The Trouble on the Torolito.

BY FRANCIS LYNDE.

CHAPTER I.

ANGUS THE FIRST.

It was a crystalline evening of a sort unpaintable in any poor word-pigments of mine; an evening vibrant with the harmonies of the altitudes, unspeakable for me, and altogether indescribable to any who have never looked upon the soul-quelling glories of a Colorado mountain sunset. Macpherson had propped me with two bear-skins and a spare poncho on the squared log which served as a door-stone for the ranch house, and had given me the field-glass wherewith to amuse myself. It was my first sane glimpse of the sheltered upland valley watered by the Torolito. Three days before, when Macpherson had brought me up from Fort Cowan swathed in blankets and lashed lengthwise on his buckboard, I had been too ill to know or care greatly about the whence or whither.

It was a stockman's paradise, the park-like little valley shut in by lofty mountains, and from the heaving swell crested by the ranch buildings and corral the metes and bounds of Macpherson's small kingdom were well within eye-sweep. Eastward, no more than a rifle-shot from the home ranch, a black gash in Gringo mountain marked the portal of Six-Mile canyon, the only gateway to the paradise; and from thence the inclosing ranges diverged to meet again in the snow-coifed summit of Jim's peak at the head of the valley. The "X-bar-Z" men, with the exception of the mild-mannered desperado who cooked for us, were still out; and Macpherson sat beside me, naming the mightinesses in their order, and pointing them out with the stem of his black cutty pipe. When I lowered the field-glass in sheer weariness, he told me about the single fly in his pot of ointment.

Now it may chance that when one has given hostages to death, panoramic sunsets and friendly confidences may become alike mere flotsam and jetsam on the ebbing tideway of time; but Macpherson was too good a fellow to be flouted in his time of asking. Wherefore, when he had made an end, I was fain to put a little life, galvanic or otherwise, into the moribund body of human interest.

"Then you think this land company will ultimately drive you out of the Torolito?" said I.

"Sure. It's only a question of time if the syndicate once gets hold. The stock-raiser is like the Indian; he must move on when the farmer comes."

"The relentless march of civilization, and all that, eh?" quoth I, lying in wait to spring upon him.

"Yes; it's the survival of the fittest, I suppose."

A near-hand view of eternity is subversive of many theories, and I lashed out in fine scorn.

"What an infernal lot of cant we can swallow when it's sugar-coated with the ipse dixit of the theorists! Why don't you call things by their right names and say that when the strong man comes, the weak have to give him the wall? You drove up here five years ago when everybody said that the first winter in this altitude would cost you every hoof you owned. You proved the contrary; and now, when you've set up your little kingdom in one of the waste places of the earth, a lot of capitalists come along and invite you to abdicate. I'd see them hanged first!"

Macpherson made a dumb show of applause. He is a latter-day recrudescence of the physically-fit heroes of the Homeric age, with square shoulders and legs like posts; a man who can bend nails in his bare hands, and who has never found the bottom of his well of strength; but he has laughing brown eyes with a womanish tenderness in them—eyes that may glow with righteous indignation, but which know not vindictiveness.

"Oh, you be damned," he said, affectionately. "What would you do?"

"I'd be governed by circumstances and fight for my own to the last gasp. You can do that as well as another, can't you?"

He took time to think about it. "I don't know. If Selter would stand by me—"

"Who is Selter?" As I have said, it was only my third day in the Torolito, and the first two had been spent in the spare bunk of the ranch house.

"I'll have to begin back a bit to account for him. Three years ago a rattletrap of a prairie schooner—but say; you're sick, and I don't want to bore you with folk-lore."

"Go on; I'm three planetary orbits beyond the boring point."

"Are you? Well, as I was going to say, a shackly old schooner drifted up Six-Mile canyon and into the park. Jake Selter was its skipper, and the crew consisted of a wife, a half-grown daughter, and a flock of little ones. They were homesteaders looking for a bit of prairie with a stream convenient which could be dammed and ditched, and the old man drove up to ask me what I thought of the Torolito from the point of view of potatoes and the small grains."

