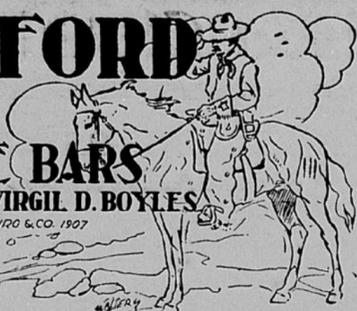


LANGFORD OF THE THREE BARS

BY KATE AND VIRGIL D. BOYLES

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Leave your horse for Mary. She'll give her water when she's cooled off a bit."

"You sent for me, Williston?" asked the young man, rubbing his face affectionately against the wet neck of his mare.

"I did. It was good of you to come to soon."

"Fortunately your messenger found me at home. As for the rest, Sade, here, hasn't her heat in the cow country, if she is only a cow pony, eh, Sade?"

At that moment Mary Williston came into the open doorway of the rude claim shanty set down in the very heart of the sun-seared plain which stretched away into heart-choking distances from every possible point of the compass. And sweet she was to look upon, though tanned and glowing from close association with the ardent sun and riotous wind. Her auburn hair, more reddish on the edges from sunburn, was fine and soft and there was much of it. It seemed newly brushed and suspiciously glossy. One sees far on the plains, and two years out of civilization are not enough to make a girl forget the use of a mirror, even if it be but a broken sliver, propped up on a pine-board dressing table. She looked strangely grown-up despite her short, rough skirt and badly scuffed leather riding leggings. Langford stared at her with a startled look of mingled admiration and astonishment. She came forward and put her hand on the mare's bridle. She was not embarrassed in the least. But the color came into the stranger's face. He swept his wide hat from his head quickly.

"No indeed, Miss Williston; I'll wear Sade myself."

"Please let me. I'd love to."

"She's used to it, Langford," said Williston in his quiet, gentlemanly voice, the well-bred cadence of which spoke of a training far removed from the harassments and harshnesses of life in this plains country. "You see, she is the only boy I have. She must of necessity be my chore boy as well as my herd boy. In her leisure moments she holds down her kitchen claim; I don't know how she does it, but she does. You had better let her do it; she will hold it against you if you don't."

"But I couldn't have a woman doing my grooming for me. Why, the very idea!"

He sprang into the saddle.

"But you waited for me to do it," said the girl, looking up at him curiously.

"Did I? I didn't mean to. Yes, I did, too. But I beg your pardon. You see—say, look here; are you the 'little girl' who left word for me this morning?"

"Yes. Why not?"

"Well, you see," smiling, but apologetic, "one of the boys said that Williston's little girl had ridden over and said her father wanted to see me as soon as I could come. So, you see, I thought—"

"Dad always calls me that, so most of the people around here do, too. It is very silly."

"I don't think so at all. I only wonder why I have not known about you before," with a frank smile. "It must be because I've been away so much of the time lately. Why didn't you wait for me?" he asked suddenly. "Ten miles is a sort of a lonesome run—for a girl."

"I did wait a while," said Mary, honestly, "but you didn't seem in any hurry. I expect you didn't care to be bored that long way with the silly chatter of a 'little girl.'"

"Well," said Langford, ruefully, "I'm afraid I did feel a little relieved when I found you had not waited. I never will again. I do beg your pardon," he called, laughingly, over his shoulder as he galloped away to the spring.

When he returned there was no one to receive him but Williston. Together they entered the house. It was a small room into which Langford was ushered. It was also very plain. It was more than that, it was shabby. An easy chair or two that had survived the wreckage of the house of Williston had been shipped to this "land of promise," together with a few other articles such as were absolutely indispensable. The table was a big shipping box, though Langford did not notice that, for it was neatly covered with a moth-eaten plum-colored felt cloth. A rug, crocheted out of parti-colored rags, a relic of Mary's conservative and thrifty grandmother, served as a carpet for the living room. A peep through the open door into the next and only other room disclosed glimpses of matting on the floor. There was a holy place even in this castaway house on the prairie. As the young man's careless eyes took in this new significance, the door closed softly. The "little girl" had shut herself in.

The two men sat down at the table. It was hot. They were perspiring freely. The flies, swarming through the screenless doorway, stung disagreeably.

Laconically Williston told his story. He wasted no words in the telling. In

the presence of the man whose big success made his own pitiful failures incongruous, his sensitive scholar's nature had shut up like a clam.

