LANGFORD OF THE THREE BARS

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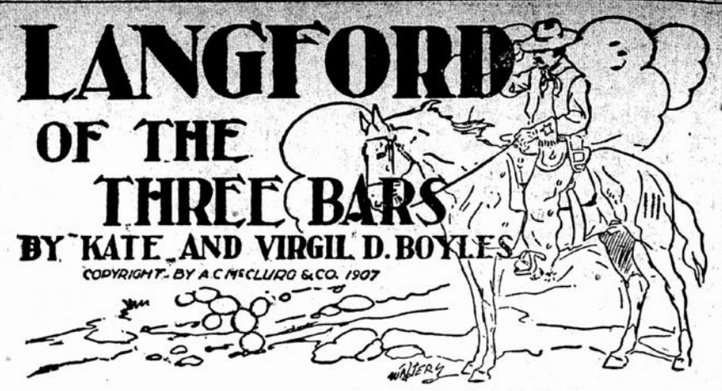

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In the Indian country at last. Mile after mile of level, barren stretches after the hill region had been left behind. Was there no end to the thirst-inspiring, monotonous, lonely reach of cacti? Prairie dogs, perched in front of their holes, chattered and scolded at them. The sun went down and a

Turned His Stanch Little Team Squarely.

refreshing coolness crept over the hard, baked earth. Still, there was nothing but distance anywhere in all the land, and a feeling of desolation swept over the girl.

The moon came up. Then there were miles of white moonlight and lonely plain. But for some time now there has been a light in front of them. It is as if it must be a will-o'-the-wisp. They never seem to get to it. But at last they are there. The door is wide open. A pleasant odor of bacon and coffee is wafted out to the tired travelers.

"Come right in," says the cheery voice of Mary. "How tired you must be, Miss Dale. Tie up, Jim, and come in and eat something before you go. Well, you can eat again—two suppers won't hurt you. I have kept things warm for you. Your train must have been late. Yes, dad is better, thank you. He'll be all right in the morning"

CHAPTER VII.

The Preliminary.

Very early in the morning of the day set for the preliminary hearing of Jesse Black the young owner of the Three Bars rode over to Velpen. He identified and claimed the animal held over from shipment by Jim's persuasion. Brown gave possession with a rueful countenance.

"First time Billy Brown ever was taken in," he said, with great disgust.

Langford met with no interruption to his journey, either going or coming, although that good cow-puncher of his, Jim Munson, had warned him to look sharp to his pistols and mind the bridge. Jim being of a somewhat belligerent turn of mind, his boss had not taken the words with seriousness. As for the fracas at the pontoon, cowmen are touchy when it comes to a question of precedence, and it might well be that the inflammable Jim had brought the sudden storm down on his head. Paul Langford rode through the sweet early summer air without let or hindrance and looking for none. He was jubilant. Now was Williston's story verified. The county attorney, Richard Gordon, had considered Williston's story, coupled with his reputation for strict honesty, strong and sufficient enough to bind Jesse Black over to appear at the next regular term of the circuit court. Under ordinary circumstances the state really had an excellent chance of binding over; but it had to deal with Jesse Black, and Jesse Black had flourished for many years west of the river with an unsavory character, but with an almost awesome reputation for the phenomenal facility with which he slipped out of the net in which the law—in the person of its unpopular exponent, Richard Gordon—was so indefatigably endeavoring to enmesh him. The state was prepared for a hard fight. But now—here was the very steer Williston saw on the island with its Three Bars brand under Black's surveillance. Williston would identify it as the same. He, Langford, would swear to his own animal. The defense would not know he had regained possession and would not have time to readjust its evidence. It would fall down and hurt itself for the higher court, and Dick Gordon would know how to use any inadvertencies against it—when the time came. Now Paul Langford was lighthearted. In all his arrogant and unhampered [illegible] he had never before received such an affront to his pride and his sense of what was due to one of the big men that ranged cattle west of the river. Woe to him who had dared [illegible] with the concerns of Paul Langford of the Three Bars.

Williston drove on from the Lazy [illegible] to the [illegible] ner at the hotel—the hearing was set for 2 o'clock—but his little party contented itself with a luncheon prepared at home and packed neatly and appetizingly in a tin bucket. It was not likely there would be a repetition of bad meat. It would be poor policy. Still, one could not be sure, and it was most important that Williston ate no bad meat that day.

Gordon met them in the hot, stuffy little parlor of the hotel.