Now I submit that anyone save Angus Macpherson would have divined at once that this was the entering edge of a wedge which would ultimately split him in twain, and I said as much.

"You should have told him the altitude was prohibitory, but I suppose you didn't."

Macpherson grinned. "No; I have my weaknesses, same as other people. I was the king of the Torolito, as you have remarked, but I had only the 'X-bar-Z' men for subjects and I was lonesome for a sight of women and children. You don't know what that means now, but you may, sometime. I piloted the schooner to the head of the valley, helped Selter stake up his claim, took the boys up one day and knocked him up a cabin, and another and built him a dam, and there he was, a fixture."

"Of course. Go on."

"Well, the potatoes were a success. That summer, Selter got word to some of his old neighbors in Tennessee, and more prairie schooners came up Six-Mile. We built a bigger dam and dug a longer ditch; and in the course of time the settlement at Valley Head named itself and built a schoolhouse."

The crimson and gold in the sky-fire over the shoulder of Jim's peak faded to fawndun and ashes of roses, and I waited for Macpherson to drive on. When it became evident that he had stopped at the schoolhouse, I gave a tug at the halter.

"That accounts for Selter; but you haven't told me how he figures in the syndicate matter. I should think he and his neighbors would be a unit with you in trying to keep the land-grabbers out."

"You would think so. They'll be between the upper and nether millstones if the big company ever gets control of the water. But human nature is pretty much the same the world over—short-sighted and easily fooled. The promoters tell the settlers that the big ditch will jump their land from nothing to $100 an acre, and so it would if they could contrive to hold on to their own water-right."

"Why can't they?" I had been born and reared in a land where the former and the latter rains fail not, and irrigation is unknown.

"Because the syndicate is too sharp to take chances. It must control the water absolutely and exclusively in order to make the scheme successful. As the first homesteader to prove up on his claim, Selter has the prior right to the water, much or little,—owns the present ditch, in fact, in fee simple. So long as he stands in the way, the money-people will do nothing but talk; but I'm afraid they're talking to some purpose. If Selter sells, that settles it."

"Can't you buy him out and hold the whip in your own hands?"

"I thought I could at one time, but latterly he's been dodging me; just why, I don't know."

"Perhaps the syndicate has overbid you."

"I've thought of that; but in that case you'd think Selter would whip-

"IT'S BART KILGORE."

saw back and forth between us. He is an avaricious old sinner."

I remembered the half-grown daughter—whole-grown, doubtless, by this time—and looked askance at the handsome young athlete whose guest I was. "Family coolness all around?" I queried, feeling my way.

Macpherson was bronzed and sunburned like any son of the wilderness, but I saw the red blood go to his face.

"Blest if I don't believe you've hit it. Since the school-ma'am came—but that's another story."

"Out with it," said I. "Dead men tell no tales, and I'm as good as dead, you know."

The half jest went nearer to the loving heart of him than I meant it should.

"Drop that, old man," he said, with a hand on my shoulder. "It hurts me, and it doesn't do you any good. You must believe that this clean air and the out-door life are going to make a man of you again."

"Not in a hundred years, Angus, my boy; I've put it off too long. But tell me the story—the other story. What has the school-ma'am to do with it?"

Macpherson is Scotch only in name. His manner of attacking a thing is more like that of an English trooper charging a masked battery with the odds against him.

"The school-ma'am isn't to blame," he made haste to say. "She is an angel, pure and simple; and, as I happen to know, she has been trying all along to make peace. But since she came, the Selters have been offish,—mulish is the better word,—and for no reason on top of earth, that I can understand."

I smiled in my beard. When an angel, pure and simple, is set over against any daughter of the solitudes, a casus belli with a handsome young athlete like my friend is not far to seek.

"You used to visit the Selters pretty often along at the first?" I ventured.

"Why, yes; we were neighborly."

"Gave the daughter a pony, let us say, and taught her how to ride?"

Macpherson laughed. "Now how the mischief did you know that?"