Langford's jaw was set. His young face was tense with interest. He had thrown his hat on the floor as he came in, as is the way with men who have lived much without women. He had a strong, bronzed face, with dare-devil eyes, blue they were, too, and he had a certain turn of the head, a mark of distinction which success always gives to her sons. He had big shoulders, clad in a blue flannel shirt open at the throat. In his absorption he had forgotten the "little girl" as completely as if she had, in very truth, been the 10-year-old of his imagination. How plainly he could see all the unholy situation—the handful of desperate men perfectly protected on the little island. One man sighing from behind a cottonwood could play havoc with a whole sheriff's posse on that open stretch of sand-bar. Nothing but a surprise—and did these insolent men fear surprise? They had laughed at the suggestion of the near presence of an officer of the law. And did they not do well to laugh? Surely it was a joke, a good one, this idea of an officer's being where he was needed in Kemah county.

"And my brand was on that spotted steer," he interrupted. "I know the creature—know him well. He has a mean eye. Had the gall to dispute the right of way with me once, not so long ago, either. He was in the corral at the time, but he's been on the range all summer. He may have the evil eye all right, but he's mine, bad eye and all; and what is mine, I will have. And is that the only original brand you saw?"

"The only one," quietly, "unless the J R on that red steer when he got up was an original one."

"J R? Who could J R be?"

"I couldn't say, but the man was—Jesse Black."

"Jesse Black?"

The repeated words were fairly spit out.

"Jesse Black! I might have known. Who else bold enough to loot the Three Bars? But his day has come. Not a hair, nor a hide, nor a hoof, not tallow enough to fry a flapjack shall be left on the Three Bars before he repents his insolence."

"What will you do?" asked Williston.

"What will you do?" retorted Langford.

"I? What can I do?" in the vague, helpless manner of the dreamer.

"Everything—if you will," briefly. He snatched up his wide hat.

"Where are you going?" asked Williston, curiously.

"To see Dick Gordon before this day is an hour older. Will you come along?"

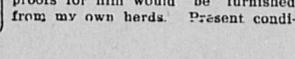
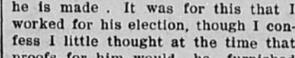
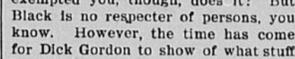
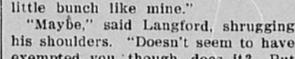
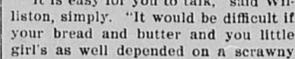
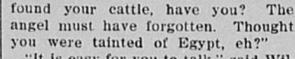
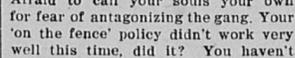
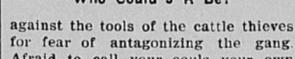
"Ye—es," hesitatingly. "Gordon hasn't made much success of things so far, has he?"

"Because you—and men like you—are under the thumb of men like Jesse Black," said Langford, curtly. "Afraid to peach for fear of antagonizing the gang. Afraid to vote

against the tools of the cattle thieves for fear of antagonizing the gang. Afraid to call your souls your own for fear of antagonizing the gang. Your 'on the fence' policy didn't work very well this time, did it? You haven't found your cattle, have you? The angel must have forgotten. Thought you were tainted of Egypt, eh?"

"It is easy for you to talk," said Williston, simply. "It would be difficult if your bread and butter and you little girl's as well depended on a scrawny little bunch like mine."

"Maybe," said Langford, shrugging his shoulders. "Doesn't seem to have exempted you, though, does it? But Black is no respecter of persons, you know. However, the time has come for Dick Gordon to show of what stuff he is made. It was for this that I worked for his election, though I confess I little thought at the time that proofs for him would be furnished from my own herd. Present condi-



tions humiliate me utterly. Am I a weakling that they should exist? Are we all weaklings?"

A faint, appreciative smile passed over Williston's face. No, Langford did not look a weakling, neither had the professed humiliation lowered his proud head.

Langford strode to the door. Then he turned quickly.

"Look here, Williston, I shall make you angry, I suppose, but it has to go in the cattle country, and you little fellows haven't shown up very white in these deals; you know that yourself."

"Well?"

"Are you going to stand pat with us?"

"If you mean, am I going to tell what I know when called upon," answered Williston, with a simple dignity that made Langford color with sudden shame, "I am. There are many of us 'little fellows' who would have been glad to stand up against the rustling outrages long ago had we received any backing. The moral support of men of your class has not been what you might call a sort of 'on the spot' support, now, has it?" relapsing into a gentle sarcasm. "At least, until you came to the front," he qualified.

"You will not be the loser, and there's my hand on it," said Langford, frankly and earnestly, ignoring the latter part of the speech. "The Three Bars never forgets a friend. They may do you before we are through with them, Williston, but remember, the Three Bars never forgets."

Mary Williston, from her window, as is the way with a maid, watched the two horsemen for many a mile as they galloped away. She followed them with her eyes while they slowly became faint, moving specks in the level distance and until they were altogether blotted out, and there was no sign of living thing on the plain that stretched between. But Paul Langford, as is the way with a man, forgot that he had seen a beautiful girl, and had thrilled to her glance. He looked back not once as he urged his trusty little mare on to see Dick Gordon.

