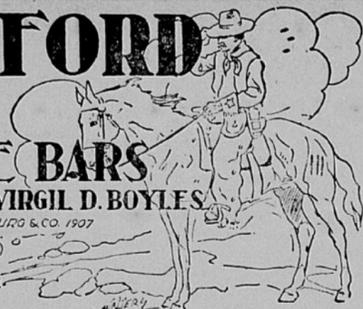


LANGFORD OF THE THREE BARS

BY KATE AND VIRGIL D. BOYLES

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"My note books!" cried Louise, in a flash of comprehension. She dressed hastily. Shirt waist was too intricate, so she threw on a gay Japanese kimono; her jacket and walking skirt concealed the limitations of her attire.

"What are you going to do?" asked Mary, also putting on clothes which were easy of adjustment. She had never gone to fires in the old days before she had come to South Dakota; but if Louise went—gentle, highbred Louise—why, she would go too, that was all there was about it. She had constituted herself Louise's guardian in this rough life that must be so alien to the eastern girl. Louise had been very good to her. Louise's startled cry about her note books carried little understanding to her. She was not used to court and its ways.

They hastened out into the hallway and down the stairs. They saw no one whom they knew, though men were still dodging out from unexpected places and hurrying down the street. It seemed impossible that the inconspicuous, diminutive prairie hotel could accommodate so many people. Louise found herself wondering where they had been packed away. The men, carelessly dressed as they were, their hair shaggy and unkempt, always with pistols in belt or hip-pocket or hand, made her shiver with dread. They looked so wild and weird and fierce in the dimly lighted hall. She clutched Mary's arm nervously, but no thought of returning entered her mind. Probably the judge was already on the court-house grounds. He would want to save some valuable books he had been reading in his official quarters. So they went out into the bleak and windy night. They were immediately enveloped in a wild gust that nearly swept them off their feet as it came tearing down the street. They clung together for a moment.

"It'll burn like hell in this wind!" some one cried, as a bunch of men hurried past them. The words were literally whipped out of his mouth. "Won't save a thing."

Flames were bursting out of the front windows upstairs. The sky was all alight. Sparks were tossed madly southward by the wind. There was grave danger for buildings other than the one already doomed. The roar of the wind and the flames was well-nigh deafening. The back windows and stairs seemed clear.

"Hurry, Mary, hurry!" cried Louise, above the roar, and pressed forward, stumbling and gasping for the breath that the wild wind coveted. It was not far they had to go. There was a jam of men in the yard. More were coming up. But there was nothing to do. Men shook their heads and shrugged their shoulders and watched the progress of the inevitable with the placidity engendered of the potent: "It can't be helped." But some things might have been saved that were not saved had the first on the grounds not rested so securely on that quieting inevitability. As the girls came within the crowded circle of light, they overheard something of a gallant attempt on the part of somebody to save the county records—they did not hear whether or no the attempt had been successful. They made their way to the rear. It was still dark.

"Louise! What are you going to do?" cried Mary, in consternation. There were few people on this side. Louise put her hand deliberately to the door-knob. It gave to her pressure—the door swung open. Some one stumbled out blindly and leaned against the wall for a moment, his hands over his eyes.

"I can't reach the vaults." Louise slipped past him and was within the doorway, closely followed by the frantic Mary.

The man cried out sharply, and stretched out a detaining hand. "Are you crazy? Come back!"

"Mr. Gordon!" cried Louise, with a little sob of relief. "Is it really you? Let me go—quick—my note books!"

A thick cloud of smoke at that moment came rolling down the back stairs. It enveloped them. It went down their throats and made them cough. The man, throwing an arm over the shoulders of the slender girl who had started up after the first shock of the smoke had passed away, pushed her gently but firmly outside. "Don't let her come, Mary," he called back, clearly. "I'll get the note books—if I can." Then he was gone—up the smoke-wreathed stairway.