"If I had lived a century or so ago, your ancestors would have said that I was fey and had the dying man's gift of second sight. But never mind that. You made yourself agreeable to the Tennessee girl—gave her the pony and went a-gallop with her, and all that. But when the angel, pure and simple, came—"

He threw up his hands. "Let up on that, old man," he said, with a little laugh of embarrassment. "I'm no woman's man—wasn't in the old high flying college days, if you happen to remember. I've been no more than decently civil to Nancy Selter; and as for Miss Sanborn—"

The interruption was a scurrying dust cloud whirling up from the portal of Six-Mile canyon; a cloud which presently resolved itself into a horseman, riding as if for life. MacPherson picked up the field-glass and focused it.

"It's Bart Kilgore, coming back from his regular after-pay-day spree at Fort Cowan," he said. "Just lean back against the door-jamb and hold your breath when he gets here. I shall have to give him the usual cussing out, you know."

CHAPTER II.

THE INVADERS.

I obeyed orders literally, leaning back and closing my eyes when the dust-begrimed range-rider galloped up and swung out of the saddle. But Kilgore proved to be a bearer of tidings; and when he had opened his budget the breach of ranch discipline and its merited out-cursing were alike forgotten.

"You're sure you know what you are talking about, Bart?" said Macpherson, eying his man suspiciously. "You know I've a good right to be doubtful of anything you say you see or hear at the fort after pay-day."

The scourger of dumb brutes grinned and turned his pockets inside out.

"I reckon that calls the turn. Cap'n Mac., six times in the haffen dozen, but I'm jug-proof this evenin'; no dust, no drink. An' I'm givin' it to you straight. Ther' ain't no kind of a balk on it this time; Selter's sold us out, lock, stock and barrel. The deal's done dealt, papers signed, gradin' outfit on the way, and the ingineers a-comin' up the canyon this identical minute,—tepees, telescopes, barber-poles, and all."

A far-away look came into Macpherson's eyes, and the pipe between his teeth began to go up and down in a way that swept me back through a decade to a stuffy little college dormitory, with a big-limbed young son of Anak sitting across the table from me, hammering away at his mathematics.

"Who is it, Bart?—the Englishmen?"

"I reckon."

"And they're on the way in now, you say?"

"Yep."

"I guess that settles it," said Macpherson, half absently. "We might as well round up and drive over the range."

His seeming reluctance to fight for his own nettled me past endurance. "You'll do nothing of the sort if I can help it," I cut in. "You're going to contest this thing from start to finish; and when your money's gone, you can have mine."

He shook his head. "It's no use. I can give and take with the next fellow when it's worth while; but I'd have to go, in the end. These people are well within their lawful rights, if they've bought Selter's ditch; and I—I'm only a squatter."

"Law be hanged!—you've right and possession. And in the last resort, you can at least make them pay you to go."

Knowing Macpherson as I did, I should have said that he was the last man in the world to take the sentimental point of view in any matter of business, but surprises lie in wait for one at every turn in this vale of incertitude.

"If it were only a question of profit and loss, I shouldn't mind," he said. "But it's just as you said awhile back; I've been the Macpherson of Torolito, and I've come to look upon the park as my own particular little kingdom."

I wheeled promptly into line with the sentimental point of view, and spoke to the matter in hand.

"Put it upon any ground you please, but don't give up without trying a fall or two with them. I'll back you, as I promised; you might as well have the patrimony as the charity-people who will scramble over it after I'm gone. We can homestead a quarter-section or two on their line of ditch for a beginning, and pull down a few injunctions on them if they try to cross. I'm far enough past qualifying and going into court for you, but I can be your consulting attorney while I last."

He shook his head again, as one whose mind is made up. "It wouldn't do any good. There isn't a ghost of a show for us in any legal fight. It would be your bit of money and mine against millions."

Kilgore took the short-barreled rifle from its sling under his saddle-flap and flicked the dust from it with his soft hat. He had a trick of looking tired and sleepy upon occasion, and at such times, as I afterward learned, those who knew him best watched his pistol-hand.

