The Honorable Senator Sagebrush

By FRANCIS LYNDE

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[CONTINUED.]

CHAPTER VII.

A BATTLE OF L'OUTRANCE.

BLOUNT had been halting between two opinions. The fighting blood in him prompted him to stay and set up the standard of honesty and fair dealing in the Blount name, to gather a few men of like convictions around him and to enter the political conflict at the head of a movement designed at once and forever to abolish machine dictatorship in his native state.

But, on the other hand, the claims of blood could not be altogether ignored. The campaign for political cleanliness would inevitably involve his father, would, if successful, defeat and disgrace him. Clearly it was the part of filial duty to hesitate before he should set his hand to this particular plow of reform. Would it not be better for him to drop out quietly, leaving the political housecleaning for some one who would not have to pay such a costly price for the leadership?

Thus the two promptings clamored each for its hearing. But, after all, it was chance and the swift current of the occasion that decided for him and swept him along into the vortex of action.

Before he had gone ten steps toward Gantry's office some one in the throng of debarking overland passengers called his name. When he turned he was facing a white haired old gentleman with a scholarly face and an irascible twist to his thin lips, a man and a straight figured maiden with level eyes and a face in which the inherited traits were softened into lines of thoughtful firmness and serenity.

"WHY, BLESS MY SOUL, OF ALL THE LUCKY THINGS!"

"Why, bless my soul, of all the lucky things!" ejaculated the young man, who but an instant before had been halting between two opinions. "You don't mean to tell me that this is the west to which you said you were coming, Patricia?"

"It is, and you're to blame, young man," snapped the father of the peerless maid. "If you've been telling me fibs about those megalosauridae which you said could be dug out of your sagebrush hills you'll pay our fare back home again—understand? Now show us to the best hotel in this mushroom city of yours, and do it quickly."

Having a definite thing to do, Blount forgot his problem and bestirred himself hospitably.

Though it was only three squares to the Inter-Mountain, he chartered the best looking auto he could find in the hack rank, put his charges into it and went with them to the hotel, thereby killing two things which might have had an important bearing on the temporarily forgotten problem.

If he had gone directly to the office of the traffic manager on the second floor of the station building he could hardly have missed meeting a tall, full faced man coming out of Gantry's private room, and he might have overheard the visitor's parting word to Gantry: "Oh, yes; he fell for it all right. If you'd seen his face when Lackner and I came away you'd have said there were battle, murder and sudden death in it for somebody."

"But, see here, Bradbury," Gantry held his visitor to say, "it wasn't in the game that you were to fill him up with a lot of lies. I won't stand for that, you know. He is too good a fellow and too good a friend of mine."

It was at this conjuncture that Blount, if he had been present and invisible, would have seen a sour smile wrinkle upon the full face of the club gossip.

"It wasn't necessary. If he or the senator wanted to sue us for libel we could prove every word that was said. And it got him—got him right in the solar plexus. If you don't see some fireworks within the next few days I miss my guess and lose my ante."

On the other hand, if Evan had lingered a few minutes longer on the station platform he would have marked Vice President McVickar crossing to the arriage stand, followed by the private car porter bearing impedimenta. At the carriage rank the vice president climbed heavily into the senator's roadster, which seemed to have been arranged for in advance, and was whirled stormily up to the Inter-Mountain, where he traced his illegible name in the great guest book two minutes after Blount, still anxious for the comfort of Professor Anners and the serene eyed maid, had gone up in the elevator with them to see that the rooms to which they had been assigned were all that they should be.

Coming down a few minutes later to give the several luggage checks to the hotel porter, Blount missed another incident which might have sent him back suddenly to his problem and its unsettled condition. When Mr. McVickar turned away from the clerk's desk it was to shake hands perfunctorily with the owner of the fast roadster.

"Well, senator," he said, with a certain dogged emphasis, "I'm here. Let's find a place where we can flail it out." And together they entered an elevator, which, as chance would have it, passed, in ascending, the car in which the younger Blount was coming down.

It was to the senator's suit that the two opposing field commanders made their way when their car reached the fourth floor. In the senator's sitting room McVickar dragged a chair over to one of the windows which commanded a view of the Lost River mountains and dropped into it massively.

"I suppose we may cut out the preliminaries and come to the point at once," he began. "Ackerton wired me that you had definitely announced your son as a candidate for the attorney generalship. Have you?"

The senator was opening a box of cigars, and his reply savored of good natured irony.

"The primaries do the nominating in this state, Hardwick. Didn't you know that?" he asked mildly.

"See here, Blount, I've come 3,000 miles to thrash this thing out with you, and I'm not in the humor to spar for an opening. Do you mean to run your son or not? That is a plain question, and I'd like a plain answer."

