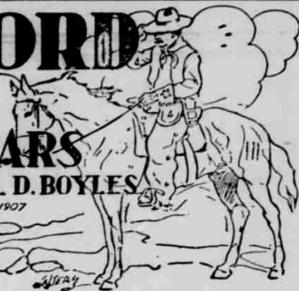


LANGFORD

OF THE THREE BARS

BY KATE AND VIRGIL D. BOYLES

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a burning fever, with Paul Langford in constant and untrusting attendance upon him. George Williston was a sadly shattered man.

"I met Black on the corner west of Gordon's office," he explained, when he could talk. "I had not been able to sleep, and had been walking to tire my nerves into quiet. I was coming back to the hotel when I heard Black's shot and then Mary's. I ran forward and met Black on the corner, running. He stopped, cried out, 'You, too, damn you,' and that's the last I knew until the boys picked me up."

These were the most interested—Langford, Gordon, Williston. Had they been in the count, things might have been different. It is very probable a posse would have been formed for immediate pursuit. But others must do what had been better done had it not been for those shots in the dark. There was blood outside Gordon's window; yet Black had not crawled home to die. He had not gone home at all,—at least, that is what the sheriff said. No one had seen the convicted man after his desperate and spectacular exit from the court-room—no one at least but Louise, Marr, and her father. Mary's shot had not killed him, but it had saved Richard Gordon's life, which was a far better thing. It was impossible to track him out of town, for the cattle had trampled the snow in every direction.

The sheriff could gather no outside information. The only claims were made by the officers on any hint of their having given aid or shelter to the fugitive, or of having any acquaintance whatsoever regarding his possible whereabouts. So the pursuit, at first hot and excited, gradually wearied of following false leads,—contented itself with desultory journeys when prodded thereto by the compelling power of public opinion,—finally ceased altogether even as a pretence.

One of the first things doing the dramatic deed were followed by the officers in court had little share in the officers out to the half-way in the valley where the dead lay dead across the threshold. A watch was also set upon this place; but no one ever came there.

August had come again, and Judge Dale was in Kenah to hear a court case.

Langford had ridden in from the ranch on purpose to see Judge Dale. His clothes were spattered with mud. There had been a succession of storms, lasting for several days; last night a cloud had burst out west somewhere. All the creeks were swollen.

"Judge, I believe Jesse Black has been on that island of his all the time."

"What makes you think so, Langford?"

"Because our sheriff is four-fushin'—he always was in sympathy with the gang, you know. Besides, where else can Black be?"

Dale puckered his lips thoughtfully.

"What have you heard?" he asked.

"Rumors are getting pretty thick that he has been seen in that neighborhood on several occasions. It is my honest belief he has never left it."

"What did you think of doing about it, Langford?"

"I want you to give me a bench warrant, judge. I am confident that I can get him. It is the shame of the county that he is still at large."

"You have to deal with one of the worst and most desperate outlaws in the United States. You must know it will be a very hazardous undertaking,



The Little Posse Started on its Journey.

granting your surmises to be correct, and fraught with grave peril for some one."

"I understand that fully."

"This duty is another's, not yours."

"But that other is incompetent."

"My dear fellow," said the judge, rising and laying his hand on Langford's big shoulder, "do you really want to undertake this?"

"I certainly do."

"Then I will give you the warrant."

fant little deputy marshal. You know the danger. I admire your grit, my boy. Get him if you can; but take care of yourself. Your life is worth so much more than his. Who will you take with you?"

"Munson, of course. He will go in spite of the devil, and he's the best man I know for anything like this. Then I thought of taking the deputy-sheriff. He's been true blue all along, and has done the very best possible under the conditions."

"Very good. Take Johnson, too. He'll be glad to go. He's the pluckiest little fighter in the world,—not a cowardly hair in his head."

So it was agreed, and the next morning, bright and early, the little posse, reinforced by others who had earnestly solicited the privilege of going along, started out on its journey. The rains were over, but the roads were heavy. In many places, they were forced to walk their mounts. No one but the initiated know what gumbo mud means. Until they took to the hills, the horses could scarcely lift their feet, so great would be the weight of the sticky black earth which clung in immense chunks to their hoofs. When they struck the hills, it was better and they pressed forward rapidly. Once only the sheriff had asserted that he had run across the famous outlaw. Black had resisted savagely and had escaped, sending back the bold taunt that he would never be taken alive. Such a message might mean death to some of the plucky posse now making for the old-time haunts of the desperado.

The sun struggled from behind rain-exhausted clouds, and a rickety wind blew up. The clouds hurried away toward the horizon.

At White river the men looked at each other in mute inquiry. The stream was a raging torrent. It was swollen until it was half again its ordinary width. The usually placid waters were rushing and twisting into whirlpool-like rapids.