"It was good of you to come," he said to Louise, with grave sincerity.

"I didn't want to," confessed Louise, honestly. "I'm afraid it is too big and lonesome for me. I am sure I should have gone back to Velpen last night to catch the early train had it not been for Mary. She is so—good."

"The worst is over now that you have conquered your first impulse to fly," he said.

"I cried, though. I hated myself for it, but I couldn't help it. You see I never was so far from home before."

He was an absorbed, hard-working lawyer. Years of contact with the plain, hard realities of rough living in a new country had dried up, somewhat, his stream of sentiment. Maybe the source was only blocked with debris, but certainly the stream was running dry. He could not help thinking that a girl who cries because she is far from home had much better stay at home and leave the grave things which are men's work to men. But he was a gentleman and a kindly one, so he answered quietly, "I trust you will like us better when you know us better," and, after a few more commonplaces, went his way.

"There's a man," said Louise, thoughtfully, on the way to McAllister's office. "I like him, Mary."

"And yet there are men in this country who would kill him if they dared."

"Mary! what do you mean? Are there then so many cut-throats in this awful country?"

"I think there are many desperate men among the rustlers who would not hesitate to kill either Paul Langford or Richard Gordon since these prosecutions have begun. There are also many good people who think Mr. Gordon is just stirring up trouble and putting the county to expense when he can have no hope of conviction. They say that his failures encourage the rustlers more than an inactive policy would."

"People who argue like that are either tainted with dishonesty themselves or they are foolish, one of the two," said Louise, with conviction.

"Mr. Gordon has one stanch supporter, anyway," said Mary, smiling. "Maybe I had better tell him. Precious little encouragement or sympathy he gets, poor fellow."

"Please do not," replied Louise, quickly. "I wonder if my friend, Jim Munson, has managed to escape 'battle, murder and sudden death,' including death by poison, and is on hand with his testimony."

As they approached the office the crowd of men around the doorway drew aside to let them pass.

"Our chances of worming ourselves through that jam seem pretty slim to me," whispered Mary, glancing into the already overcrowded room.

"Let me make a way for you," said Paul Langford, as he separated himself from the group of men standing in front, and came up to them.

"I have watered my horse," he said, flashing a merry smile at Mary as he began shoving his big shoulders through the press, closely followed by the two young women.

It was a strange assembly through which they pressed; ranchmen and cowboys, most of them, just in from ranch and range, hot and dusty from long riding, perspiring freely, redolent of strong tobacco and the peculiar smell that betokens recent and intimate conpanionship with that part and parcel of the plains, the horse. The room was indeed hot and close and reeking with bad odors. There were also present a large delegation of cattle dealers and saloon men from Velpen, and some few Indians from Rosebud agency, whose curiosity was insatiable where the courts were concerned, far from picturesque in their ill-fitting, nondescript cowboy garments.

Yet they were kindly, most of the men gathered there. Though at first they refused, with stolid resentment, to be thus thrust aside by the breezy and aggressive owner of the Three Bars, planting their feet the more firmly on the rough, uneven floor, and serenely oblivious to any right of way so arrogantly demanded by the big shoulders, yet, when they perceived for whom they way was being made, most of them stepped hastily aside with muttered and abashed apologies. Here and there, however, though all made way, there would be no red-faced or stammering apology. Sometimes the little party was followed by insolent eyes, sometimes by malignant ones. Had Mary Williston spoken truly when she said the will for bloodshed was not lacking in the country?

But if there was aught of hatred or enmity in the heavy air of the improvised courtroom for others besides the high-minded counsel for law and order Mary Williston seemed serenely unconscious of it. She held her head proudly. Most of these men she knew. She had done a man's work among them for two years and more. In her man's work of riding the ranges she had had good fellowship with many of them. After to-day much of this must end. Much blame would accrue to her father for this day's work among friends as well as enemies, for the fear of the law-defiers was an omni-present fear with the small owner, stalking abroad by day and by night. But Mary was glad and there was a new dignity about her that became her well, and that grew out of this great call to rally to the things that count.

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 fine scorn 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' hoss thieves right from the word go. Yep. That's a fac'."

"What 'blamed meddlin' hoss 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 trailed me to the stockyards. She spotted 'em right away. She's a cute'n. Made me shet my mouth when I was a blabbin' too much, jest before the fun began. Oh, she's a cute'n!"

"Who were they, Jim?"

(To be continued)