"I told you two weeks ago what I meant to do, McVickar, but you wouldn't believe me. I'll say it again if you want to hear it."

"And I told you two weeks ago that we couldn't stand for it; that you might name your own price for an alternative."

"Yes, and I told you my price, if you happen to remember."

"I know. You said you wanted us to turn everything over to the reformers and take our chances on a clean administration. Naturally we are not going to do any such utopian thing. What I want to know now is what it is going to cost us to get your consent to do the practical and possible thing."

"Want to buy me outright this time, do you?" said the boss, still smiling gently.

"We"—McVickar was going to say, "we bought you before," but he changed it to a less offensive form—"We have had no difficulty in arriving at some sensible and practical conclusions in the past, Blount, and we shouldn't have now. We can't let you have your son for attorney general. That's out of the question. If you put your son in as public prosecutor you can have but one object in view—you mean to squeeze us till the blood runs. We're willing to discount that object before the fact."

"So you have said before a number of times and in a number of different ways," was the mild counter suggestion.

"I shan't say it many more times, David. You're pushing me too far."

"What will you say then?"

"Just this—if you won't meet me halfway, if you insist upon a fight, I'll fight you with any weapons I can get hold of."

"You've said that in other campaigns, Hardwick, and in the end you've always been like the possum that offered to come down out of the tree if the man wouldn't shoot."

"I'll hand you another proverb to go with that one," snapped the man in the chair by the window. "The pitcher that goes often to the well is sure to be broken at last. You've got a joint in your armor now, Blount. You've always been able to laugh at publicity before. Can you stand it now?"

"I reckon I'll have to stand it if you buy up a few newspapers, as you usually do," was the half quizzical reply, then for an added flick of the whip, "You and your folks can't paint me much blacker than you have always painted me, Hardwick."

"Maybe not, but this time we're going to give you a chance to start a few libel suits—if you think you can afford to appear in the courts. We've got all the evidence in black and white. We might possibly make your own state too hot to hold you. Have you thought of that?"

"Go ahead and try it," was the laconic response.

"But that isn't all," the man in the window chair went on remorselessly. "Your fellow citizens here know you for exactly what you are, Blount. You rule them with a rod of iron, but that rule can be broken. When it is broken you'll be looked upon as a criminal. In our last talk together you had something to say to me about our not keeping up with the change in public sentiment. It has changed—changed so far that it is coming to demand the punishment of the great offenders as well as the jailing of the little ones. If we want to push this fight hard enough it is not impossible that you may find yourself a broken man at the end of it, David."

"I'm taking all the chances," was the even toned rejoinder.

"But there is one chance I am sure you haven't considered—this son of yours! I know as much about him as you do—more, perhaps, for I have taken more pains to keep tab on him for the past few years than you have. He is clean and straight, Blount—a son for any man to be proud of. If that is the real reason why we are afraid to have him instructing the grand juries of this state it is also your best reason for keeping the past decently under cover. What will you say to him when the newspapers open up on you? And what will he say to you? Had you thought of that?"

For the first time since the beginning of the one sided conference the senator laid his cigar aside and sat thoughtfully tugging at the drooping mustaches.

"You'd set the house afire over my head, would you, Hardwick?" he queried, with the gray eyes lighting threateningly; then: "The last time we talked you posted your defi; now I'll post mine. You go ahead and do your worst. The boy and I will try to see that you don't have all the fun. I won't say that you mightn't turn him if you went at it right. But you won't go at it right, and as matters stand now—well, blood is thicker than water, and if you hit me you hit him. And I reckon between us we'll manage to give you as good as you send. That's all," rising to lean heavily upon the table, "all but one thing. You fight fair, Hardwick. Say anything you like about me, but if that boy has anything in his past that I don't know about, that he wouldn't want to see published, you let it alone and keep your newspaper reporters off it."

"YOU'D SET THE HOUSE AFIRE OVER MY HEAD, WOULD YOU, HARDWICK?"

The vice president laughed. He was of those who regain equanimity in exact proportion as an opponent loses it.

"You needn't let the boy's record trouble you," he averred. "It's as clean as a hound's tooth. That is one of the things I'm banking on, David. I'm going to have that young fellow fighting on our side before we're through."

At this the gray eyes under the penthouse brows flamed fiercely, and the senator took the two strides needful to place him before the man in the chair.

"Don't you do that, McVickar. I give you fair warning!" he said, his deep toned voice rumbling like the bur of grinding wheels. "There's only one way you could do it"—

The vice president stood up and put on his hat. "And you'll take precious good care that I don't get a chance to try that way, you were going to say. All right, David. You tell me to do my worst, and I'll hand that back to you too. You do the same, and we'll see who comes out ahead."