"Back yonder in the Tennessee hills, wher' I come f'om," he said, "ther' was wunst a feller f'om the north 'at 'lowed he was a-goin' to build him a ho-tell on the mounting and run a railroad up to it. Nobody never said a blame' word ag'inst it, as I ever hearn, but somehow'r 'nother, he got sorter tired and wo'n-out atter awhile and quit; and ther' ain't no ho-tell n'r no railroad on that ther' mounting yit."

We both filled in the inferential blanks in the parable, and when Kilgore had disappeared in the direction of the corral, I said, jestingly:

"There's an idea for you. If legal means, fail, you can mobilize your cowboy army and drive them out by main strength and awkwardness."

Macpherson laughed good-naturedly. "If you were half as vindictive as you talk, you'd be a holy terror. But I'm not going to fight. At first, I thought I should—with the Winchesters, if it came to that—but they've been figuring around so long that I've had a chance to think it over—and to change my mind."

I have pathetically acute memory for details, and it occurred to me just then that he had spoken of the school-mistress as a peacemaker.

"Has Miss Sanborn forbidden it?" I asked, with malice aforethought.

He was singularly embarrassed, for a man who had made me more or less his fidus Achates since our college days in the stuffy dormitory.

"You are taking a good deal more for granted—about Miss Sanborn—than the facts warrant," he protested. "Of course, she is interested on the side of peace, in a general way; but—"

"But you would have me believe that she has no personal interest in the matter. I haven't the pleasure of her acquaintance, but if that be the case, I'll venture to say that she is not a very discerning young woman."

Now when you would sweat out the secrets, sentimental or otherwise, of any son of Adam, there is no sudorific like a little abuse well rubbed in. Macpherson's reply told me what I wanted to know, and more.

"Say; you mustn't talk that way about her, old man. I can't listen to it, you know. She is all that's good and pure and sweet; and I'm—that is to say, I—"

It would have been needlessly cruel to let him go on stumbling about in the limited vocabulary of the lover at bay. So I said:

"Don't stultify yourself, my dear boy; bring her to me that I may bless you both before I go hence and be no more."

"Confound it all! you will go on taking too much for granted!" he broke in, missing the predetermined pathos in the last phrase. "Can't you understand? She is 'Miss Sanborn' to me yet, and I'm 'Mr. Macpherson' to her. That's the plain truth of it."

"All in good time, Angus, my boy. I can understand that there are milestones, even in Lover's Lane. And I can also understand that if Miss Sanborn is on the side of submission I can't incite you to rebellion. Is that the fact?"

"If you will put it that way. I shan't fight, at any rate."

There the matter came to the ground of its own weight, and I took up the field-glass to train it upon another miniature whirlwind of dust homing across the valley.

"That's Dan Connolly," said Macpherson, when the dust-cloud parted in the midst.

"How can you tell, at this distance?"

"By the way he rides. He was a trooper in her majesty's Heavy Dragoons before he migrated and became a cow-puncher, and he jockeys in his stirrups to this good day. Hello!—what's that?"

It sounded like the fall of plank upon plank, but I was enough of a sportsman to recognize the crack of a heavy rifle. Thereupon ensued a quick-moving and stirring tableau. The horse of the approaching range-rider made a demi-volt in air, coming down broadside in its tracks. I looked to see the ex-trooper flung headlong, but the glass showed him to me flat on the ground behind the living breastwork withers of the bronco. A thousand yards away, at the black gash in the Gringo, a small cavalcade was defiling into the park, and out of it a horseman rode, waving his gun in the air as he came. Macpherson stepped back into the house, coming out again quickly with his Winchester.

"By God," he said, between his teeth, "if they're going to begin by taking pot-shots at us— Now what the devil is that fellow trying to do? Hasn't he got sense enough to know that Connolly's only waiting till he gets in range?"

The oncoming horseman had slung his rifle, and was waving something white. The man in the breastwork let him come up until he was within easy killing distance, and then judging by the way in which the truce-bearer dragged his horse to its haunches, the bronco's garrison had called a halt. There was a brief colloquy of some sort—not peaceful, if the field-glass were to be trusted, and gestures mean anything—and at the end of it the man with the white handkerchief galloped back to his company and led it by a wide detour around the intrenched one. Five minutes later, Connolly ambled up and dropped from his horse at the corral bars.

