

Ten Years' Trial

By Gen. CHARLES KING

lie lay before the eyes of Eric Langdon. It was one to thrill and delight even an unprofessional eye, but this was the eye of a practiced soldier, to whom every detail was familiar, a soldier who many a time had taken active and up to within three months prominent part in similar pageants. Now it was the will of the law that he should be cut off from further participation in scenes of the kind. By the stern edict of a court martial duly confirmed by the order of the president himself Langdon stood summarily dismissed from the military service of the United States.

It was a sad, sad story. It has had its parallels, it has had its counterparts. There was no finer young soldier in the battalion of cadets, and great were the prophecies of class mates—indeed of instructors—when Langdon's name came up for discussion. The corps rose up and cheered him on graduation day when a great public official in handling the handsome cadet captain his diploma took occasion to say that a young gentleman who could ride and drill as he could ought to be most welcome to the finest regiment in creation, and a very pretty girl sitting close to Senator Spotts, a ponderous member of the board of visitors, whispered to that veteran beau:



Sent Torrance crashing over the table.

"Now, there's a man I should like to know."

And so it happened that before the graduating class were fairly out of cadet uniform and into their first "civils" a messenger in the shape of the official orderly of the commandant of cadets came to Eric Langdon to "invite" his presence at the quarters of that high official, and there he was presented anew to the distinguished senator to whom he, in company with his classmates, had already made the orthodox and conventional homage required of the graduating cadet to the board of visitors, and now the senator, all smiling, led forward an extremely pretty and vivacious damsel. "Mr. Langdon," said he, "this young lady has fallen in love with the corps in general and your horsemanship in particular, and I know you will be delighted to reciprocate."

It was an odd moment for Langdon. He would have been at a loss to know what to do or say had not the girl herself, with merry words and laughter, relieved the situation of its embarrassment.

That was the beginning. They met frequently that summer. They parted in the fall, when he went to his regiment, he utterly infatuated, she delighted, half regretful. She couldn't think of marrying in the army, she said. She admired it and him of all things, but that was all. Twice in that first year he managed to get leave and to go to her and plead again. He had some little money beyond his pay. He felt that he could support her in comfort, but he little dreamed of the scope of her desires. He was kept blind to the fact that she had hopes and ambitions far beyond his. Then one day the sudden death of a senator shocked the community, and Langdon, reading the news, never imagined the influence it was to have on his life. His letter of condolence to her brought an answer that was more than kind. Their marriage was sudden, but immensely "awful." She came with him to the regiment a few months, "stunning" everybody by the elegance of her toilet and the extravagance of her ideas. Then she declared she could not bear garrison life and pinned for Washington. She got him a detail on staff duty, and he would not go. His place, he said, for a few years at least must be with the regiment. She went without him, and presently he was bombarded with bills the payment of which swamped him—took his last cent. It mattered little, she said. Senator Spotts' only sister, his elder by several years, was to leave her every penny, and indeed in the hard times for him that followed more than once that he knew of and more than twice that he knew not of that sorely tried maiden came to his rescue with checks of startling size. Then there came rumors that the lovely if volatile Mrs. Langdon was flirting desperately at the capital, and one of the very best young "dandy" officers in the regiment was beginning to look haggard and shabby. She got him to sign notes far beyond his pay to meet her needs, promising that "Cousin Spotts" would meet the notes. They began to fall due just at that amiable lady was taken to her grave, and then the will was contested, the legal heirs won, and Mrs. Langdon had to begin parting with jewelry, not to meet these notes, but her own cravings. Then came more bills, more debts, more partings.

Such were three years of Eric Langdon's married life. The next and last was the worst. Striving all the time to stick to his duty and keep up appearances, he was wearing himself out in the vain hope that his military record for efficiency might offset the terrible stigma of these pressing debts. Now the creditors were becoming importunate and raising their complaints upon his colonel and the war department. No matter how or by whom contracted, the debts were to be his, that he was accountable for all. By the time he was 27 and finishing his fourth year of service with the regiment Eric Langdon looked like the patriarch of the subalterns, with his lining face and sad dark eyes, and when during the next year the news came that his wretched helpmate—save the mark—had breathed her last in a "retreat" everybody said, "Blessed relief."

