."

"And instead of doing that you went to see the senator?" she asked.

"Who else would Gantry mean by 'the boss?'" demanded the befogged one.

"Possibly he meant the senator's son," she ventured, tapping a very pretty cheek with the folded fan. "Have you been leaving Evan Blount out in all of this?"

"I didn't know where to put him in. That's what brings me here tonight. The senator or Mr. McVickar or both of them together have set the whole state to running around in circles with this appointment of young Blount. Some say it's a deal between the senator and McVickar, and some say it's a fight. Half of the professional spellbinders are walking in their sleep over it right now. I thought maybe you could tell me, Mrs. Blount."

"I can't tell you anything that would help the people who are walking in their sleep," she returned, "but I might offer a suggestion in your personal affair. Mr. Blount is your man."

Hathaway pursed his thin lips and frowned. "How big a block of Twin Buttes stock shall I offer him?"

Her laugh was a silvery peal of derision. "You always figure in dollars and cents, don't you, Mr. Simon Peter Hathaway?" she mocked.

"I have always found it the cheapest in the end."

"Listen," she said, with the folded fan held up like a monitory finger. "Mr. Gantry may be back any minute, and I can give you only the tiniest hint. You must go to Mr. Evan Blount and appeal to him frankly as one business man to another."

"But I have heard—they say he's all kinds of a crank."

"Never mind what you have heard. Tell him all the facts and ask him to help you, and, for mercy's sake, don't offer him a block of your stock. Put it where it will do the most good. Put it in the name of Professor William J. Anners of Cambridge, Massachusetts, and show Mr. Blount how dreadfully

"PUT IT IN THE NAME OF PROFESSOR WILLIAM J. ANNERS."

disastrous the loss of the preferential freight rate would be to all the poor people in your list of stockholders, including Professor Anners."

Hathaway drew down his cuff and made a rapid pencil memorandum of the name and address of the new beneficiary.

"You will take notice that I'm not asking who this Professor Anners is or why I should be making him a present of a block of stock, but what you say goes as it lies. Anything else?"

"Yes. Be perfectly frank with Mr. Blount and don't let him put you off. He may pretend to be very angry at first, but you won't mind that."

"I won't mind anything if I can bring this business down to the everyday, commonplace earth once more. You and the senator and Gantry and McVickar are playing some sort of game, and you haven't shown me more than the back of the cards. That's all right. I'll play my hand blindfolded, if that's what you want, just so we win the odd trick. When and where can I find Mr. Evan Blount?"

"The day after tomorrow at his office in Temple court. He is out of the city now, but"—

Here Gantry's coming put an end to the private conference, and the president of the Twin Buttes company went his way.

It was not until they had served out their full sentence at Mrs. Weatherford's crush and were back in the private dining room suit at the Inter-Mountain, with Miss Anners safely behind the closed door of her own apartment, that the small conspirator passed the word of good hope on to her husband.

"It is working beautifully," she exulted. "He will go to see Evan day after tomorrow—and after that the deluge."

CHAPTER XI.

THE GAME.

IF Evan Blount had been anticipating an unfriendly reception at the great mining camp in the Carnadine hills he was agreeably disappointed. A committee of prominent citizens, headed by Jasper Steuchfield, the reform chairman for Carnadine county, met him at the train, escorted him to the hotel and during the afternoon [illegible] Mining company [illegible] enthusiastic audience. [illegible] cheers and [illegible] the railroad rate [illegible] sat on the platform as the guest of the [illegible]

[illegible] Crosby, the [illegible] candidate for the state senate, had opened the joint debate with a short arraignment of the railroad's methods, not only in its dealings with its patrons as a common carrier, but also in the partnership with which it invaded the political field. There was unanimous applause. But it was no harder than that which greeted Blount when he rose to present the railroad's side of the argument.

During the journey from the capital, which had consumed the night and the greater portion of the forenoon, he had prepared his speech. His argument, the one unanswerable argument, as it seemed to him, was the existence of a law which promised to limit the earnings of a private or at least a quasi public corporation, without making a corresponding regulation limiting the cost of such a corporation's service. Upon this foundation he was able to build a very fair structure of oratory.

The judge, his opponent, was a rather turgid man, whose speech abounded in flights of spread eagle eloquence and whose appeal was to the emotions and the impulses of his audience.

Blount, on the other hand, made a typical lawyer's speech, calmly delivered, logical in every syllogism and appealing frankly to the intelligence of his hearers. In every period of it he was greeted with generous applause, and at the close of the meeting he had what the editor of the local paper called in his issue of the following day "an ovation."

Steuchfield and his fellow committeemen escorted him to the midnight train, and no one in the crowd of congratulators was more enthusiastic than the opposition chairman.

"That was a great speech, Mr. Blount," he said at parting. "If you can go all over the state making as good talks as you have made here tonight you'll tie us all up in a hard knot. But McVickar won't let you do it, not by a long shot."

