LANGFORD OF THE THREE BARS

By KATE and VIRGIE D. BOYLES. Copyright A. C. McClurg & Co., 1907.

CHAPTER XI.

"You Are—the Boss."

She held out her left hand with a sad little smile. "It is good of you to come so soon," she said, simply.

She had begged so earnestly to sit up that Mrs. White had improvised an invalid's chair out of a huge old rocker and a cracker box. It did very well. Then she had partially clothed the girl in a skimpy wrapper of the sort Langford abominated, throwing a man's silk handkerchief where the wrapper failed to meet, and around the injured arm. Mrs. White had then recalled her husband from the stables, where he was on the point of mounting to join the relief party that was to set off in search of Williston at 10 o'clock. The starting point unanimously agreed upon was to be the pitiful remnants of Williston's home. Men shook their heads dubiously whenever the question of a possible leading trail was broached. The soil was hard and dry from an almost rainless July and August. The fugitives might strike across country anywhere with meager changes of their trail being traced by any.

Mrs. White and her husband, kindly souls both, lifted the girl as gently as might be from the bed to the rudely constructed invalid's chair by the sitting-room window. Then they had left her—the woman to putter around her kitchen, the man to make good his appointment. But the exertion had been too much for Mary. She had counted on strength that she did not possess. Where had she lost it all? she wondered, lacking comprehension of her exceeding weakness. To be sure, her arm alternately ached and smarted, but one's arm was really such a small part of one, and she had been so strong—always. She tried to shake off the faintness creeping over her. It was effort thrown away. She lay back on her pillow, very white and worn, her pretty hair tangled and loosened from its coils.

Paul came. He was dusty and travel-stained. He had been almost continuously in his saddle since near midnight of the night before. He was here, big, strong, and worthy. Mary did not cry, but she remembered how she had wanted to a few hours ago, and she wondered that she could not now. Strangely enough, it was Paul who wanted to cry now—but he didn't. He only swallowed hard and held her poor hand with all gentleness, afraid to let go lest he also let go his mastery over the insurmountable lump in his throat.

"I tried to come sooner," he said, huskily, at last, releasing her hand and standing before her. "But I've been riding all over—for men, you know—and I had a talk with Gordon, too. It took time. He is coming out to see you this afternoon. He is coming with Doc. Don't you think you had better go back to bed now? You are so—so white. Let me carry you back to bed before I go."

"Are you going, too?" asked Mary, looking at him with wide eyes of gratitude.

"Surely," he responded quickly. "Did you think I wouldn't?"

"I—I—didn't know. I thought—there were a lot going—there would be enough without you. But—I am glad. If you go, it will be all right. You'll find him if any one can."

"Won't you let me carry you back to bed till Doc comes?" said Langford, brokenly.

"I could not bear it in bed," she said, clearly. Her brown eyes were beginning to shine with fever, and red spots had broken out in her pale cheeks. "If you make me go, I shall die. I hear it all the time when I am lying down—galloping, galloping, galloping. They never stop. They always begin all over again."

"What galloping, little girl?" asked Langford, soothingly. He saw she was becoming delirious. If Doc and Dick would only come before he had to go. But they were not coming until after dinner. He gazed down the dusty road. They would wait for him, the others. He was their leader by the natural-born right of push and energy, as well as by his having been the sole participant, with his own cowboys, in the last night's tragedy. But would he do well to keep them waiting? They had already delayed too long. And yet how could he leave Williston's little girl like this—even to find Williston?

"They are carrying my father away," she said, with startling distinctness. "Don't you hear them? If you would listen, you could hear them. Do listen! They are getting faint now—you can hardly hear them. They are fainter—fainter—fainter—"

She had raised her head. There was an alert look on her face. She leaned slightly toward the window.

"Good God! A man can't stand everything!" cried Langford, hoarsely. He tore the knotted handkerchief from his throat. It was as if he was choking. Then he put his cool, strong hand to her burning forehead and gently smoothed back the rough hair. Gradually the fixed look of an indescribable horror passed away from her face. The strained, hard eyes softened, became dewy. She looked at him, a clinging helplessness in her eyes, but sweet and sane.