"What now?" asked Baker, the deputy-sheriff.

"I'm thinkin' this here little posse party'll have to be postponed," vouchsafed one of the volunteers, nodding his head wisely.

"We'll sure have to wait for the cloud-burst to run out," agreed another.

"Why, we can swim that all right," put in Langford, rallying from his momentary set-back and riding his mount to the very edge of the swirling water.

"Hold on a minute there, Boss," cried Jim. "Don't be rash now. What's the census of 'pinion' o' this here company? Shall we risk the ford or shall we not?"

"Why, Jim," said Paul, a laugh in his blue eyes, "are you afraid? What's come over you?"

"Nothin'. I ain't no coward neither, and ef you wasn't the Boss I'd show you. I was just a thinkin' o'—somebody who'd care—that's all."

Just for a moment a far-away look came into the young ranchman's eyes. Then he straightened himself in his saddle.

"I, for one, am going to see this thing through," he said, tersely.

"What do you say, Johnson?"

"I never for one minute calculated on doing a thing else," replied the deputy-marshal, who had been standing somewhat apart awaiting the end of the controversy, with a good-humored smile in his twinkling blue eyes.

Paul urged Sade into the water. He was followed unhesitatingly by Munson, Johnson, and Baker. The others held back, and finally, after a short consultation, wheeled and retraced their steps.

"I ain't no coward, neither," muttered one, as he rode away, "but I plumb don't see no sense in bein' drowned. I'd ruther be killed a round-in' up Jesse."

The horses which had made the initial plunge were already in water up to their breasts. The current had an ominous rush to it.

"I don't care. I didn't mean to hold over and let our quarry get wized of this affair," cried Langford over his shoulder. "Keep your rifles dry, boys!"

Suddenly, without warning, Sade stepped into a hole and lost her balance for a moment. She struggled gallantly and recovered herself, yet it weakened her. It was not long before all the horses were compelled to swim, and the force of the current immediately began driving them down stream. She was a plucky little cow pony and loved her master, but it was about all she could do to keep from going under, let alone making much headway against the tremendous pressure of the current. Langford's danger was grave.

"Steady, my girl!" he encouraged. He flung his feet free of the stirrups so that, if she went under, he would be ready to try it alone. Poor Sade! He should hate to lose her. If he released her now and struck off by himself, she might make it. He had never known White river to run so sullenly and strongly; it would be almost impossible for a man to breast it. And there was Mary—he could never go back to her and claim her for his own until he could bring Black back, too, to suffer

for her father's wrongs.

At that moment, Sade gave a little convulsive shudder and the water rolled over her head. Langford slipped from the saddle, but in the instant of contact with the pushing current, his rifle was jerked violently from his hand and sank out of sight. With no time for vain regrets, he struck out for the shore. The struggle was tremendous. He was buffeted and beaten, and borne farther down the stream. More than once in the endeavor to strike too squarely across, his head went under; but he was a strong swimmer, and soon scrambling up the bank some distance below the ford, he turned and sent a resonant hail to his comrades. They responded lustily. He had been the only one unhorsed. He threw himself face downward in cough up some of the water he had been compelled to swallow, and Munson, running up, began slapping him vigorously upon the back. He desisted only to run swiftly along the bank.

"Good for you," Jim cried approvingly, assisting Langford's spent horse up the bank. Coming up to the party where Langford still stretched out full length, Sade rubbed her nose inquiringly over the big shoulders lying so low, and whinnied softly.

"Hello there!" cried Paul, springing excitedly to his feet. "Where'd you come from? Thought you had crossed the bar. Now I'll just borrow a gun from one of you fellows and we'll be getting along. Better my rifle than my horse at this stage of the game, anyway."

The little party pushed on. The longer half of their journey was still before them. On the whole, perhaps, it was better the crowd had split. There was more unity of purpose among those who were left. The sun was getting hot, and Langford's clothes dried rapidly.

Arrived at the entrance of the cross ravine which Williston had once sought out, the four men rode their horses safely through its length. The waters of the June rise had receded and the outlaw's presumably deserted holding was once more a peninsula. The wooded section in the near distance lay green and in innocent-looking places, cool and innocent-looking in the late summer sun. The sand between stretched out hot in the white glare. From the gulch covert, the wiry marshal rode first. His face bore its wonted expression of good-humored alertness, but there was an inscrutable glint in his eyes that might have found place there because of a sure realization of the hazard of the situation and of his accepting it.

