

LANGFORD of the THREE BARS

By KATE AND VIRGIL D. BOYLES

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CHAPTER I.

The Island With a Mystery.

He said positively to Battle Ax, his scraggy buckskin cow pony, that they would ride to the summit of this one bluff, and that it should be the last. But he had said the same thing many times since striking the barren hill ranges flanking both sides of the river. Hump after hump had been surmounted since the sound of the first promise had tickled the ears of the tired broncho, humps as alike as the two humps of a Bactrian camel, the monotonous continuity of which might very well have confused the mind of one less at home on these ranges than George Williston. Even he, riding a blind trail since sun-up, sitting his saddle with a heavy indifference born of heat and fatigue, began to think it might be that they were describing a circle and the sun was playing them strange tricks. Still, he urged his pony to one more effort; just so much farther and they would retrace their steps, giving up for this day at least the locating of a small bunch of cattle, branded a lazy S, missing these three days.

Had not untoward circumstances intervened, he might still have gone blindly on; for, laying aside the gambling fever that was on him, he could ill afford to lose the ten or twelve steers somewhere wandering the wide range or huddled into some safe place, there to abide the time when a daring rustler might conveniently play at witchcraft with the brand or otherwise dispose of them with profit to himself and with credit to his craft. Moreover, what might possibly never have been missed from the vast herds of Langford, his neighbor of the plains country, was of most serious import to Williston.

"Devil take you, Battle Ax, but you're slow," muttered Williston. "I'd give a good deal to sit down this minute to some of my little girl's flapjacks and coffee. But nothing for us, lazy-bones, till midnight—or morning, more likely. Do walk up as if you had some little standing in the world of cow ponies. You haven't, of a surety, but you might make an effort. All things are possible to him who tries, you know, which is a tremendous lie, of course. But perhaps it doesn't apply to poor devils like us who are 'has-beens.' Here we are. Ah!"

There were no more hills. Almost directly at his feet was one of those precipitous cut-aways that characterize the border bluffs of the Missouri river. A few more steps, in the dark, and horse and rider would have plunged over a sheer wall of nearly 200 feet. As it was, Williston gave a gasp of involuntary horror which almost simultaneously gave place to one of wonder and astonishment. He had struck the river at a point absolutely new to him. It was the time of low water, and the river, in most of its phases muddy and sullen-looking, gleamed silver and gold with the glitter of the setting sun, making a royal highway to the dwelling-place of Phoebus. A little to the north of this sparkling highroad lay what would have been an island in high water, thickly wooded with willows and cottonwoods. Now a long stretch of sand reached between bluff and island.

Dismounting, with the quick thought that yonder island might hold the secret of his lost cattle, he crept as close to the edge as he dared. The cut was sheer and tawny, entirely devoid of shrubbery by means of which one might hazard a descent. The sand bed began immediately at the foot of the yellow wall. Even though one managed to gain the bottom, one would hardly dare risk the deceitful sands, ever shifting, fair and treacherous. Baffled, he was on the point of remounting to retrace his steps when he dropped his foot from the stirrup amazed. Was the day of miracles not yet passed?

It was the sun, of course. Twelve hours of sun in the eyes could play strange tricks and might even cause a dancing black speck to assume the semblance of a man on horseback, picking his way easily, though maybe a bit warily, across the waste of sand. He seemed to have sprung from the very bowels of the bluff. Whence else? Many a rod beyond and above the ghostly figure frowned the tawny, wicked cut-away. Path for neither horse nor man appeared so far as eye could reach. It must be the sun. But it was not the sun.

Motionless, intent, a figure cast in bronze as the sun went down, the lean ranchman gazed steadfastly down upon the miniature man and horse creeping along so far below. Not until the object of his fixed gaze had been swallowed by the trees and underbrush did his muscles relax. This man had ridden as if unafraid

What man, how, man can do, ran swiftly through Williston's brain, and with no idea of abandoning his search until he had probed the mystery, he mounted and rode northward, closely examining the edge of the precipice as he went along for any evidence of a possible descent. Presently he came upon a cross ravine, devoid of shrubbery, too steep for a horse, but presenting possibilities for a man. With unerring instinct he followed the cross-cut westward. Soon a scattering of scrub oaks began to appear, and sumach already streaked with crimson. A little farther and the trees began to show spiral wreaths of woodbine and wild grape. Yet a little farther, and doubtless there would be outlet for horse as well as man.