It was some five minutes later when the vice president had made his leisurely way down to the lobby. The electric lights blazed out, and the great gathering place was beginning to take on its evening air of stir and activity. Mr. McVickar pushed his way to the desk, and a row of lately arrived guests waited when he asked his question.

"Where will I be most likely to find Mr. Evan Blount at this time of day?" was the question he wished to have answered, and the obliging clerk made the line wait still longer while he summoned a bellboy and sent him scurrying across to one of the writing tables.

"This is Mr. Evan Blount," he said to the railroad magnate, indicating the young man who came up with the bellboy. "Mr. Blount, this is Mr. Hardwick McVickar, first vice president of the Transcontinental Railway company."

There was no trace of the recent battle in Mr. McVickar's voice or manner when he turned and shook hands cordially with the son of the man who had defied him.

"Your father and I were just holding a little conference over your future prospects, Mr. Blount," he said, going straight to his point. "Suppose you come down to the car with me for a little private talk on the legal situation. I'm not sure but we shall wish to retain you in a cause that is coming up in September. Gantry tells me that you are pretty well up in corporation law. Can you spare me a half hour or so?"

Evan Blount glanced at his watch. Patricia had told him that she and her father would dine in the cafe at 7 and that there would be room at their table for him and for his father, if the ex-senator would so far honor a poor college professor. There was an hour to spare, and if the vice president of the Transcontinental company were not the king he was at least a great man whose invitation was in some sense a command.

It was at the precise moment when the butterfly doors of the lobby entrance were winging to their closing behind Mr. McVickar and his quarry that the house telephone called the registry clerk. A sad faced tourist who was waiting, pen in hand, for his room assignment heard only the answer to the question which came over the wires from one of the upper floors.

"No, senator," the clerk was saying; "he has just this moment gone out—with Mr. McVickar! Could I overtake him? I'll try. But I don't know where they were going. I'll send a boy right away, though."

CHAPTER VIII.

THE QUEEN'S GAMBIT.

WHEN the news went out to the dwellers in the sagebrush hills that Boss David's son had accepted a place on the railroad's legal staff the first wave of astoundment was followed by many guesses as to what young Blount's action portended.

The Plainsman, the principal daily and the leading organ of the reformers, was the first to find an ulterior motive in Evan Blount's appointment and its acceptance. The editor took a half column in which to point out in emphatic and vigorous phrase the danger that threatened the commonwealth in this very evident coalition of the railroad and the machine.

The Lost River Miner, on the other hand, was unwilling to believe that the younger Blount was acting altogether in his father's interest in taking the place provided for him by the railway. Hints there were in this editor's comment of a disagreement between father and son, of differences of opinion which might later on lead to a pitched battle.

The Daily Capital, however—the railroad organ—covertly insinuated that nothing for nothing was the accepted rule in politics; that if the railroad had made a place for the son it was only a justifiable deduction that the father was not as inimical to the railroad interest as the opposition press was willing to have the public believe.

Elsewhere in the state press comment was divided as the molders of public opinion happened to read party loss or gain in the appointment of the new legal department head. But on the whole the senator's son was given the benefit of the doubt and a chance to prove up. Time would tell.

Of the interview between the father and son, in which Evan had announced his intention of accepting a place under McVickar, nothing was said in the newspapers, for the very good reason that no reporter was present.

If the young man had been prepared for a storm of opposition he was disappointed. The interview took place in the evening of the day Mr. McVickar's private car was attached to eastbound train No. 102, and the place was the sitting room of the senator's private suit. Blount had meant to give some of the ethical reasons for taking the step which would put such a summary end to the attorney generalship scheme. But when the time came and he had brusquely declared his purpose of accepting the railroad appointment he did not find it entirely easy to say the other things.

"So McVickar talked you over?" was the father's gentle comment. "It's all right, son. You're a man grown, and I reckon you know best what you want to do. If it puts us on opposite sides of the political creek we won't let that roil the water any more than it has to, will we?"

To such a mild mannered surrender or apparent surrender the purely filial emotions could do no less than to respond heartily.

"We mustn't let it," was the quick reply, but after that he added: "I feel that I ought to make some explanations, though. I've been going about with my eyes and ears open, and I must confess that the political field has been made to appear most unattractive to me. From what I can learn the political situation in this state seems to be very frankly controlled upon the principle of bargain and sale. I couldn't go into anything like that and keep my self respect."

"No, of course you couldn't, son, so you just took a place where you could earn good clean money in your profession. I don't blame you."

Blount was vaguely perturbed. He could not help feeling that his father was keeping something back.