"What was the row, Dan?" Macpherson called.

"Nothin' worth the name of ut, sorr. It was on'y Misther Engineer Wykamp, av the Glenlivat Land Coomp'ny—bad 'cess to 'm—poppin' his gun over the head av me to ask about the thrail. He was sweatin' heejus, an' for wan cint I'd 've put him out av his mis'ry. I was that near to doin' ut annyhow."

Macpherson's smile was the grimmest. "It's God's mercy Connolly didn't kill him," he said. "I've known him to do a worse thing on slighter provocation than that."

The little episode was to me like the sight of his first battle is like to be to the soldier, and my bones became as water. Moreover, the spirit of prophecy came upon me and I was fain to give it speech as one who had advised a thought too rashly.

"If that's the beginning of it, Angus, the middle part and the ending will be of violence. I don't know but the school-ma'am is right, after all. What I had in mind was a legal fight."

"You mean that I'd better be prospecting for the new range?"

"After you've driven the money bargain, yes. There'll be bloodshed if you don't."

He laid the rifle across his knees and the far-away look came back into the brown eyes of him.

"I don't know," he said, slowly. "Somehow, I don't feel as sure about what I ought to do as I did a few minutes ago. Are we a lot of outlaws to be called down like escaping convicts?"

I tried to turn it off in a laugh. "It's doubtless all one to the engineer. He is probably from the far east, with fictional notions of western customs. I shouldn't wonder if he thought that was the accepted method of calling a man's attention out here. Where are you going?" Macpherson had risen to take his saddle from its peg under the wide eaves.

"I believe I'll ride up the valley a piece and see what has become of Milt. He isn't quite as hasty as Dan Connolly, but I wouldn't answer for him if that fellow tries to bully him. Shall I put you to bed before I go?"

I suffered him; and a little later, through a chink in the ranch house wall, saw him mount and ride. It must have been hours later when he returned. The men were snoring peacefully, and the moon was pouring a flood of white radiance through the square window openings and the never-closed door of the ranch house. I heard Macpherson stumble in and fling himself into his bunk, which was opposite mine. When I turned over to speak to him, I had a glimpse of his face in the moonlight, and it brought me to my elbow with a sharp ejaculation of concern.

"For heaven's sake, Angus, what's the matter wth you? You're bleeding—you're hurt!"

He rolled over quickly and hid his face after the manner of a petulant child, and I heard something which sounded like a mumbled curse.

"Never mind me; I'm all right. The bronco stumbled. You go to sleep."

CHAPTER III.

A WORD AND A BLOW.

When I awoke on the morning following the day of episodes it was late, and the bunk-room was deserted by all save the master. Macpherson was smoking peacefully and reading the papers brought up from Fort Cowan by Kilgore, and his greeting was cheerfully obliterative of the overnight attack of ill-humor.

"The dregs of the morning to you; I thought you were going to sleep the clock around. How do you feel this morning?"

"I feel as if I could punish a square meal. What time is it?"

"Nine o'clock, and worse. Oh, Andy!—is the water boiling?"

"Yep," came the answer from the cook-house in the rear.

"Put the eggs in, and be ready to die if they come out hard." And then to me: "You like 'em underdone, don't you?"

"Yes. When did you put eggs on the menu?"

"Last night. Milt had you in mind, and he brought them down from the settlement in his hat."

A mist not of the atmosphere blurred the homely interior of the bunk-room for me. Self-control is but a crater-crust in a well man, and the hot lava of illness thins it to the fracturing point.

"If I were a sick child you fellows couldn't be more loving kind to me."

"Oh, you be——" The affectionate malison stuck in his throat, and he made a hollow pretense of relighting his pipe—which had not gone out. When the air was fairly blue with tobacco-smoke, he said: "I'm going down to the fort to-day. Want anything?"

"Yes; I want to know how the bronco came to stumble—last night."

He got up and began to tramp, with his hands behind him and his head in a dense cloud of the pipe's making.