Blount laughed. "There are no strings tied to me, Mr. Steuchfield," he declared. "This is a new deal, and I am the dealer. Come down to the capital and let me convince you that we are out for open publicity and a square deal for every man, including the railroad man."

"All right," was the cordial reply. "I'll be down along some of these days, and if you can show me that McVickar isn't going into politics any further than you have gone here tonight I'll promise you to come back here and tell the boys that the jig is up."

Five minutes later the branch train pulled out, and the chairman and his fellow committeemen gave the departing joint debater three cheers and another. When the red tail lights of the train had disappeared around the first curve Steuchfield turned to his fellow conspirators.

"Well, boys," he said, with a grin that went from ear to ear, "I guess we did it up all right and according to orders. I don't know what sort of game the Hon. Dave Sagebrush is playing this time, but whatever he says goes, and I reckon we gave the young man a right pleasant time. Anyway, he seemed to think so."

Blount did not reach his office in the capital until the afternoon of the second day. His first care was to call up the Inter-Mountain, and when the clerk disappointed him by telling him that his father, Mrs. Blount and their guest had gone out to Wartrace Hall he counted it as one more opportunity missed and settled down to business.

First in the memoranda on his desk was a stenographer's note asking him to make an appointment with one S. P. Hathaway, whose address was the Inter-Mountain hotel. Since the note was marked "important" he told the clerk to call up the hotel at once, and in due time the gentleman, who, the stenographer said, had called several times during the day, made his appearance at the door of the private office.

It was a mutual shock. Blount recognized instantly his companion of the Omaha-Aretas Pullman smoking compartment and the man who had doubtless sent the three highbinders after him on the night of mysteries and who had been the prime mover in the series of singular incidents ending in the midnight homecoming to Wartrace Hall.

On the other hand, the president saw before him the supposed agent of the forestry service.

"Well, I'll be hanged!" he ejaculated, dropping into the nearest chair.

"You needn't be," laughed Blount easily. "I'll admit that it was partly my fault, Mr. Hathaway. What can I do for you today?"

By this time the lumber king had recovered his breath and some measure of his composure.

"Great Scott!" he said. "If you had given me half a hint that you were Dave Blount's son, but you didn't, you know, and now I am handicapped just at the time when I oughtn't to be. I have come to talk business with you today, Mr. Blount, and you've got me going when I ought to be coming. I've been given to understand that you are handling the political end for the railroad company in this campaign, Mr. Blount. Is that right?"

"It is and it isn't," was the quick reply. "The railroad company is not in politics in this campaign—as a political factor, I mean. What we are trying to do—what we mean to do—is to lay the entire matter plainly and fairly before the people with a plea for a square deal."

"H'm, yes," said the trust president, who was evidently suffering from a fresh attack of embarrassment. "But there are certain little business matters which have to enter into every campaign, and your company, like my own, is obliged to take cognizance of them. Two years ago the railroad people found it advisable and profitable to—er—make a little arrangement with us which was to our mutual advantage, and I called to see if it could not be made again."

Blount sat back in his chair, and the conciliatory smile disappeared. "State the facts, if you please, Mr. Hathaway," he said curtly.

"Well, it was like this. As you know, we have a great many sawmills scattered around in different places in the state, and we employ a good many men. While our employees are residents of the state, they are not citizens in the sense that they take any active interest in state politics. They may be here this year and up among the Oregon redwoods next year and somewhere else the year following. That being the case, when they vote at all they naturally ask us how we would like to have them vote."

"Go on," said Blount.

"Well, as I say, such being the case, we are able to control at least four and probably five of the legislative districts in this state. The control is worth something to your people, and in the last election that fact was recognized. Since the Twin Buttes Lumber company is practically the only heavy lumber shipper in this region, it was given a preferential rate on its products, not at all as a quid pro quo, you understand, but merely in friendly recognition of our help in the last election.

"Really, it was not such a great thing that was done for us, Mr. Blount. If you are familiar with lumber rates in this territory you will know that the special tariff made for us is all that enables us to live. Without it we would go into bankruptcy inside of a year."

Blount had opened his penknife and was absently sharpening a pencil. "This special rate you speak of, Mr. Hathaway," he said, speaking slowly—"I imagine it is not confined to this state."

"Well—er—no," was the hesitating reply. "To meet competition it has been made to apply also on through shipments."

"And it is covered by rebates, I suppose?"

"N-not exactly," was the reluctant admission. "The Transcontinental company is a heavy purchaser of lumber, and the greater part of the difference between the preferential and the regular tariff rate is taken up in our bills for stock sold to the railroad."

"Let me be quite clear upon that point, Mr. Hathaway. You mean that you are allowed to charge the railroad company more than the market price on the lumber it buys?"

The president of the lumber trust nodded. "Yes; that's practically the way of it," he admitted. Then he once more pressed the time worn argument: "It's the only way we can live and do business nowadays, Mr. Blount. Like every other large corporation, we have a small army of little shareholders—widows, orphans, charitable institutions and trustees' accounts. I have brought a list of our stockholders, and I'd like to have you look it over."