But Williston was growing impatient. Besides, the thought came to him that he had best not risk his buckskin to the unknown dangers of an untried trail. What if he should go lame? Accordingly he was left behind in a slight depression where he would be pretty well hidden, and Williston scrambled down the steep incline alone. When foothold or handhold was lacking, he simply let himself go and slid, grasping the first root or branch that presented itself in his dare-devil course.

Arrived at the bottom, he found his clothes torn and his hands bleeding; but that was nothing. With grim determination he made his way through the ravine and struck across the sand trail with a sure realization of his danger, but without the least abatement of his resolution. The sand was firm under his feet. The water had receded a sufficient length of time before to make the thought of quicksands an idle fear. No puff of cloudy smoke leaped from a rifle barrel. If, as he more than half suspected, the island was a rendezvous for cattle thieves, a place surely admirably fitted by nature for such unlawful operations, the rustlers were either overconfident of the inaccessibility of their retreat and kept no lookout, or they were insolently indifferent to exposure. The former premise was the more likely. A light breeze, born of the afterglow, came scurrying down the river bed. Here and there, where the sand was finest and driest, it rose in little whirlwinds. No sound broke the stillness of the summer evening.

What was that? Coyotes barking over yonder across the river? That



Turned and Faced Squarely the Spot Which Held the Watching Man.

alien sound! A man's laugh, a curse, a heart-breaking bellow of pain. Williston parted ever so slightly the thick foliage of underbrush that separated him from the all too familiar sounds and peered within.

In the midst of a small clearing—man-made, for several stumps were scattered here and there—two men were engaged in unroping and releasing a red steer, similar in all essential respects to a bunch of three or four huddled together a little to one side. They were all choice, well-fed animals, but there were thousands of just such beasts herding on the free ranges. He owned red steers like those, but was there a man in the cattle country who did not? They were impossible of identification without the aid of their brand, and it happened that they were so bunched as to completely baffle Williston in his eager efforts to decipher the stamp that would disclose their ownership. That they were the illegitimate prey of cattle rustlers, he never for one moment doubted. The situation was conclusive. A bed of glowing embers constantly replenished and kept at white heat served to lighten up the weird scene growing dusky under the surrounding cottonwoods.

Williston thought he recognized in one of the men—the one who seemed to be directing the procedure of this little affair, whose wide and dirty hatrim was so tantalizingly drawn over his eyes—the solitary rider whose unexpected appearance had so startled him a short time before. Both he and his companion were dressed after the rough, nondescript manner of cattle men, both were gay, laughing and talkative, and seemingly as oblivious to possible danger as if engaged in the most innocent and legitimate business. A little to the left and standing alone was an odd creature of most striking appearance—a large, spotted steer with long, peculiar-looking horns. It was quite impossible to mistake such a possession if it had once been yours. Its right side was turned full toward Williston and in the center of the hip stood out distinctly the cleanly characterized three perpendicular lines that were the identifying mark of the Three Bars ranch, one of those same big, opulent, self-centered outfits whose

astonishingly multiplying sign was becoming such a veritable and prophetic writing on the wall for Williston and his kind.

Who, then, had dared to drive before him an animal so branded? The boldness of the transgression and the insolent indifference to the enormity of attendant consequences held him for the moment breathless. His attention was once more called to the movements of the men. The steers with which they had been working was led away still moaning with surprise and pain, and another brought forward from the reserve bunch. The branded hip, if it was a brand, was turned away from Williston. The bewildered animal was cleverly roped and thrown to the ground. The man who was plainly directing the affair, he of the drooping hat and lazy shoulders, stepped to the fire. Williston held his breath with the intensity of his interest. The man stooped and took an iron from the fire. It was the endgate rod of a wagon and it was red-hot. In the act of straightening himself from his stooping position, the glowing iron stick in his right hand, he flung from his head with an easy swing the flopping hat that interfered with the nicety of sight requisite in the work he was about to do, and faced squarely that quiet, innocent looking spot which held the watching man in its brush; and in the moment in which Williston drew hastily back, the fear of discovery beating a tattoo of cold chills down his spine, recognition of the man came to him in a clarifying burst of comprehension.

But a man evidently saw nothing and suspected nothing. His casual glance was probably only a manifestation of his habitual attitude of being never off his guard. He approached the prostrate steer with indifference to any meaning that might be attached to the soft snapping of twigs caused by Williston's involuntary drawing back into the denser shadows.

"Y' don't suppose now, do you, that any blamed, interferin' officer is a-loafin' round where he oughtn't to be?" said the second man with a laugh.

Williston, much relieved, again peered cautiously through the brush. He was confident a brand was about to be worked over. He must see—what there was to see.