And yet, poor lad, he mourned her and went and wept at her grave. Then he came back to the regiment to face curious glances and those thousand debts. Among the junior officers there were a few brave boys like Woodrow and Rodney May who strove to cheer and sustain him. But Torrance, who had "struck it rich" at Fortress Monroe and married an insane young woman of much wealth, was intolerant of a fellow at his wife's end for money, and there was a captain in the garrison who developed into one of the garrison's persecutors. This was Felix Nathan. Nobody in 1870 could have traced Nathan's antecedents. He shunned the topic himself and left to others the comforting theory that they were in some way connected with the pawnshop. He had been commissioned in the infantry at the instance of the Hon. Mr. Stelmeyer, who represented in congress a wealthy if inconspicuous district in New York. He found a few months' sojourn in a fighting regiment on the far frontier so utterly to his dislike—the mere mention of Indians would turn him livid long years after—that when the army was reorganized he literally bought a transfer into the artillery, where the splendor of his attire and a certain Germanic cast of feature won him the title of "the Baron" or sometimes Herr von Fertigen Kleider. Certain pecuniary loans with which he favored some of his new found comrades gave him at first a glamorous air of generosity. The remorse-

less rigor with which full payment was later exacted—at most inconvenient times and conspicuous places—removed the glamour.

But the artillery works and polishes. Nathan had to work, drill and study. He was no fool. He labored with his dancing master and speedily shone in both the ballroom and in ballistics. They had sent him to Fortress Monroe in hopes of damping his desire to remain in the artillery, and he mastered the course with comparative ease. They "put up jobs" at his expense at mess by the introduction of sausage and sparrows in undue proportion, and Nathan said he feared they didn't know the good from the bad, sent "home," he said, for dainties and amazed them with the quality and quantity of sausages shipped to him.

And then in course of time he cut in and won the heiress of the season, and that marriage made him. His wife had most influential connections. They frequently spent summers at Bar Harbor or Newport. They had the most sumptuously furnished quarters in garrison and very "jewel" visitors made the time. They entertained lavishly, and so it came about that their social supremacy was established, not without protest, but it was no "kicking against the pricks."

All the same, Nathan was mean. He lavished his cigars and champagne on certain of his callers and treated with cold courtesy the others. His wife's charm, if she had any, in the regiment were the two or three whose gowns sometimes nearly matched her own. They distinctly "put on airs" over their fellows, and for a time a weakling of a post commander permitted it, but that was before Melville's day, and Melville was a regimental adjutant.

One thing Nathan hated Langdon for was the fact that the latter could "take the battery" and make it do anything. He was a consummate drillmaster and handler of men. Things never went so well as when the captain stepped aside and the lieutenant took command. Regimental critics twitted Nathan with the fact, and it made him furious. If anything could have helped Langdon, it would have been service under some other commander. There were three other captains who would have been glad of his services, but Nathan refused to allow the exchange. Time and again there were sharp disagreements between them, and three when Langdon had to appeal the decision went in his favor.

