

LANGFORD OF THE THREE BARS

BY KATE AND VIRGIL D. BOYLES

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At the far end of the room they found the justice of the peace enthroned behind a long table. His honor, Mr. James R. McAllister, more commonly known as Jimmie Mac, was a ranchman on a small scale. He was ignorant, but of an overweening conceit. He had been a justice of the peace for several years and labored under the mistaken impression that he knew law; but Gordon, on short acquaintance, had dubbed him "Old Necessity," in despairing irony, after a certain high light of early territorial days who "knew no law."

The prisoner was brought in. His was a familiar personality. He was known to most men west of the river



"One of 'em, I'm a Thinkin', Was Jake Sanderson."

—if not by personal acquaintance, certainly by hearsay.

Then came the first great surprise of this affair of many surprises. Jesse Black waived examination. It came like a thunderbolt to the prosecution. It was not Black's way of doing business, and it was generally believed that, as Munson had so forcibly though inelegantly expressed it to Billy Brown, "He would fight like hell" to keep out of the circuit courts. He would kill this incipient Nemesis in the bud. What, then, had changed him? The county attorney had rather looked for a hard-fought defence—a shifting of the burden of responsibility for the misbranding to another, who would, of course, be off somewhere on a business trip, to be absent an indefinite length of time; or it might be he would try to make good a trumped-up story that he had but lately purchased the animal from some Indiana cattle-owner from up country who claimed to have a bill-of-sale from Langford. He would not have been taken aback had Black calmly produced a bill-of-sale.

The absoluteness of the surprise flushed his clean-shaven face a little, although his grave immobility of expression underwent not a flicker. It was a surprise, but it was a good surprise. Jesse Black was bound over under good and sufficient bond to appear at the next regular term of the circuit court in December. That much accomplished, now he could buckle down for the big fight. How often had he been shipwrecked in the shifting sands of the really remarkable decisions of "Old Necessity" and his kind. This time, as by a miracle, he had escaped sands and shoals and sunken rocks and rode in deep water.

A wave of enlightenment swept over Jim Munson.

"Boss," he whispered, "that gal reporter's a hummer."

"How so?" whispered Langford, amused. He proceeded to take an interested, if hasty, inventory of her charms. "What a petite little personage, to be sure! Almost too colorless, though. Why, Jim, she can't hold a tallow candle to Williston's girl."

"Who said she could?" demanded Jim, with a sneer and much relieved to find the boss so unappreciative. Eden might not be lost to them after all. Strict justice made him add: "But she's a wise one. Spotted them blamed meddlin' boss thieves right from the word go. Yep. That's a fact."

"What 'blamed meddlin' boss thieves,' Jim? You are on intimate terms with so many gentlemen of that stripe—at least your language so leads us to presume—that I can't keep up with the procession."

"At the bridge yistidy. I told you 'bout it. Saw 'em first at the Bon Amy—but they must a trilled me to the stockyards. She spotted 'em right away. She's a cute'n. Made me sset my mouth when I was a blabbin' too much, jest before the fun began. Oh, she's a cute'n!"

"Who were they, Jim?"

"One of 'em, I'm a thinkin', was Jake Sanderson, a red-headed devil who came up here from hell, I reckon, or Wyoming, one of the two. Nobody knows his biz. But he'll look like a stepped-on potato bug 'gainst I git through with him. Didn't git on to

another feller. Will next, you bet—

"But what makes you think they are mixed up in this affair?"

"They had their eyes on me to see what was I a doin' in Velpen. And I was a doin' things, too."

Langford gave a long, low whistle of comprehension. That would explain the unexpected waiving of examination. Jesse Black knew the steer had been recovered and saw the futility of fighting against his being bound over.

"Now, ain't she a hummer?" insisted Jim, admiringly, but added slightly, "Homely, though, as all git-out. Mouse-hair. Plumb homely."

"On the contrary, I think she is plumb pretty," retorted Langford, a laugh in his blue eyes. Jim fairly gasped with chagrin.

Unconcerned, grinning, Black slouched to the door and out. Once straightened out that lazy-looking body and you would have a big man in Jesse Black. Yes, a big one and a quick one, too, maybe. The crowd made way for him unconsciously. No one jostled him. He was a marked man from that day. His lawyer, Small, leaned back in his chair, radiating waves of self-satisfaction as though he had just gained a disputed point. It was a manner he affected when not on the floor in a frenzy of words and muscular action.