CHAPTER III.

Louise.

It was raining when she left Wind City, but the rain had soon been distanced. Perhaps the judge was right when he said it never rained north or west of Wind City. But the judge had not wanted her to go. Neither had the judge's wife.

Full 20 minutes, only day before yesterday, the judge had delayed his day's outing at the mill where the Jim river doubles right around on its tracks, in order to make it perfectly clear to her that it was absolutely outside the bounds of her duty, that it was altogether an affair on the side, that she could not be expected to go, and that the prosecuting attorney up there had merely asked her out of courtesy, in deference to her position. Of course he would be glad enough to get her, but let him get some one nearer home, or do without. It wasn't at all necessary for the court reporter to hold herself in readiness to answer the call of anything outside her prescribed circuit duties. To be sure she would earn a trifle, but it was a hard trip, a hard country, and she had much better postpone her initial journey into the unknown until the regular term of court, when he could be with her. He had then thrown his minnow seine over his shoulders, taken his minnow pail in one hand and his reel case and lunch box in the other, and walked out to the road wagon awaiting him at the gate, and so off to his frolic, leaving her to fight it out for herself.

The judge's wife had not been so diplomatic, not by any means. She had dwelt long and earnestly, and no doubt to a large extent truly, on the uncivilized condition of their neighbors up the line; the roughness of accommodations, the boldness and license of the cowboys, the daring and insolence of cattle thieves, and cunning and dishonesty of the Indians, and the uncountness and viciousness of the half-breeds. She had ended by declaring eloquently that Louise would die of lonesomeness if, by God's good providence, she escaped a worse fate at the hands of one or all of the many evils she had enumerated. Yes, it was very evident Aunt Helen had not wanted her to go. But Aunt Helen's real reason had been that she held it so dizzily unconventional for her niece to go to that wild and unholy land alone. She did not actually fear for her niece's personal safety, and Louise more than half suspected the truth.

She had heard all the arguments before. They had little or no terrors for her now. They were the arguments used by the people back in her eastern home, those dear, dear people, her people—how far away she was!—when they had schemed and plotted so pathetically to keep her with them, the second one to break away from the slow, safe, and calm traditions of her kin in the place where generation after generation of her people had lived and died, and now lay waiting the great judgment in the peaceful country burying-ground.

She had listened to them dutifully, half believing, swallowed hard and followed her uncle, her father's youngest brother, to the "Land of the Dakotahs."

Now, that same dear uncle was a man of power and position in the new land. Only last November he had been reelected to his third term on the bench of his circuit with a big, heart-stirring majority. In the day of his prosperity he had not forgotten the little, tangle-haired girl who

had cried so inconsolably when he went away, and the unaccountable horror in whose eyes he had tried to laugh away on that never-to-be-forgotten day when he had wrenched his heartstrings from their safe abiding place and gone forth in quest of the pot of gold at the rainbow's end—the first of many generations. Tradition knew no other since his ancestors had felled forests and built homes of hewn logs. Now he had sent for Louise. His court reporter had recently left him for other fields of labor.

There was commotion among her people on receipt of the astounding proposition. She lived over again the dark days of the first fitting. It might well be her, uncle had exaggerated the dangers of life in the new land. It was great fun to shock his credulous relatives. He had surely written them some enormous tales during those 15 years and more. He used to chuckle heartily to himself at reading some of the sympathizing replies. But these tales were held in evidence against him now that he dared to want Louise. Every letter was brought out by Louise's dear old grandmother and read to her over again. Louise did not half believe them, but they were gospel truth to her grandmother and almost so to her father and mother as well. She remembered the old spirit of fun rampant in her favorite uncle, and while his vivid pictures took all the color from her sensitive face, deep down in her heart she recognized them for what they were worth. The letters were a strange medley of grasshoppers, blizzards and Indians. But a ten-dollar per diem was a great temptation over a five-dollar per diem, and times were pretty hard on the old farm. More than all, the inexplicable something that had led her uncle to throw tradition to the four winds of heaven was calling her persistently and would not be denied.

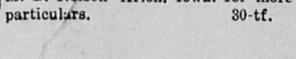
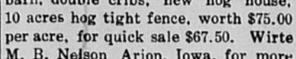
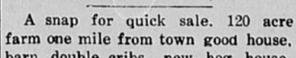
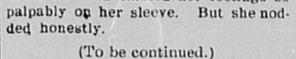
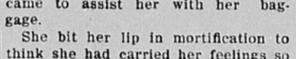
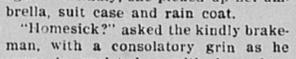
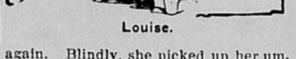
The dear hero of her childhood was much changed to be sure; his big joints had taken on more flesh and he had gained in dignity of deportment what he had lost in ease of movement. His once merry eye had grown keen with the years of just judging. The lips that had laughed so much in the old days were set in lines of sternness. Judge Hammond Dale was a man who would live up to the tenets of his high calling without fear or favor, through good and evil report. Yet through all his gravity of demeanor and the pride of his integrity, Louise instinctively felt his kindness and loved him for it. The loneliness fell away from her and a measure of content had come in its place, until the letter had come from the state's attorney up in Kemah county:

My Dear Miss Dale: The eighteenth of August is the date set for the preliminary hearing of Jesse Black. Will you come and take the testimony? I am very anxious that the testimony be taken by a competent reporter and shall be grateful to you if you decide to come.