By this time the battery had been made a part of the great western squadron on the Pawnee, where two squadrons of mounted batteries formed the main features of the command. A veteran dragoon officer was at the head of affairs, a man with much commonsense and little sympathy, and the way he "baited in," as the boys said, to polish up the entire military establishment was a caution. The Nathans gave a sumptuous dinner in his honor about the first thing, and the colonel pitched into Nathan with 48 hours all along of the condition of his horses, to the intense joy of the uninitiated, because this was the last thing that dinner was supposed to bring about. Nathan accepted the criticism and said he could not help himself, his lieutenants were so careless. It was at this time that renewed complaints came to headquarters concerning the nonpayment of those notes. Poor Langdon was setting aside a portion of his meager stipend and sending it each month to "protect" creditors, but the others kept up the row, and it must be admitted that along about this stage of the game in his grief and despair Langdon had sought solace at times in whisky. All this Nathan reported to his chief when asked about the financial straits of his subaltern. Had old "Cut of Nine Tails," the post commander, consulted the veteran major, who had just recently arrived and assumed command of the battery, he would have heard a different tale, for Melville knew a soldier and a gentleman when he saw one, and his sorrow for Langdon was expressed in something deeper than words. He made him come to his quarters and sat with him on an evening or two. His wife, his children and a very interesting niece—all seemed to take a hand in Langdon's entertainment, but it lasted only a week or so, for matters were hastening to a climax. The colonel had sent for the young officer, roughly told him that the army was no place for men as deeply involved as he, went for men as "neglected duties," frequent lapses over liquor, all of which was grievous exaggeration, got honestly believed by him to be true, and poor Langdon came jawy stung, stunned and hopeless.

That night, very late, after every eye but the star of had retired, a fire broke out in the barracks, and while the men were at work with buckets and ladders, the entire command was at arms. It was observed by more than one observer that Langdon was perceptibly under the influence of liquor. Sitting upright and undisturbed over his tobacco, he had probably taken to the bottle.

"Torrance," said a clerk, Melville's, "I had a whole lot of pure methylated alcohol devoted to riding." Melville added Langdon to take her out, and Captain Nathan, Mr. Torrance and two or three of their set, viewing the performance from afar, made comments thereon. In presence of young fellows like May, who liked Langdon more than a little, and it all got straight to the clubhouse. He was just before the bar, and a number of officers were seated on the veranda, chatting, smoking and sipping cooling drinks. Torrance had been chief offender, and him he hated.

"Mr. Torrance," said Langdon, his eyes ablaze, his lips very white, "you are reported to have said thus and so this afternoon."

"I did," said Torrance, rising from his chair. "What have you to say about it?"

"That" was the only reply as a stinging blow sent Torrance crashing over the table.

The instant action of officers present stopped further hostilities. Nathan sent Langdon to his quarters in arrest and his company clerk to take charges and specifications ten pages drawn out were preferred. No plea was listened to. A court was ordered in the season, and it had no alternative. On a still October evening the order that day received from Washington, and next morning when the department inspector had them all out for an early review he, without whom reviews seemed hardly complete, looked sadly on from a far corner, a practically ruined man.

But there were friends to go with him to the station after his brief interview with Melville—noble-hearted Melville that day. May and Woodrow and others of the boys, besides some scores of "boys in blue" who had slipped away and were bent on giving their pet lieutenant a parting cheer, and there was an incident that became historic.

The railway station was like all far western stations of those days, an ordinary brown frame building with projecting roof overhanging the platform and a broad, open space at the table end, and here it was, in the presence of half a dozen of the officers, a swarm of citizens and "boys in blue" off duty, the memorable encounter occurred. The instant Captain Nathan stepped from his handsome carriage, with the whistle of the express already sounding far down the Pawnee, he found himself confronted by Langdon, whose dark features took on no flush of the wrath that consumed him, but whose erect and slender form, patent in its athletic proportions even through the simple civilian suit he wore, quivered from head to foot. It was vain for Nathan to dodge. The words came like the sting of a whiplash:

"You are no longer my superior officer, Nathan, and there's only a moment to say my say. Your language at the club this morning has been told me. Now hear my reply. Today we stand, in the pride of your wealth and power, I with the world to begin again. More than to any man in the regiment I owe my troubles to you. Yet I wouldn't exchange my soldier record for yours if reinstatement were offered me this minute. Not I'm not to be intimidated by any gesture. All I have to say is that if God spares my life before ten years pass our places shall be reversed—you will be at the bottom, I at the top. Now you may go."

CHAPTER II.