Jim Munson contrived to pass by Jake Sanderson.

"So you followed me to find out about Mag, did you? Heap o' good it did you! We knew you knew," he bragged insultingly.

The man's face went white with wrath.

"Damn you!" he cried. His hand dropped to his belt.

The two glared at each like fighting cocks. Men crowded around, suddenly aware that a quarrel was on.

"The Three Bar's a gittin' busy!" jeered Jim.

"Come, Jim, I want you." It was Gordon's quiet voice. He laid a restraining hand on Munson's overzealous arm.

"Dick Gordon, this ain't your put-in," snarled Sanderson. "Git out the way!" He shoved him roughly aside.

"Now, snappin' turtle," to Jim, "the Three Bars 'd better git busy!"

A feint at a blow, a clever little twist of the feet, and Munson sprawled on the floor, men pressing back to give him the full force of the fall. They believed in fair play. But Jim, uncowed, was up with the nimbleness of a monkey.

"Hit away!" he cried, tauntingly. "I know 'nough to swear out a warrant 'gainst you! 'T won't be so lonesome for Jesse now breakin' stones over to Sioux Falls."

"Jim!" It was Gordon's quiet, authoritative voice once more. "I told you I wanted you." He threw his arm over the belligerent's shoulder.

"Comin', Dick. I didn't mean to blab so much," Jim answered, contritely.

They moved away. Sanderson followed them up.

"Dick Gordon," he said with cool deliberateness, "you're too damned anxious to stick your nose into other people's affairs. Learn your lesson, will you? My favorite stunt is to teach meddlers how to mind their own business—this way."

It was not a fair blow. Gordon doubled up with the force of the punch in his stomach. In a moment all was confusion. Men drew their pistols. It looked as if there was to be a free-for-all fight.

Langford sprang to his friend's aid, using his fists with plentiful freedom in his haste to get to him.

"Never mind me," whispered Gordon. He was leaning heavily on Jim's shoulder. His face was pale, but he smiled reassuringly. There was something very sweet about his mouth when he smiled. "Never mind me," he repeated. "Get the girls out of this—quick, Paul."

Mary and Louise had sought refuge behind the big table.

"Quick, the back door!" cried Langford, leading the way; and as the three passed out, he closed the door behind them, saying, "You are all right now. Run to the hotel. I must see how Dick is coming on."

"Do you think he is badly hurt?" asked Louise. "Can't we help?"

"I think you had best get out of this as quickly as you can. I don't believe he is knocked out, by any means, but I want to be on hand for any future events which may be called. Just fly now, both of you."

The unfair blow in the stomach had given the sympathy of most of the bystanders, for the time being at least, to Gordon. Men forgot, momentarily, their grudge against him. Understanding from the black looks that he was not in touch with the crowd, Sanderson laughed—a short snort of contempt—and slipped out of the door. Unable to resist the impulse, Jim bounded out after his enemy.

When Paul hastened around to the front of the building, the crowd was nearly all in the street. The tension was relaxed. A dazed expression prevailed—brought to life by the suddenness with which the affair had developed to such interesting proportions and the quickness with which it had

materialized out to nothing. For Sanderson had disappeared, completely, mysteriously, and in all the level landscape, there was no trace of him nor sign.

"See a balloon, Jim?" asked Langford, slapping him on the shoulder with the glimmer of a smile. "Well, your red-headed friend won't be down in a parachute—yet. Are you all right, Dick, old man?"

"Yes. Where are the girls?"

"They are all right. I took them through the back door and sent them to the hotel."

"You kin bet on the boss every time when it comes to petticoats," said Jim, disconsolately.

"Why, Jim, what's up?" asked Langford, in amused surprise.

But Jim only turned and walked away with his head in the air. The serpent was leering at him.

CHAPTER VIII.

The County Attorney.

"I too am going to Wind City," said a pleasant voice at her side. "You will let me help you with your things, will you not?"

The slender girl standing before the ticket window, stuffing change into her coin purse, turned quickly.