"Easy now, boss," said the second man with an officious warning. He was a big, beefy fellow with a heavy, hardened face. Williston sounded the depths of his memory but failed to place him among his acquaintances in the cow country.

"Gamble on me," returned the leader, with ready good nature, "I'll make it as clean as a boiled shirt. I take it you don't know my reputation, pard, well, you'll learn. You're all right, only a trifle green, that's all."

With a firm, quick hand, he began running the searing iron over the right hip of the animal. When he had finished and the steer, released, staggered to its feet, Williston saw the brand clearly. It was J. R. If it had been worked over another brand, it certainly was a clear job. He could see no indications of any old markings whatsoever.

"Too clean to be worked over a lazy S," thought Williston, "but not over three bars." "There were six reds," said the chief, surveying the remaining bunch with a critical eye. "One must have wandered off while I was gone. Get out there in the brush and round him up, Alec, while I tackle this longhorned gentleman."

Williston turned noiselessly away from the scene which so suddenly threatened danger. Both men were fully armed and would brook no eavesdropping. Once more he crossed the sand in safety and found his horse where he had left him, up the ravine. He vaulted into the saddle and galloped away into the quiet night.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

MODERN DEMAND FOR SILENCE. German Newspapers Protest It Is Being Carried to Extremes.

"How the times change!" says a writer in the Frankfurter Zeitung. "In the days of our fathers no description of a homelike, cosy room was complete without a reference to the ticking clock. It was this gentle sound which emphasized the quiet of the place. People had no nerves in those days. To-day the thought of a machine ticking off the seconds and striking the hours is a source of worry and distress. Time is going, but they do not wish to be reminded of it continually; no clock is better than the ticking machine. And now to meet the requirements of the nervous people, a factory at Schramburg is making a noiseless clock." In an article on the same subject another paper says: "The anti-noise craze has made disagreeable and unendurable some of the noises which once were music to us, and soon we will find a way to silence the birds and to muffle the sound of the rustling leaves."

The Cutting Retort. "You don't have to brag of success," declared the big woman when she had listened to the little woman's account of how well she was doing with her work; "it shows for itself." "And you don't have to tell outright of the decline of success once you have been successful," remarked the little woman, who had listened first to the big woman's talk; "it shows in the bitterness with which you complain of existing circumstances."

His Present State. "What state does the young fellow belong to who wants to marry old Billy's daughter?" "Judging from his appearance when I saw him come out of the old man's office I should say a state of collapse."

SERIAL STORY

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SYNOPSIS.

George Williston, a poor ranchman, high minded and cultured, searches for cattle missing from his ranch—the "Lazy S." On a wooded spot in the river's bed that would have been an island had the Missouri been at high water, he discovers a band of horse thieves engaged in working over brands on cattle. He creeps near enough to note the changing of the "Three Bars" brand on one steer to the "J. R." brand.

CHAPTER II. "On the Trail."

Williston himself came to the door. His thin, scholarly face looked drawn and worn in the mid-day glare. A tiredness in the eyes told graphically of a sleepless night.

"I'm glad to see you, Langford," he said. "It was good of you to come. Leave your horse for Mary. She'll give her water when she's cooled off a bit."

"You sent for me, Williston?" asked the young man, rubbing his face affectionately against the wet neck of his mare.

"I did. It was good of you to come to soon."

"Fortunately your messenger found me at home. As for the rest, Sade, here, hasn't her heat in the cow country, if she is only a cow pony, eh, Sade?"

At that moment Mary Williston came into the open doorway of the rude claim shanty set down in the very heart of the sun-seared plain which stretched away into heart-choking distances from every possible point of the compass. And sweet she was to look upon, though tanned and glowing from close association with the ardent sun and riotous wind. Her auburn hair, more reddish on the edges from sunburn, was fine and soft and there was much of it. It seemed newly brushed and suspiciously glossy. One sees far on the plains, and two years out of civilization are not enough to make a girl forget the use of a mirror, even if it be but a broken siver, propped up on a pine-board dressing table. She looked strangely grown-up despite her short, rough skirt and badly scuffed leather riding leggings. Langford stared at her with a startled look of mingled admiration and astonishment. She came forward and put her hand on the mare's bridle. She was not embarrassed in the least. But the color came into the stranger's face. He swept his wide hat from his head quickly.

"No indeed, Miss Williston; I'll water Sade myself."

"Please let me. I'd love to."

"She's used to it, Langford," said Williston in his quiet, gentlemanly voice, the well-bred cadence of which spoke of a training far removed from the harassments and harshnesses of life in this plains country. "You see, she is the only boy I have. She must of necessity be my chore boy as well as my herd boy. In her leisure moments she holds down her kitchen claim; I don't know how she does it, but she does. You had better let her do it; she will hold it against you if you don't."