"Don't you worry, child," he said, comfortingly. "They can't help finding him. Twenty men with the Sheriff start on the trail. There'll be fifty before night. They can't help finding him. I'm going to stay right here with you till Doc comes. I'll catch up with them before they've gone far. I'll send word to the boys not to wait. Must be somebody around the house, I reckon, besides the old lady."

He started cheerily for the door.

"Mr. Langford!"

"Yes?"

"Please come back."

He came quickly to her.

"What is it?"

"Mr. Langford, will you grant me a favor?"

"Certainly, Miss Mary. Anything in this world that I can do for you, I will do. You know that, don't you?"

"I am all right now. I don't think I shall get crazy again if you will let me sit here by this window and look out. If I can watch for him, it will give me something to do. You see, I could be watching all the time for the party to come back over that little rise up the road. I want you to promise me," she went on, steadily, "that I may sit here and wait for you—to come back."

"God knows you may, little girl, anyway till Doc comes."

"You are wiser than Doc," pursued the girl. "He is a good fellow, but foolish, you know, sometimes. He might not understand. He might like to use authority over me because I am his patient—when he did not understand. Promise that I may sit up till you come back."

"I do promise, little girl. Tell him I said so. Tell him—"

"I will tell him you are—the Boss."

she said, with a pitiful little attempt at a jest, and smiling wanly. "He will mind—the Boss."

Langford was in agony. Perspiration was springing out on his forehead, though August was wearing away peacefully in soft coolness, with drifting depths of white cloud as a lounging-robe—a blessed reprieve from the blazing sun of the long weeks which had gone before.

"And then I want you to promise me," went on Mary, quietly, "that you will not think any more of staying behind. I could not bear that. I trust you to go. You will, won't you?"

"Yes, I will go. I will do anything you say. And I want you to believe that everything will be all right. They would not dare to kill him now, knowing that we are after them. If we are not back tonight, you will not worry, will you? They had so much the start of us."

"I will try not to worry."

"Well, good-bye. Be a good girl, won't you?"

"I will try," she answered wearily.

With a last look into the brave, sweet face, and smothering a mad, uncowman-like desire to stay and comfort this dear little woman while others rode away in stirring quest, Langford strode from the sickroom into the kitchen.

"Don't let her be alone any more than you can help, Mother White," he said, brusquely, "and don't worry her about going to bed."

"Have a bite afore you start, Mr. Langford, do," urged the good woman, hospitably. "You're that worn out you're white around the gills. I'll bet you haven't had ary bite o' breakfast."

"I had forgotten—but you are right. No, thank you, I'll not stop for anything now. "I'll have to ride like kingdom come. I'm late. Be good to her, Mother White," this last over his shoulder as he sprang to his mount from the kitchen stoop.

The long day wore along. Mother White was baking. The men would be ravenous when they came back. Many would stop there for something to eat. It might be tonight, it might be tomorrow, it might not be until the day after, but whenever the time did come, knowing the men of the range country, she must have something "by her." The pleasant fragrance of new bread just from the oven, mixed with the faint, spicy odor of cinnamon rolls, floated into the cheerless sitting-room. Mary, idly watching Mother White through the open door as she bustled about in a wholesome-looking blue-checked gingham apron, longed with a childish intensity to be out where there were human warmth and companionship. It was such a weary struggle to keep cobwebs out of her head in that lonely, carpetless sitting-room, and to keep the pipe that reared itself above the squat stove, from changing into a cottonwood tree. Some calamity seemed to hover over her all the time. She was about to grasp the terrible truth—she knew she must look around. Now some one was creeping toward her from under the bed. Unless she stared it out of countenance, something awful would surely come to pass.

Mother White came to the door from time to time to ask her how she was, with floury hands, and stove smutch on her plump cheek. She never failed to break the evil spell. But Mary was weak, and Mrs. White, on one of her periodical pauses at the door, found her sobbing in pitiful self-abandonment. She went to her quickly, her face full of concern.

"My dear, my dear," she cried anxiously, "what is it? Tell me. Mr. Langford will never forgive me. I didn't mean to neglect you, child. It's only that I'm plumb a-foot for time. Tell me what ails you, that's a dearie."

Mary laid her head on the motherly shoulder and cried quietly for a while. Then she looked up with the faintest ghost of a smile.