Outside, the girls waited. It seemed hours. The wind, howling around the corners, whipped their skirts. There was a colder edge to it. Fire at last broke out of the back windows simultaneously with the sound of breaking glass, and huge billows of released black smoke surged out from the new outlet. Louise started forward. She never knew afterward just what she meant to do, but she sprang away from Mary's encircling arm and ran up the little flight of steps leading to the door from which she had been so un-

ceremoniously thrust. Afterward, when they told her, she realized what her impulsive action meant, but now she did not think. She was only conscious of some wild, vague impulse to fly to the help of the man who would even now be safe in blessed outdoors had it not been for her and her foolish woman's whim. She had sent him to his death. What were those wretched note books—what was anything at all in comparison to his life! So she stumbled blindly up the steps. The wind had slammed the door shut. It was a cruel obstacle to keep her back. She wrenched it open. The clouds of smoke that met her, rolling out of their imprisonment like pent-up steam, choked her, blinded her, beat her back. She strove impotently against it. She tried to fight it off with her hands—those little intensely feminine hands whose fortune Gordon longed to take upon himself forever and forever. They were so small and weak to fend for themselves. But small as they were, it was a good thing they did that night. Now Mary had firm hold of her and would not let her go. She struggled desperately and tried to push her off, but vainly, for Mary had twice her strength.

"Mary, I shall never forgive you—" She did not finish her sentence, for at that moment Gordon staggered out into the air. He sat down on the bottom step as if he were drunk, but little darts of flame colored the surging smoke here and there in weird splotch and, suddenly calm now that there was something to do, Mary and Louise led him away from the doomed building where the keen wind soon blew the choking smoke from his eyes and throat.

"I've swallowed a ton," he said, recovering himself quickly. "I couldn't get them, Louise." He did not know he called her so.

"Oh, what does it matter?" cried Louise, earnestly. "Only forgive me for sending you."

"As I remember it, I sent myself," said Gordon with a humorous smile, "and, I am afraid, tumbled one little girl rather unceremoniously down the stairs. Did I hurt you?" There was a caressing cadence in the question that he could not for the life of him keep out of his voice.

"I did not even know I tumbled. How did you get back?" said Louise, tremulously.

"Who opened the door?" counter-questioned Gordon, remembering. "The wind must have blown it shut. I was blinded—I couldn't find it—I couldn't breathe. I didn't have sense enough to know it was shut, but I couldn't have helped myself anyway. I groped for it as long as I could without breathing. Then I guess I must have gone off a little, for I was sprawling on the floor of the lower hall when I felt a breath of air playing over me. Somebody must have opened the door—because I am pretty sure I had fainted or done some foolish thing."

Louise was silent. She was thankful—thankful. God had been very good to her. It had been given to her to do this thing. She had not meant to do it—she had not known what she did; enough that was done.

"It was Louise," spoke up Mary, "and I—tried to hold her back!" So she accused herself.

"But I didn't do it on purpose," said Louise, with shining eyes. "I—I—"

"Yes, you—" prompted Gordon, looking at her with tender intentness.

"I guess I was trying to come after you," she confessed. "It was very—foolish."

The rear grounds were rapidly filling up. Like children following a band-wagon, the crowd surged toward the new excitement of the discovered extension of the fire. Gordon drew a long breath.

"I thank God for your—foolishness," he said, simply, smiling the smile his friends loved him for.

CHAPTER XVIII.

An Unconventional Tea Party.

As the flames broke through the roof, Langford came rushing up where the group stood a little apart from the press.

"Dick! I have been looking for you everywhere," he cried, hoarsely.

"What's the trouble, old man?" asked Gordon, quietly.

"I have something to tell you," said Langford, in a low voice. "Come quick—let's go back to your rooms. Why, girls—"

"We will go, too," said Mary, with quiet decision. She had caught a glimpse of Red Sanderson's face through the crowd, and she thought he had leered at her. She had been haunted by the vague feeling that she must have known the man who had attempted to carry her off—that dreadful night; but she had never been able to concentrate the abstract, fleeting impressions into comprehensive substance—never until she had seen that scar, and glancing away in terror saw that Langford, too, had seen; but she was not brave enough to lose herself and Louise in the crowd where that man was. She could not. He had leered at Louise, too, last night at sup-

per. They could not ask the protection of Gordon and Langford back to the hotel then, when Langford's handsome, tanned face was white with the weight of what he had to tell.

"It will be best," he agreed, unexpectedly. "Come—we must hurry!"

It was Williston's "little girl" whom he took under his personal protection, diving up the street in the teeth of the gale which blew colder every moment, with a force and strength that kept Mary half the time off her feet. A gentler knight was Gordon—though as manly. All was lark around the premises. There was no one lurking near. Everybody was dancing attendance on the court-house holocaust. Gordon felt for his keys.