Military matters at the great cavalry and artillery post on the Pawnee were not altogether harmonious during the fall and winter following Eric Langdon's departure. There were some things and many soldiers Captain Nathan's money could not buy, and a ruler shock and landing awakening to his true position this platoon battery man could not well have had than came to him in that scene at the station. He had gone thither to meet and escort to his quarters two prominent and wealthy railway officials from the distant east, one of them a relative of his wife. He had counted on their coming to make a profound impression in the big garrison, and his arrangements for their entertainment included two days of grand shooting, a riding party, some special drills and three or four elaborate dinners, with dancing to follow in the evening. His first impression on catching sight of the crowd at the station was one of complacency—the officers and men were gathered there to get an early glimpse of his distinguished guests. It never occurred to him that Langdon would be going away on that train, still less that any member of the garrison should go to bid him farewell and goodspeed. He figured that Langdon would have to hang about the station or two, waiting up his affairs. He had made inquiries as to the amount in which Langdon was indebted to the mess and to the establishment still maintained at the edge of the reservation by the descendants of an old time post trader. When, therefore, he stepped from his stylish carriage as the footman sprang down and opened the door, he was startled and shocked by the apparition of Langdon himself and stunned speechless by that white denunciation. Glancing about him, he saw that half a hundred soldiers, with a sprinkling of civilians, and not one face that he recognized anything but sympathy for Langdon and dislike for himself. The rush of the incoming train released him from the humiliation of his position, as the men swarmed about Langdon, eager to clasp his hand, while the captain, friendless and alone, hastened to the rear sleeper to meet the magnates. To keep them to his carriage he was compelled to return through a throng of his own men just as the train began to move, and a stentor of a sergeant shouted, "Three cheers for Lieutenant Langdon, the best officer of Battery D!" whereat, with lusty lungs and swinging caps, the soldiers shouted again and again until the train slipped away round the bend under the bluff, and not one of their number had so much as a look, much less a salute, for

the captain. It was no time to resort to discipline then. "I'll fix 'em for this when I get 'em back to barracks," he swore to himself, but the sorest hearted, bitterest man to return that morning from the railway to the post was he who rolled homeward in his cushioned chariot, with liveried retainers on the box and untold wealth beside him.

It chafed him, too, that Woodrow, May and other young officers should gallup past him on the homeward way without so much as a peep at his imposing companions or a touch of the cap to him. The magnates were vastly interested in the dashing riding of the party and in May's beautiful thought and asked questions concerning them which only added to Nathan's keen sense of humiliation and defeat. He couldn't reach May, for that young gentleman was Melville's adjutant and kept his mount in his own little stable in rear of the bachelor quarters. But Woodrow was poor and rode a battery saddle horse, and that evening at stables the captain sent for him and, with cutting emphasis, informed him that the order permitting officers on temporary duty with the light batteries to use a public horse applied only to occasions of drill, parade or prescribed exercise. "No officer in my battery, sir," he concluded, "can be permitted to use a horse to scatter dirt in the faces of my guests and to race impudently past the battery commander without a salutation of any kind." Woodrow stood at attention, saluted, waited a moment and said, "Anything further, sir?" to which Nathan responded, "That's all, sir." And then as, with another punctilious salute, the subaltern was about to turn away the idea that had been uppermost, the sting and humiliation of the morning clamored for expression, forced from Nathan the very words Woodrow was longing to hear and that he lost no time in rushing off delightedly to tell to his fellows at the club: "There is one mat-



Three cheers for Lieutenant Langdon.

"Three cheers for Lieutenant Langdon," you need to be warned about and one that, should it come to the ears of the commanding officer, may get you into a court martial, your prominence in that riotous, even mutinous, demonstration at the depot this morning. When officers and men conspire to cheer a person dismissed in disgrace from the army, they attack the administration and are guilty of gross insubordination. I shall not report the occurrence myself because of my known antagonism to such characters as Mr. Langdon, but you'll be most fortunate if the colonel does not hear of it."

[TO BE CONTINUED.]

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