"You think there will be more or less political work in my job with the railroad?" he asked, determined to get at the submerged facts, if there were any.

"Oh, I don't know. McVickar has hired you to do a lawyer's work, and I guess that is what he will expect you to do, isn't it?"

Mr. McVickar had not defined the duties of the new assistant counselship very clearly. But there was a strong inference running through all that was said to the effect that the headship of the legal department would carry with it some political responsibilities.

At the moment Blount had been rather glad that such was the case. The vice president had convinced him very thoroughly of the justice of the railroad company's contention—that the laws of the state, if rigidly administered, amounted to a practical confiscation of the company's property.

While Mr. McVickar was talking Blount had rather hoped that his new position would give him opportunities to place the railroad's point of view fairly before the people of the state, and to do this he knew that he would have to enter the campaign as a political worker. Surely his father must know this, and he went boldly upon the assumption that his father did know it.

"I am to be chief of the legal department on this division, and as such it will, of course, be necessary for me to defend my client in court and out of court," he said finally. "And I mean to do it."

"Of course you do; you've got to be honest with yourself—and with McVickar. I don't mind telling you, son, that I am squarely on the other side this time, and I had hoped you were going to be. But if you're not, why, that's the end of it. We won't quarrel about it."

Now, this was not at all the paternal attitude which the young man had prefigured. But before anything more could be said Mrs. Blount came in to remind them both that they had a dinner appointment with Professor Anners and his daughter and that there was barely time to dress for it.

It was late that night, several hours after the informal little dinner for five in the Inter-Mountain cafe, when the senator had himself lifted from the lobby to the fourth floor and made his way to the door of his own apartments. As was her custom, his wife was waiting up for him.

"Did you find out anything more?" she asked without looking up from the tiny embroidery frame which seemed to be her constant companion at home or elsewhere.

"Not very much. McVickar has fixed things to suit himself. Evan's law office position is to be pretty largely nominal, I guess, and Gantry's crowd is to see to it that he doesn't get to know too much, which means that the bribery is not to be done by the legal department in this campaign."

"But they can't keep him from finding out about it," she protested.

"They are going to try mighty hard anyway. Evan wants to believe that everything is on the high moral plane, and when a man wants to believe a thing it's pretty easy to fool him. It'll be a winning card to them if they can send the boy out to talk convincingly about the cleanliness of the company's campaign. That sort of talk, handed out as Evan can do it, if he is convinced of the truth of what he is saying, will capture the honest ranchman every time."

"We must get him back," she said. "Have you thought of any plan?"

"No."

She smiled. "I have a plan. He may have to take a regular course of treatment, and it may make him very ill. Would you mind that?"

David Blount leaned back in his chair and regarded her through half closed eyelids.

"I don't want to see the boy suffer any more than he has to," he objected.

"Neither do I," was the quick agreement; then, with no apparent relevance, "What do you think of Miss Anners?"

The senator sat up, and the slow smile wrinkled humorously at the corners of his eyes. "I haven't thought much about her. She's the kind you can't get near enough to think about, isn't she?"

"She is a young woman with a very bright mind and a very high purpose," was the little lady's summing up of Patricia. "But she isn't altogether a Boston iceberg. She thinks she is in love with her career; but, really, I think she is very much in love with Evan. If we could win her over to our side"—

This time the senator's smile broadened into a laugh.

"You are away yonder out of my depth now, little woman," he chuckled. "Does your course of treatment for the boy include large doses of the young woman administered frequently?"

"Oh, no," was the instant reply. "I was only wondering if it wouldn't be well to enlist her sympathies."

"Why not—if you think best?"

"Will you give me carte blanche to do as I please?" asked the small intriguer.

"Why not?" said the senator again. "You can always outfigure me two to one when it comes to real politics. You have made a fine art of it, Honoria."

"You deal with people in the mass, David, and no one can do it better. I deal with the individual. That is all the difference. When do the Annerses go up to the fossil fields?"

"I don't know—any time when you will invite them to make Wartrace Hall their headquarters, I guess."

"Then I think it will be tomorrow," said the confident mistress of policies. "It won't do to let Evan see too much of the young woman until after his course of treatment has been begun. Shall we make it tomorrow? And will you telephone Dawkins to bring down the big car? I think Miss Patricia Anners will stand a little impressing. She is very democratic—in theory."

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

Reaches Century Mark.

Nyack, March 15.—Charles Weidner, of Sparkill, near here, attained is 100th birthday today. He is a native of Germany and came to America in 1845. His mind is clear, his memory almost unimpaired and he sees well with one eye, the other having been destroyed in a mine more than 60 years ago.

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