"How good it is to get out of the wind," whispered Louise. This proceeding smacked so much of the mysterious that whispering followed as a natural sequence.

They stepped within. It was inky black.

"Lock the door," said Langford, in a low voice.

Gordon recalled, surprised, but asking no question. He knew his friend, and had faith in his judgment. Then he lighted a lamp that stood on his desk.

"Why did you do that?" asked Louise, gravely.

"What?"

"Lock the door."

"I don't know," he answered, honestly. "I didn't think you would notice the click. Ask Paul."

"I'll explain in a minute," said Langford. He stepped to the windows and drew the blinds closely.

"Now that I have you safe," he said, lightly, "I'll confess I had an old woman's scare. It came to me that as long as you are not, strictly speaking, on kind and loving terms with—every one west of the river—and this being such an all-round nasty night anyway, why, I'd just spirit you home and give the charged atmosphere a chance of clearing a little."

Gordon looked at him steadily a moment. His face did not pale. Yet he knew that Langford had heard—or suspected—more than he intended to tell—then. It was good to see him shrug his shoulders in unconcern for the sake of the two white-faced girls who sat there in his stiff office chairs.

"You are an old duffer, Paul," he said, in pretended annoyance. "You treat me like a child. I won't stand it always. You'll see. Some day I'll rebel—and—then—"

"Meanwhile, I'll just trot these ladies back to the hotel," said Langford. "But you must promise to keep your head inside. We're fixtures until we have that promise."

"What, lock me up and run off with—all the ladies! I guess not. Why didn't we round up that way, I'd like to know? This isn't Utah, Paul. You can't have both."

Paul meant for him to be low, then. He was also in a hurry to get the girls away. Evidently the danger lay here. There was a tightening of the firm mouth and an ominous contraction of the pupils of the eyes. He stirred the fire, then jammed a huge, knotted stick into the sheet-iron stove. It seemed as if everybody had sheet-iron stoves in this country. The log caught with a pleasant roar as the draught sent flames leaping up the chimney. But Paul made no movement to go. Then he, Gordon, had not understood his friend. Maybe the menace was not here, but outside. If so, he must contrive to keep his guests interested here. He would leave the lead to Paul. Paul knew. He went back to his living-room and returned, bringing two heavy buggy robes.

"You will find my bachelor way of living very primitive," he said, with his engaging smile. He arranged the robes over two of the chairs and pushed them close up to the stove. "I haven't an easy chair in the house—prove it by Paul, here. Haven't time to rock, and can't afford to run the risk of cultivating slothful habits. Take these, do," he urged, "and remove your coats."

"Thank you—you are very kind," said Louise. "No, I won't take off my jacket," a spot of color staining her cheek when she thought of her gay kimono. Involuntarily, she felt her throat to make sure the muffler had not blown away. "We shall be going soon, shan't we, Mr. Langford? If Mr. Gordon is in any danger, you must stay with him and let us go alone. It is not far."

"Surely," said Mary, with a big sinking of the heart, but meaning what she said.

"Not at all," said Gordon, decidedly. "It's just his womanish way of bossing me. I'll rebel some day. Just wait! But before you go, I'll make tea. You must have gotten chilled through."

He would keep them here a while and then let them go—with Langford. The thought made him feel cheap and cowardly and sneaking. Far rather would he step out boldly and take his chances. But if there was to be any shooting, it must be where Louise—and Mary, too—was not. He believed Paul, in his zeal, had exaggerated evil omens, but there was Louise in his bachelor room—where he had never thought to see her; there with her cheeks flushed with the proximity to the stove—his stove—her fair hair wind-blown. No breath of evil thing must assail her that night—that night, when she had glorified his lonely habitation—even though he himself must sink into a corner like a cowardly cur. A strange elation took possession of him. She was here. He thought of last night and seemed to walk on air. If he won out maybe—but, fool that he was! what was there in this rough land for a girl like—Louise?

"Oh, no, that will be too much trouble," gasped Louise, in some alarm and thinking of Aunt Helen.

"Thanks, old man, we'll stay," spoke

up Langford, cheerfully. "He makes excellent tea—really. I've tried it before. You will never regret staying."