"I had hoped you'd forget that," he said, after a turn or two.

"Is it anything I ought not to know?"

"Not on my account; but you've troubles enough of you own."

"A friend's share of yours won't make mine any heavier."

"I'm not so sure of that."

"You may be. Besides, it's only the details that are lacking; you had a row with the engineer."

"How do you know?"

"I'm only guessing at it. How did it happen?"

"It happened because it's written in the book of fate that one of us is to efface the other, I think. It began to grind itself into me yesterday, when that fellow rode out to parley with Dan Connolly. If I believed in transmigration, I should say that we had worried through some past avatar as red-dog and wolf."

"But the bronco-stumble?" said I.

"I'm coming to that. When I saddled El Gato last night, I had it in mind to go and wrestle it out with Selter for not keeping faith with me. A mile this side of the settlement I met Milt, and when he told me that Wykamp was at Selter's, I killed time to give him a chance to get away. What I had to say to Selter wouldn't brook witnesses."

"I can imagine."

"When I reached the schoolhouse, Miss Sanborn was locking up, and I—I—"

"You stopped to talk it over with her. Go on."

"She boards at the Selters', you know, and it struck me all at once that I didn't want her to meet that fellow Wykamp. I don't know why, and I didn't stop to reason it out. I made her sit down on the step of the schoolhouse, and we talked for an

"I LOST MY HEAD AND STRUCK HIM."

hour or more, I should say. When I thought I had given Wykamp time to vanish, I drew the line. The moon was up and it was getting chilly, and I can't make Winif—Miss Sanborn believe that thin sleeves and pneumonia are cause and effect at this altitude."

"Confound your digressions! Will you never come to the point?"

"All in good time. We were half way to Selter's when I heard the engineer coming. He pulled his horse down to a walk when he saw us, and I gave him plenty of room. I saw him bend to stare at us as he passed, and before I knew what was happening he was blocking the way with a sneer on his face and her name on his tongue. She clung to me and tried to hide her face; and he—he laughed."

Macpherson was living it over again in the retelling, and his handsome face was a study in righteous wrath. I could easily imagine that the engineer would never know how nearly he had laughed his life away.

"Yes, he laughed, and said: 'I told you the world wasn't going to be big enough for you to hide in. Won't you introduce me to your—friend?' She began to cry at that, and I lost my head, of course, and struck him. He came back at me—with the butt of his whip, I think—calling me a name that made her out to be—God help me, Jack! I can't go over it all again in cold blood!"

"Don't try; I can finish it. You killed him, and you're going to Fort Cowan to give yourself up. Is there a lawyer this side of Denver with brains enough to defend you?"

He shook his head. "No, I didn't. I meant to, but she got between us. She was half crazy with grief and fright, as she had a right to be, but out of her passionate incoherence I managed to pick this: that Wykamp's life was not mine to take—that I, of all men in the world, must spare and slay not, even if the blood of a kinsman should cry out for vengeance."

Just at this point in Macpherson's narrative, Andrew the Mild came in with my breakfast. When he went away, I said: "Was that all?"

"About all. I don't think Wykamp heard much of what she was trying to say. He'd had a look down the gullet of a forty-five, and had lost his nerve. He made out to climb his horse after a frantic plunge or two, and rode away; and then I took Winifred home."

"Did she say anything to clear it up?"

"Not a word. And I didn't have the heart to ask questions, as you may imagine. She was too deep in misery to talk; and you'll understand from what I've told you that she has not yet given me the right to be inquisitive."

"There are some things in this world that need to be taken for granted. But what is your theory?"

"I haven't any."

"I have—or rather, it's a horrible suspicion."

He stopped and put his hand on my shoulder, and I wondered if he had read my thought.

"Keep it to yourself, Jack," he said, with his chin a-quiver; "I've about all I can stand, just now. If you knew her you wouldn't say 'suspicion.' Are you safe to leave for a day or two?"

"Of course I am. And you'd better be off if you expect to reach Cowan by daylight."

"I'm gone. Take care of yourself and just play the outfit's yours. The