"I'm ashamed to tell you, Mother White," she half whispered. "It is—only—that I was afraid you hadn't put enough cinnamon in the rolls. I like cinnamon rolls."

"Lord love the child!" gasped Mrs. White, but without the least inclination to laugh. "Why, I lit'rally buried 'em in cinnamon. I couldn't afford not to. If I do say it who shouldn't, my rolls is pretty well known in Kemah county. The boys wouldn't stand for no economizin' in spice. No, sirree."

She hastened wonderingly back to her kitchen, only to return with a heaped-up plate of sweet-smelling rolls.

"Here they are, honey, and they won't hurt you a mite. I can't think what keeps that fool Doc." She was getting worried. It was nearly 4 o'clock, and he was not even in sight.

Now that she had them, Mary did not want the rolls. She felt they would choke her. She waited until her kindly neighbor had trotted back to her household cares, and pushed the plate away. She turned to her window with an exaggerated feeling of relief. It was hard to watch for some one to top that little rise out yonder and yet for no one ever to do it. But there was compensations. It is really better sometimes not to see things than to see—some things. And it was easier to keep her head clear when she was watching the road.

A younger White, an over-grown lad of twelve, came in from far afield. He carried a shot-gun in one hand and a gunnysack thrown over his shoulder. He slouched up and deposited the contents of the bag in front of Mary's window with a bashful, but sociable grin. Mary nodded approvingly, and the boy was soon absorbed in dressing the fowls. What a feast there would be that night if the men got back!

At last came the doctor and Gordon, driving up in the doctor's top-buggy, weather-stained, mud-bedaubed with the mud of last spring, of many springs. The doctor was a badly-dressed, pleasant-eyed man, past middle age, with a fringe of gray whiskers. He was a sort of journeyman doctor, and he had drifted hither one day two summers ago from the Lake Andes country in this self-same travel-worn conveyance, with its same bony sorrel. He had found good picking, he had often jovially remarked since, chewing serenely away on a brand of vile plug the while. He had elected to remain. He was part and parcel of the cattle country now. He was an established condition. People had learned to accept him as he was and be grateful. Haste was a mental and physical impossibility to him. He took his own time. All must perforce acquiesce.

But as he took Mary's wrist between well-shaped fingers disfigured with long, black nails, he had not been able as yet to readjust himself to old conditions after last night's grewsome experience. He was still walking in a maze. He occasionally even forgot the automatic movement of his jaws. Ah, little doctor, something untoward must have happened to cause you to forget that! What that something was he was thinking about now, and that was what made his blue eyes twinkle so merrily.

Last night—was it only last night?—oh, way, way in the night, when ghosts and goblins stalked abroad and all good people were safely housed and deeply asleep, there had come a goblin to his door in the hotel, and cried for admittance with devilish persistence and wealth of language. When he, the doctor, had desired information as to the needs of his untimely visitant, the shoulders of some prehistoric giant had been put to the door, and it had fallen open as to the touch of magic. A dazzling and nether-world light had flamed up in his room, and this Hercules-goblin with lock-destroying tendencies had commanded him to clothe himself, with such insistency that the mantle of nimbleness had descended upon all the little doctor's movements. That this marvelous agility was the result, pure and simple, of black arts, was shown by the fact that the little doctor was in a daze all the rest of the night. He did not even make a show of undue astonishment or nervousness when, clothed in some wonderful and haphazard fashion, he was escorted through the dimly lit hall, down the dark stairway, past the office where a night lamp burned dully, out into the cool night air and into the yawning depths of a mysterious vehicle which rattled with a suspiciously familiar rattle when it suddenly plunged into what seemed like everlasting darkness ahead. He had felt a trifle more like himself after he had unconsciously rammed his hand through the rent in the cushion where the hair stuffing was coming out. But he had not been permitted the reins, so he could not be sure if they were tied together with a piece of old suspender or not; and if that was Old Sorrel, he certainly had powers of speed hitherto unsuspected.