Silently he watched his friend in the inner room bring out a battered teakettle, fill it with a steady hand and put it on the stove in the office, coming and going carelessly, seemingly conscious of nothing in the world but the comfort of his unexpected guests.

True to her sex, Louise was curiously interested in the house-keeping arrangements of a genuine bachelor establishment. Woman-like, she saw many things in the short time she was there—but nothing that diminished her respect for Richard Gordon. The bed in the inner chamber where both men slept was disarranged but clean. Wearing apparel was strewn over the chairs and tables. There was a litter of magazines on the floor. She laid them up against Langford; she did not think Gordon had the time or inclination to cultivate the magazine habit. She did not know to whose weakness to ascribe the tobacco pouch and brier-wood pipe placed invitingly by the side of a pair of gay, elaborately bead-embroidered moccasins, cozily stowed away under the head of the bed; but she was rather inclined to lay these, too, to Langford's charge. The howling tempest outside only served to enhance the coziness of the rumbling fire and the closely drawn blinds.

But tea was never served in those bachelor rooms that night—neither that night nor ever again. It was a little dream that went up in flame with the walls that harbored it. Who first became conscious that the tang of smoke was gradually filling their nostrils, it was hard to tell. They were not far behind each other in that consciousness. It was Langford who discovered that the trouble was at the rear, where the wind would soon have the whole building fanned into flames. Gordon unlocked the door quietly. He said nothing. But Paul, springing in front of him, himself threw it open. It was no new dodge, this burning a man out to shoot him as one would drown out a kopher for the killing. He need not have been afraid. The alarm had spread. The street in front was rapidly filling. One would hardly have dared to shoot—then—if one had meant to. And he did not know. He only knew that devilry had been in the air for Gor-



Gordon Unlocked the Door Quietly.

don that night. He had suspected more than he had overheard, but it had been in the air.

Gordon saw the action and understood it. He never forgot it. He said nothing, but gave his friend an illuminating smile that Langford understood. Neither ever spoke of it, neither ever forgot it. How tightly can quick impulses bind—forever.

Outside, they encountered the judge in search of his delinquent charges.

"I'm sorry, Dick," he said. "Dead loss my boy. This beastly wind is your undoing."

"I'm not worrying, Judge," responded Gordon, grimly. "I intend for some one else to do that."

"Hellity damn, Dick, hellity damn!" exploded Jim Munson in his ear. The words came whistling through his lips, caught and whirled backward by the play of the storm. The cold was getting bitter, and a fine, cutting snow was at last driving before the wind.

Gordon, with a set face, plunged back into the room—already fire-licked. Langford and Munson followed. There sat the little tea-service staring at them with dumb pathos. The three succeeded in rolling the safe with all its precious documents arranged within, out into the street. Nothing else mattered much—to Gordon. But other things were saved, and Jim gallantly tossed out everything he could lay his hands on before Gordon ordered everybody out for good and all. It was no longer safe to be within. Gordon was the last one out. He carried a battered little teakettle in his hand. He looked at it in a whimsical surprise as if he had not known until then that he had it in his hand. Obeying a sudden impulse, he held it out to Louise.

"Please take care of—my poor little dream," he whispered with a strange, intent look.

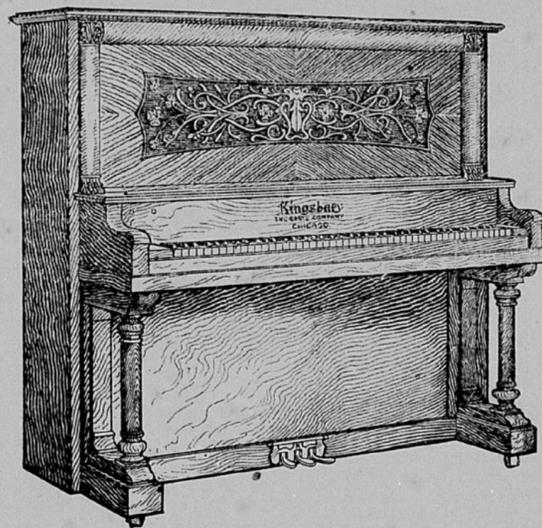
Before she could comprehend the significance or give answer, the judge had faced about. He bore the girls back to the hotel, scolding helplessly all the way as they scudded with the wind. But Louise held the little tin kettle firmly.

(To be continued)

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