The judge will tell you about our poor accommodations. Let me recommend to your consideration some good friends of mine, the Willistons, father and daughter. They live three miles northwest of Kemah. The judge will remember Williston, George Williston of the Lazy S. They are cultured people, though their way of living is necessarily primitive. I am sure you will like it better there than at our shabby little hotel, which is a rendezvous for a pretty rough class of men, especially at court time.

If you decide to come, Mary Williston will meet you at Nelton. Please let me know your decision. Very sincerely,
RICHARD GORDON.

So here she was, going into the Indian country at last. A big state, South Dakota, and the phases of its civilization manifold. Having come so far, to refuse to go on seemed like turning back with her hand already on the plow, so with a stout heart she had wired Richard Gordon that she would go. But it was pretty hard now, to be sure, and pretty dreary, coming into Velpen knowing that she would see no one she knew in all the wide, wide world. The thought choked her and the impish demon, loneliness, he of the smirk and horns and devil's eyes, loomed leeringly before her

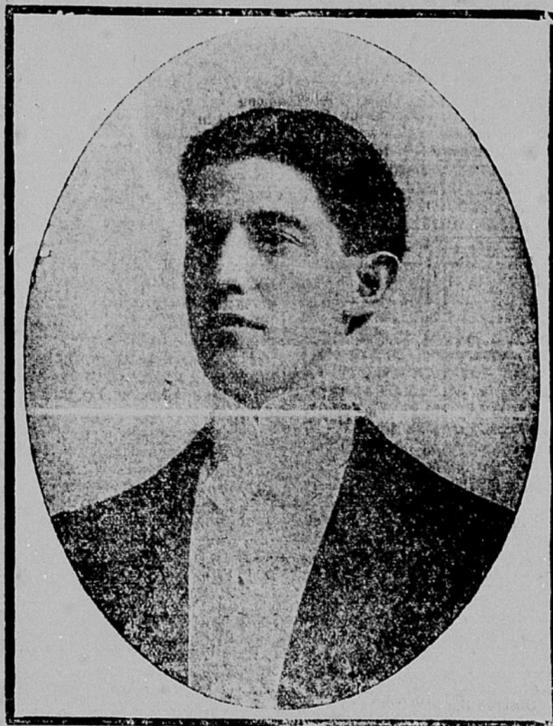


Germania Opera House

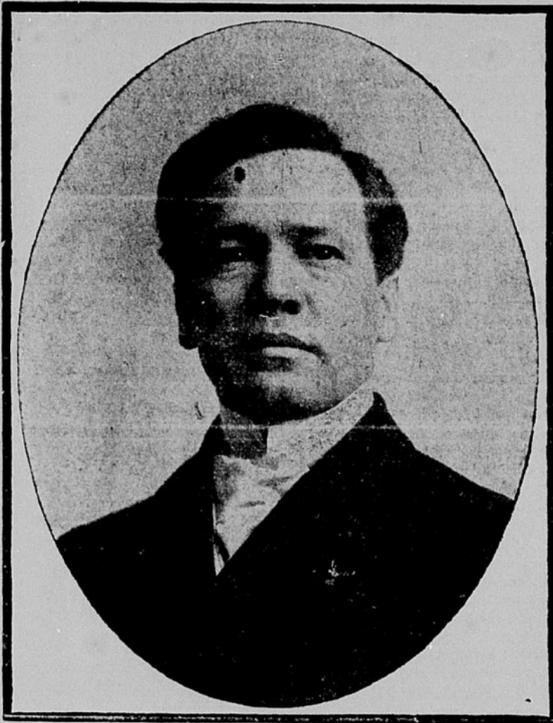
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again. Blindly, she picked up her umbrella, suit case and rain coat.

"Homesick?" asked the kindly brakeman, with a consolatory grin as he came to assist her with her baggage.

She bit her lip in mortification to think she had carried her feelings so palpably on her sleeve. But she nodded honestly.

(To be continued.)

A snap for quick sale. 120 acre farm one mile from town good house, barn, double cribs, new hog house, 10 acres hog tight fence, worth \$75.00 per acre, for quick sale \$67.50. Write M. B. Nelson Arion, Iowa, for more particulars. 30-11.