"But I couldn't have a woman doing my grooming for me. Why, the very idea!"

He sprang into the saddle.

"But you waited for me to do it," said the girl, looking up at him curiously.

"Did I? I didn't mean to. Yes, I did, too. But I beg your pardon. You see—say, look here; are you the 'little girl' who left word for me this morning?"

"Yes. Why not?"

"Well, you see," smiling, but apologetic, "one of the boys said that Williston's little girl had ridden over and said her father wanted to see me as soon as I could come. So, you see, I thought—"

"Dad always calls me that, so most of the people around here do, too. It is very silly."

"I don't think so at all. I only wonder why I have not known about you before," with a frank smile. "It must be because I've been away so much of the time lately. Why didn't you wait for me?" he asked suddenly. "Ten miles is a sort of a lonesome run—for a girl."

"I did wait a while," said Mary, honestly, "but you didn't seem in any hurry. I expect you didn't care to be bored that long way with the silly chatter of a 'little girl.'"

"Well," said Langford, ruefully, "I'm afraid I did feel a little relieved when I found you had not waited. I never will again. I do beg your pardon," he called, laughingly, over his shoulder as he galloped away to the spring.

When he returned there was no one to receive him but Williston. Together they entered the house. It was

a small room into which Langford was ushered. It was also very plain. It was more than that, it was shabby. An easy chair or two that has survived the wreckage of the house of Williston had been shipped to this "land of promise," together with a few other articles such as were absolutely indispensable. The table was a big shipping box, though Langford did not notice that, for it was neatly covered with a moth-eaten plum-colored felt cloth. A rug, crocheted out of parti-colored rags, a relic of Mary's conservative and thrifty grandmother, served as a carpet for the living room. A peep through the open door into the next and only other room disclosed glimpses of matting on the floor. There was a holy place even in this castaway house on the prairie. As the young man's careless eyes took in this new significance, the door closed softly. The "little girl" had shut herself in.

The two men sat down at the table. It was hot. They were perspiring freely. The flies, swarming through the screenless doorway, stung disagreeably.

Laconically Williston told his story. He wasted no words in the telling. In the presence of the man whose big success made his own pitiful failures incongruous, his sensitive scholar's nature had shut up like a clam.

Langford's jaw was set. His young face was tense with interest. He had thrown his hat on the floor as he came in, as is the way with men who have lived much without women. He had a strong, bronzed face, with dare-devil eyes, blue they were, too, and he had a certain turn of the head, a mark of distinction which success always gives to her sons. He had big shoulders, clad in a blue flannel shirt open at the throat. In his absorption he had forgotten the "little girl" as completely as if she had, in very truth, been the 10-year-old of his imagination. How plainly he could see all the unholy situation—the handful of desperate men perfectly protected on the little island. One man sighting from behind a cottonwood could play havoc with a whole sheriff's posse on that open stretch of sand-bar. Nothing but a surprise—and did these insolent men fear surprise? They had laughed at the suggestion of the near

presence of an officer of the law. And did they not do well to laugh? Surely it was a joke, a good one, this idea of an officer's being where he was needed in Kemah county.

"And my brand was on that spotted steer," he interrupted. "I know the creature—know him well. He has a mean eye. Had the gall to dispute the right of way with me once, not so long ago, either. He was in the corral at the time, but he's been on the range all summer. He may have the evil eye all right, but he's mine, bad eye and all; and what is mine, I will have. And is that the only original brand you saw?"

"The only one," quietly, "unless the J R on that red steer when he got up was an original one."

"J R? Who could J R be?"

"I couldn't say, but the man was—Jesse Black."

"Jesse Black!"

The repeated words were fairly spit out.

"Jesse Black! I might have known. Who else bold enough to loot the Three Bars? But his day has come. Not a hair, nor a hide, not a hoof, not a tallow enough to fry a flapjack shall be left on the Three Bars before he repents his insolence."

"What will you do?" asked Williston.

"What will you do?" retorted Langford.

"I? What can I do?" in the vague, helpless manner of the dreamer.

"Everything—if you will," briefly. He snatched up his wide hat.

"Where are you going?" asked Williston, curiously.

"To see Dick Gordon before this day is an hour older. Will you come along?"

"Ye-es," hesitatingly. "Gordon hasn't made much success of things so far, has he?"

"Because you—and men like you—are under the thumb of men like Jesse Black," said Langford, curtly.

"Afraid to peach for fear of antagonizing the gang. Afraid to vote against the tools of the cattle thieves for fear of antagonizing the gang."