Witchcraft? Ay! Had not he, the little doctor, heard ghostly hoof-beats alongside all the way? It had been nerve-racking. Sometimes he had thought it might just be a cow pony, but he could not be sure; and when he had been tossed profanely and with no dignity into the house of one White, homesteader, with the enigmatical words, "There, damn ye, Doc! I reckon ye got a move on once in your life, anyway," the voice had sounded uncannily like that of one Jim Munson, cowpuncher; but that was doubtless a hallucination of his, brought about by the unusualness of the night's adventures.

"You have worked yourself into a high fever, Miss Williston, that's what you've done," he said, with professional mournfulness.

"I know it," she smiled, wanly. "I couldn't help it. I'm sorry."

Gordon drew up a chair and sat down by her, saying with grave kindness, "You are fretting. We must not let you. I am going to stay with you all night and shoo the goblins away."

"You are kind," said Mary, gratefully. "May I tell you when they come? If some one speaks to me, they go away."

"Indeed you may, dear child," he exclaimed heartily. He had been half joking when he spoke of keeping things away. He now perceived that these things were more serious than he knew.

The doctor administered medicine to reduce the fever, dressed the wounded arm, with Gordon's ready assistance, and then called in Mother White to prepare the bed for his patient; but he paused nonplussed before the weight of entreaty in Mary's eyes and voice.

"Please don't," she cried out in actual terror. "Oh, Mr. Gordon, don't let him! I see such awful things when I lie down. Please! Please! And Mr. Langford said I might sit up till he came. Mr. Gordon, you will not let him put me to bed, will you?"

"I think it will be better to let her have her way, Lockhart," said Gordon, in a low voice.

"Mebbe it would, Dick," said the doctor, with surprising meekness.

"I'll stay all night and I'll take good care of her, Lockhart. There's Mother White beckoning to supper. You'll eat before you go? No, I won't take any supper now, thank you, mother, I will stay with Mary."

And he did stay with her all through the long watches of that long night. He never closed his eyes in sleep. Sometimes Mary would drop off into uneasy slumber—always of short duration. When she awakened suddenly in wide-eyed fright, he soothed her with all tenderness. Sometimes when he thought she was sleeping she would clutch his arm desperately and cry out that there was someone behind the big cottonwood. Again it would be to ask him in a terrified whisper if he did not hear hoof-beats, galloping, galloping, galloping, and begged him to listen. He could always quiet her, and she tried hard to keep from wandering; but after a short, broken rest, she would cry out again in endless repetition of the terrors of that awful night.

Mrs. White and several of her small progeny breathed hard in an adjoining room. A lamp burned dimly on the table. It grew late—12 o'clock and after. At last she rested. She passed from light, broken slumber to deep sleep without crying out and thus awakening herself. Gordon was tired and sad. Now that the flush of fever was gone, he saw how white and miserable she really looked. The circles under her eyes were so dark they were like bruises. The mantle of his misfortune was spreading to bring others besides himself into its somber folds.

The men were coming back. But they were coming quietly, in grim silence. He dared not awaken Mary for the news he knew they must carry. He stepped noiselessly to the door to warn them to a yet greater stillness, and met Langford on the threshold.

The two surveyed each other gravely with clasped hands.

"You tell her, Dick. I—I can't," said Langford. His big shoulders drooped as under a heavy burden.

"Must I?" asked Gordon.

"Dick, I—I can't," said Langford, brokenly. "Don't you see?—if I had been just a minute sooner—and I promised."

"Yes, I see, Paul," said Gordon, quietly. "I will tell her."

"You need not," said a sweet, clear voice from across the room. "I know. I heard. I think I knew all the time—but you were all so good to make me hope. Don't worry about me any more, dear friends. I am all right now. It is much better to know. I hope they didn't hang him. You think they shot him, don't you?"

"Little girl, little girl," cried Langford, on his knees beside her, "It is not that! It is only that we have not found him. But no news is good news. That we have found no trace proves that they have to guard him well because he is alive. We are going on a new tack tomorrow. Believe me, little girl, and go to bed now, won't you, and rest"

"Yes," she said, wearily, as one in whom no hope was left, "I will go. I will mind—the Boss."

As he laid her gently on the bed, while Mrs. White, aroused from sleep fluttered aimlessly and drowsily about, he whispered, his breath caressing her cheek:

"You will go to sleep right away, won't you?"

"I will try. You are the Boss."

(To be Continued.)

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