Langford followed him quickly, and Munson and Baker were not far behind. They trotted breezily across the open in a bunch, without words. Where the indistinct trail to the house slipped into the wooded enclosure they paused. Was the desperado at last really rounded up so that he must either submit quickly or turn at bay? It was so still. Spots of sunlight had filtered through the foliage and flocked the pathway. Insects flitted about. Bumble bees droned. Butterflies hovered over the snow-on-the-mountain. A turtle dove mourned. A snake glided sinuously through the grass. Peering down the warm, shaded interior, one might almost imagine one was in the heart of an ancient wood. The drowsy suggestions of solitude crept in upon the sensibilities of all the men and filled them with vague doubts. If this was the haunt of a man, a careless, sordid man, would this place which knew him breathe forth so sweet, still, and undisturbed a peace?

Langford first shook himself free of the haunting fear of a deserted hearthstone.

"I'd stake my all on my belief that he's there," he said, in a low voice.

"Now listen, boys. Johnson and I will ride to the house and make the arrest, providing he doesn't give us the slip. Baker, you and Jim will remain here in ambush in case he does. He's bound to come this way to reach the mainland. Ready, Johnson?"

Jim interposed. His face was flinty with purpose.

"Not ef the court knows herself, and I think she do. Me and Johnson will do that there little arrestin' job and the boss he'll stay here in the ambush. Ef anybody's a countin' on my tottin' the boss's openwork body back to Mary Williston, it's high time he was a losin' the count, for I ain't goin' to do it."

He guided his horse straight into the path.

"But, Jim," expostulated Langford, laying a detaining hand on the cowboy's shoulder, "as for danger, there's every bit as much—and more—here. Do you think Jesse Black will tamely sit down and wait for us to come up and nab him? I think he'll run."

"Then why are you a shirkin', ef this is the worst spot o' all? You ain't no coward, boss, leastways you never was. Why don't you stay by it? That's what I'd like to know."

Johnson grinned appreciatively.

"Well, there's always the supposition that he may not see us until we ride into his clearing," admitted Langford. "Of course, then—it's too late."

Jim blocked the way.

"I'm an ornery, no-count cowboy with no one in this hull world to know or care what becomes o' me. There ain't no one to care but me, and I can't say I'm a hurtin' myself any a carin'! You just wait till I screech, will you?"

"Jim," said Langford, huskily, "you go back and behave yourself. I'm the boss—not you. You've got to obey orders. You've sassed me long enough. You get back, now!"

"Tell Mary, ef I come back a dead-er," said Jim, "that women are s'perfluous critters, but I forgive her. She can't help bein' a woman."

He gave his horse a dig with his knee and the animal bounded briskly forward.

"Jim! You fool boy! Come back!"

cried Langford, plunging after him. Johnson shrugged his shoulders and wheeled his horse into clever concealment on one side of the path.

"Let the fool kids go," he advised, dryly. "I'm a lookin' for Jess to run, anyway."

The two men rode boldly up toward the house. It seemed deserted. Weeds were growing around the door-stoop, and crowding thickly up to the front windows. A spider's silver web gleamed from casing to panel of the warped and weather-stained door. The windows were blurred with the tricklings of rain through seasons of dust. Everything appeared unkempt, forlorn, desolate.

There was a sound from the rear. It carried a stealthy significance. A man leaped from the protection of the cabin and was seen running toward the barn. He was heavily armed.

"Stop that, Black!" yelled Langford, authoritatively. "We are going to take you, dead or alive—you'd better give yourself up! It will be better for you."

The man answered nothing.

"Wing him with your rifle, Jim, before he gets to the barn," said Paul quickly.

The shot went wild. Black wrenched the door open, sprang upon the already bridled horse and made a bold dash for the farther wood—and not in the direction where determined men waited in ambush. What did it mean. As his horse cleared the stable, he turned and shot a vindictive challenge to meet his pursuers.

"You won't take me alive—and dead, I won't go alone!"

He plunged forward in a northerly direction. Dimly he could be seen through the underbrush; but plainly could be heard the crackling of branches and the snapping of twigs as his horse whipped through the low-lying foliage. Was there, then, any way to the mainland—other than the one over which Johnson and Baker kept guard? How could it be? How Langford longed for his good rifle and its carrying power. But he knew how to use a pistol, too. Both men sent menacing shots after the fugitive. Langford could not account for the strange direction. The only solution was that Black was leading his pursuers a chase through the woods, hoping to decoy them so deeply into the interior that he might, turning suddenly and straightly, gain time for his desperate sprint across the exposed stretch of sand. If this were true, Baker and Johnson would take care of him there.

Black returned the fire venomously. A bullet scraped his horse's flank. His hat was shot from his head. He turned savagely in his saddle with a yell of defiance.

"You'll never take me alive!"

The fusillade was furious, but the trees and branches proved Black's friends. It was impossible to judge one's aim aright. His horse staggered. Another bullet sang and purred through the foliage, and the horse fell. "My God, Jim!" cried Langford. "My cartridges are out! Give me your gun!"

For answer, Jim sent another bullet whistling forward. Black, rising from his fallen horse, fell back.

"I got him!" yelled Jim, exultantly. He spurred forward.