Afraid to call your souls your own for fear of antagonizing the gang. Your 'on the fence' policy didn't work very well this time, did it? You haven't found your cattle, have you? The angel must have forgotten. Thought you were tainted of Egypt, eh?"

"It is easy for you to talk," said Williston, simply. "It would be difficult if

your bread and butter and you little girl's as well depended on a scrawny little bunch like mine."

"Maybe," said Langford, shrugging his shoulders. "Doesn't seem to have exempted you, though, does it? But Black is no respecter of persons, you know. However, the time has come for Dick Gordon to show of what stuff he is made. It was for this that I worked for his election, though I confess I little thought at the time that proofs for him would be furnished from my own herds. Present conditions humiliate me utterly. Am I a weakling that they should exist? Are we all weaklings?"

A faint, appreciative smile passed over Williston's face. No, Langford did not look a weakling, neither had the professed humiliation lowered his proud head.

Langford strode to the door. Then he turned quickly.

"Look here, Williston, I shall make you angry, I suppose, but it has to go in the cattle country, and you little fellows haven't shown up very white in these deals; you know that yourself."

"Well?"

"Are you going to stand pat with us?"

"If you mean, am I going to tell what I know when called upon," answered Williston, with a simple dignity that made Langford color with sudden shame, "I am. There are many of us 'little fellows' who would have been glad to stand up against the rustling outrages long ago had we received any backing. The moral support of men of your class has not been what you might call a sort of 'on the spot' support, now, has it?" relapsing into a gentle sarcasm. "At least, until you came to the front," he quailed.

"You will not be the loser, and there's my hand on it," said Langford, frankly and earnestly, ignoring the latter part of the speech. "The Three Bars never forgets a friend. They may do you before we are through with them, Williston, but remember, the Three Bars never forgets."

Mary Williston, from her window, as is the way with a maid, watched the two horsemen for many a mile as they galloped away. She followed them with her eyes while they slowly became faint, moving specks in the level distance and until they were altogether blotted out, and there was no sign of living thing on the plain that stretched between. But Paul Langford, as is the way with a man, forgot that he had seen a beautiful girl, and had thrilled to her glance. He looked back not once as he urged his trusty little mare on to see Dick Gordon.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

AS EXPLAINED BY THE EDITOR.

Drastic Action Evidently Was Necessary, and It Was Taken.

The Buie's Creek (S. C.) Index to the Times recently came out with a double-leaded editorial as follows: "We wish to make our abject apologies to Hon. Hezekiah E. Kinney for having said of him in our last issue that he 'fumigates his garments.' What we meant to say was 'fulminates his arguments.' We have had our eye on the printer ever since he twisted a phrase which appeared in an editorial of ours from 'full of internal rottenness and dead men's bones' into internal rattlesnakes and dead wren's tones.' And as soon as our eye lit upon this gratuitous insult above to the Hon. Hezekiah E. Kinney we armed ourselves with our repeating shotgun, sought out the guilty party and shot him down in cold blood, notwithstanding the fact that the now deceased was the only support of a widowed mother and possessed a large and flourishing family. We wish to assure the Hon. Hezekiah E. Kinney that in the future his person and his speeches will be handled in these columns with respect."—New York Press.

A Backwoods Humorist.

The eastern tourists decided to have a little fun with a Billville citizen to whom they had applied for information as to the road they were traveling.

"How long have you lived here?" they asked.

"Long enough to know better."

"Don't you like the country?"

"When it goes to suit me."

"Ever been up in an airship?"

"No. When I make up my mind to fly, I'll know what to light."

"Ever ride on a railroad train?"

"No. Nighest I ever come to it wuz bein' blowed up by a sawmill."

"Well, tell us what 'moonshine' liquor means."

The Billville man shifted his "chaw" of tobacco from one jaw to the other, spat on the greensward, and as he prepared to climb a fence, said:

"H—I, and a heap of it!"—Atlanta Constitution.

Turkish Labor Too Cheap.

An American manufacturer of laundry machinery tried to introduce it into Smyrna, Turkey, but Consul Ernest L. Harris has reported that so long as the price of labor in that Turkish city remains so low the practice will continue of doing the washing at home, and there will be no opportunity for the sale of laundry machinery. Of late years in Smyrna it has become the practice, he says, to a certain extent to send the washed linen to public laundries for ironing and starching, but even this is ceasing. Specifications were drawn up for the establishment of a laundry after the American plan, and careful consideration was given to the price of coal and labor. It was found that the margin was so small that the undertaking was bound to be a failure.