"Why, Mr. Gordon," she said, holding out a small hand with frank pleasure. "How very nice! Thank you, will you take my rain-coat? It has been such a bother. I would bring it right in the face of Uncle Hammond's objections. He said it never rained out this way. But I surely have suffered a plenty for my waywardness. Don't you think so?"

"It behooves a tenderfoot like you to sit and diligently learn of such experienced and toughened old-timers as we are, rather than flaunt your untried ideas in our faces," responded Gordon, with a smile that transformed the keen gray eyes of this man of much labor, much lofty ambition, and much sorrow, so that they seemed for the moment strangely young, laughing, untroubled; as clear of taint of evil knowledge as the source of a stream leaping joyously into the sunlight from some mountain solitude. It was a revelation to Louise.

"I will try to be a good and diligent seeker after knowledge of this strange land of yours," she answered, with a little laugh, half of embarrassment, half of enjoyment of this play of nonsense, and leading the way to her suit-case and Mary outside. "When I make mistakes, will you tell me about them? Down east, you know, our feet travel in the ancient, prescribed circles of our forefathers, and they are apt to go somewhat uncertainly if thrust into new paths."

And this laughing, clever girl had cried with homesickness! Well, no wonder. The worst of it was, she could never hope to be acclimated. She was not—their kind. Sooner or later she must go back to God's country.

To her surprise, Gordon, though he laughed softly for a moment, answered rather gravely.

"If my somewhat niggardly fate should grant me that good fortune, that I may do something for you, I ask that you be not afraid to trust to my help. It would not be half-hearted—I assure you."

She looked up at him gratefully. His shoulders, slightly stooped, betokening the grind at college and the burden-bearing in later years, instead of suggesting any inherent weakness in the man, rather inspired her with an intuitive faith in their quiet, unswerving, utter trustworthiness.

"Thank you," she said, simply. "I am so glad they did not hurt you much that day in the court-room. We worried—Mary and I."

"Thank you. There was not the least danger. They were merely venting their spite on me. They would not have dared more."

"There's my brakeman," said Louise, when she and Gordon had found a seat near the rear. Mary had gone and a brakeman had swung onto the last car as it glided past the platform, and came down the aisle with a grin of recognition for his "little white lamb."

"How nice it all seems, just as if I had been gone months instead of days and was coming home again. It would be funny if I should be homesick for the range when I get to Wind City, wouldn't it?"

"Let us pray assiduously that it may be so," answered Gordon, with one of his rare smiles. He busied himself a moment in stowing away her belongings to the best advantage. "It gets in one's blood—how or when, one never knows."

They rode in silence for a while.

"Tell me about your big fight," said Louise, presently. The roadbed was fairly good, and they were spinning along on a down grade. He must needs bend closer to hear her.

She was good to look at, fair and sweet, and it had been weary years since women had come close to Gordon's life. In the old college days, before this hard, disappointing, unequal fight against the dominant forces of greed, against tolerance of might over-coming right, had begun to sap his vitality, he had gone too deeply into his studies to have much time left for the gayeties and gallantries of the social side in university life. He had not been popular with women. They did not know him. Yet, though dubbed a "dig" by his fellow collegians, the men liked him. They liked him for his trustworthiness, admired him for his rugged honesty, desired his friendship for the inspiration of his high ideals.

"What shall I talk about, Miss Dale? It is all very prosaic and uninteresting. I'm afraid; shockingly primitive, glaringly new."

"I breakfasted with a stanch friend of yours this morning," answered Louise, somewhat irrelevantly. She had a feeling—a woman's feeling—that



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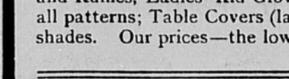
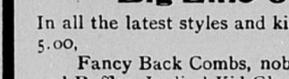
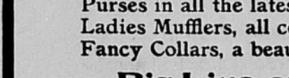
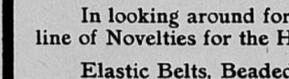
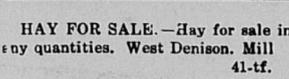
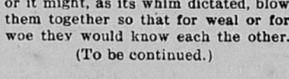
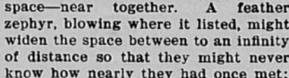
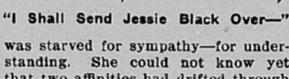
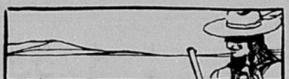
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