"Careful, Jim!" warned Langford. "He may be playing 'possum,' you know."

"You stay where you are," cried Jim. "You ain't got no gun. Stay back, you fool boss!"

Langford laughed a little.

"You're the fool boy, Jim," he said. "I'll go without a gun if you won't give me yours."

They rode cautiously up to the prostrate figure. It was lying face downward, one arm outstretched on the body of the dead horse, the other crumpled under the man's breast. Blood oozed from under his shoulder.

"He's done for," said Jim, in a low voice. In the presence of death all hatred had gone from him. The man apparently had paid all he could of his debts on earth. The body lying there so low was the body of a real man. What ever his crimes, he had been a fine type of physical manhood. He had never cringed. He had died like a man, fighting to the last.

Jim slowly and thoughtfully slipped his revolver into its holster and dismounted. Langford, too, sprang lightly from his saddle.

Black had been waiting for this. His trained ear had no sooner caught the soft rubbing sound of the pistol slipping into its leathern case than he leaped to his feet and stretched out the crumpled arm with its deadly weapon pointing straight at the heart of Langford of the Three Bars.

"Now, damn you, we're quits!" he cried, hoarsely.

There was not time for Jim to draw, but, agile as a cat, he threw himself against Black's arm and the bullet went wild. For a moment the advantage was his, and he wrested the weapon from Black's hand. It fell to the ground. The two men grappled. The struggle was short and fierce. Each strove with all the strength of his concentrated hate to keep the other's hand from his belt.

When the feet of the wrestlers left the fallen weapon free, Langford, who had been waiting for this opportunity, sprang forward and seized it with a thrill of satisfaction. Command of the situation was once more his. But the revolver was empty, and he turned to throw himself into the struggle empty-handed. Jim would thus be given a chance to draw.

At that moment Black twisted his arm free and his hand dropped like a flash to his belt, where there was a revolver that was loaded. Jim hugged him closely, but it was of no use. The bullet tore its cruel way through his side. His arms relaxed their hold—he

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Union

From the Letter.

James Pittman is "shy" one good horse, the animal leaving this world of toil and colic at about 7 o'clock Monday morning.

G. W. Garrison and wife departed last Saturday for Burlington Junction, Mo., to test the merits of the mineral springs treatment.

James Vantine of Arapahoe has been visiting his old home in this vicinity for a few days. He had been to St. Joseph with a car load of cattle.

The Baptist parsonage is being rebuilt on plans much better and with more room, and when completed it will be almost entirely new and a more attractive home for the pastor.

Wm. Wegand's dog Jip bumped into a Mo. Pacific engine Wednesday, but he'll know better when he meets the next train. The fragments were taken to Hiawatha for interment Wednesday night.

Prof. G. C. DeBolt, now teaching at Cedar Creek, was here last Saturday to interview the school board, with the result that he was employed for principal of Union's schools the coming year.

Miss Stella Banning and Uncle Sent Elkins came down from Nehawka last Sunday and were guests of the Applegate families west of town. Although quite aged and totally blind Mr. Elkins has a very jovial disposition and readily recognizes most of his acquaintances the instant he hears their voices.

Lewis Curtis has been very sick the past week, beginning with a severe attack of stomach trouble, and the past few days the principal difficulty seems

to be in his throat. His barber shop has been closed on that account, but he is now slowly improving and hopes to be able to open the shop in the near future and attend to the wants of his patrons.

Tireless Tilers Train.

First Tuesday, 5th-5th-1908, occurred the monthly carnival of the Woman's Relief corps. Though the weather was unpropitious, it did not dampen the ardor of that noble band of tireless workers, whose enthusiasm for the success of the good work in which they are engaged is unbounded. Pursuant to previous arrangements the May meeting was held at the home of the writer. After the business of the occasion had been disposed of, which always comes before pleasure with busy people, a dainty lunch was served and a social time enjoyed by as jelly a set of matrons as can be found in any well regulated and pleasure loving community.

ISABELLA CARTER,
Press Correspondent, W. R. C.

Off for Lincoln

Among those who were passengers to Lincoln this morning to attend the state convention of the Modern Woodmen, which is in session in that city, taking the morning train were: John Hadraba, C. P. Richards, John Hiber, Albert and Willie Hunger, Dan Landas, James Andrews, W. W. Gravitt, Mat Joy, Fred Linderman, August Bradway, Miles Allen, R. W. White, B. A. McElwain, W. A. White, John Janda, Robt Brisset, John Bates, Albert Timmes, Will Fitzgerald, H. S. Barthold, Lester Burrows, James Hunter, Peter Claus, Al. and Clyde Funk, Frank Bester, O. A. Newton, A. J. Beeson, J. F. Warga, J. A. Burrows, Ray Barcus and George Lushinsky.

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