Blount took the paper mechanically and quite as mechanically ran his eye down the list of names. At the bottom of it, written in with a pen, was the name of Patricia's father, with his residence and occupation filled out in full.

While Evan was staring at the pen written name Hathaway went on eloquently emphasizing the disastrous results that would fall upon the people for whom he was in the largest sense the trustee, the disaster hanging upon the withdrawal of the preferential rate.

Blount broke him in the midst of the special pleadings. "I see you have recently added one new name to this list, that of Professor Anners."

"Yes," interrupted the Twin Buttes president, "and he is a good example of our stockholders. Those like Anners—college professors, preachers and the like—buy stocks when they buy 'em at all for an investment and pay for 'em out of their hard earned savings."

"I know," said Blount, frowning. The fact that Patricia's father was involved added a fresh and exasperating complication, but he must come to some decision. "Let us get down to the present fact," he went on brusquely. "What is it that you want me to do, Mr. Hathaway?"

"I want you to set the machinery in motion so that we can have our rate continued for another two years on the same terms as before. You are going to need every vote you can get this year, Mr. Blount, and you can't afford to turn us down."

Blount returned the printed list of stockholders and fell back upon the pencil sharpening. "Is it possible that you don't recognize the bald criminality of such a transaction, Mr. Hathaway?" he asked quietly.

"Of course I don't," was the ready reply. "It is the universal rule of the business world everywhere. You do something for me and I do something for you. You make it possible for us to live and do business in lumber, and we will do what we can to make it possible for you to get your square deal from the people of this state. That's the whole thing in a nutshell, Mr. Blount."

"One question," snapped Blount, trying to fix the roving gaze of the hawklike eyes. "With whom did you make this arrangement two years ago?"

"With Mr. McVickar himself."

"And you think you can do it again?"

"I know I can, but I don't want to go over your head. They all tell me that you are handling this end of it for the railroad company, and I'm not going around hunting a chance to make enemies. There's no hurry. Take your own time to think it over and to communicate with Mr. McVickar if you want to. When you get things fixed you can wire me just one word to Aretas. Just say 'Yes' and sign your name to it, and that will be enough."

For a full half hour after the president of the lumber trust had closed the door of the private office in the Temple court building behind him Blount sat rocking gently in his pivot chair, fighting once more with the soul nausea which was threatening to overwhelm him.

So Vice President McVickar had deceived him after all, and he was merely a fence put up to screen the chicanery and trickery which were going on just the same as before. More, the vice president had let him stultify himself in a thousand ways. All his brave talk about openness and fair dealing would be set down as mere dust throwing to conceal the workings of a corrupt and criminal machine, grinding away in the background.

And his father—how did he figure in this despicable business? Had he plotted with McVickar to bring his own son to shame merely because that son had refused to be a tool in the hands of the great machine? It was grossly incredible, and yet— Evan Blount remembered that thus far his father had said no word opposing the course he had taken. Could it be possible that a father could become so much the boss as to forget the common ties of kindred?

Blount's mind—but more than his mind, his heart—went groping out in vain reachings for a confidant and an adviser. There was no one to whom he could turn, no one whose conscience was not seared and distorted in the fires of political partisanship. No one, did he say? Yes; there was one. Patricia would know and understand. He must find her and tell her. But in the interval—

He got up and shut his desk with a slam. The stenographer heard and came to the door of the anteroom, notebook and pencil in hand. "Anything to give me before you go away, Mr. Blount?" he asked.

"No!" said Blount almost savagely. Then he reconsidered. "Yes, there is. You may take a message to Mr. McVickar. Are you ready?"

The stenographer nodded.

"All right; take this:

"Pending another interview with you, I shall close my offices in Temple court and confine myself strictly to the routine legal business of the company. In the meantime my resignation is in your hands if you wish to appoint a new division counsel.

"Write that out and send it at once," he said to the clerk. "I shall be at the hotel if you want to reach me between now and closing time."

(To be Continued.)

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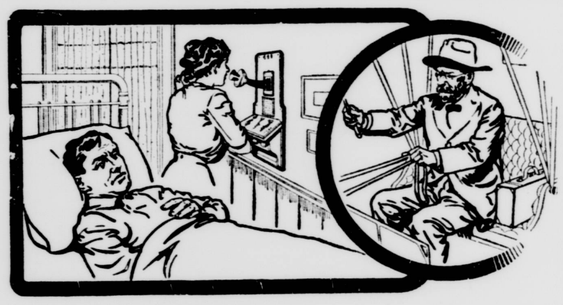

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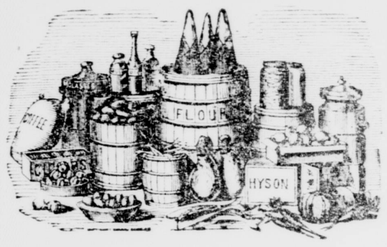

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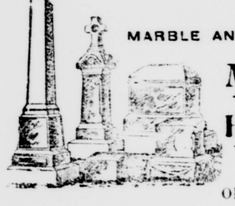

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