

Bindloss Harold

The Impostor



Harold Bindloss

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CHAPTER I – RANCHER WITHAM

It was a bitter night, for although there was no snow as yet, the frost had bound the prairie in its iron grip, when Rancher Witham stood shivering in a little Canadian settlement in the great, lonely land which runs north from the American frontier to Athabasca. There was no blink of starlight in the murky sky, and a stinging wind that came up out of the great waste of grass moaned about the frame houses clustering beside the trail that led south over the limited levels to the railroad and civilization. It chilled Witham through his somewhat tattered furs, and he strode up and down, glancing expectantly into the darkness, and then across the unpaved street, where the ruts were ploughed a foot deep in the prairie sod, towards the warm, red glow from the windows of the wooden hotel. He knew that the rest of the outlying farmers and ranchers who had ridden in for their letters were sitting snug about the stove, but it was customary for all who sought shelter there to pay for their share of the six o'clock supper, and the half-dollar Witham had then in his pocket was required for other purposes.

He had also retained through all his struggles a measure of his pride, and because of it strode up and down buffeted by the blasts until a beat of horse-hoofs came out of the darkness and was followed by a rattle of wheels. It grew steadily louder, a blinking ray of brightness flickered across the frame houses, and presently dark figures were silhouetted against the light on the hotel veranda as a lurching wagon drew up beneath it. Two dusky objects, shapeless in their furs, sprang down, and one stumbled into the post office close by with a bag while the other man answered the questions hurled at him as he fumbled with stiffened fingers at the harness.

"Late? Well, you might be thankful you've got your mail at all," he said. "We had to go round by Willow Bluff, and didn't think we'd get through the ford. Ice an inch thick, anyway, and Charley talked that much he's not said anything since, even when the near horse put his foot into a badger hole."

Rude banter followed this, but Witham took no part in it. Hastening into the post office, he stood betraying his impatience by his very impassiveness while a sallow-faced woman tossed the letters out upon the counter. At last she took up two of them, and the man's fingers trembled a little as he stretched out his hand, when she said —

"That's all there are for you."

Witham recognized the writing on the envelopes, and it was with difficulty he held his eagerness in check, but other men were waiting for his place, and he went out and crossed the street to the hotel where there was light to read by. As he entered it a girl, bustling about a long table in the big stove-warmed room, turned with a little smile.

"It's only you!" she said. "Now I was figuring it was Lance Courthorne."

Witham, impatient as he was, stopped and laughed, for the hotel-keeper's daughter was tolerably well-favoured and a friend of his.

"And you're disappointed?" he said. "I haven't Lance's good looks, or his ready tongue."

The room was empty, for the guests were thronging about the post office then, and the girl's eyes twinkled as she drew back a pace and surveyed the man. There was nothing in his appearance that would have aroused a stranger's interest, or attracted more than a passing glance, and he stood before her in a very old fur coat, with a fur cap that was in keeping with it in his hand. His face had been bronzed almost to the colour of a Blackfoot Indian's by frost and wind and sun, and it was of English type from the crisp fair hair above the broad forehead to the somewhat solid chin. The mouth was hidden by the bronze-tinted moustache, and the eyes alone, were noticeable. They were grey,

and there was a steadiness in them which was almost unusual even in that country, where men look into long distances. For the rest, he was of average stature, and stood impassively straight, looking down upon the girl without either grace or awkwardness, while his hard brown hands, suggested, as his attire did, strenuous labour for a very small reward.

"Well," said the girl with Western frankness, "there's a kind of stamp on Lance that you haven't got. I figure he brought it with him from the old country. Still, one might take you for him if you stood with the light behind you, and you're not quite a bad-looking man. It's a kind of pity you're so solemn."

Witham smiled. "I don't fancy that's astonishing after losing two harvests in succession," he said. "You see, there's nobody back there in the old country to send remittances to me."

The girl nodded with quick sympathy. "Oh, yes. The times are bad," she said. "Well, you read your letters; I'm not going to worry you."

Witham sat down and opened the first envelope under the big lamp. It was from a land agent and mortgage-broker, and his face grew a trifle grimmer as he read, "In the present condition of the money market your request that we should carry you over is unreasonable, and we regret that unless you can extinguish at least half the loan we will be compelled to foreclose upon your holding."

There was a little more of it, but that was sufficient for Witham, who knew it meant disaster, and it was with the feeling of one clinging desperately to the last shred of hope he tore open the second envelope. The letter it held was from a friend he had made in a Western city, and once entertained for a month at his ranch, but the man had evidently sufficient difficulties of his own to contend with.

"Very sorry, but it can't be done," he wrote. "I'm loaded up with wheat nobody will buy, and couldn't raise five hundred dollars to lend any one just now,"

Witham sighed a little, but when he rose and slowly straightened himself nobody would have suspected he was looking ruin in the face. He had fought a slow, losing battle for six weary years, holding on doggedly though defeat appeared inevitable, and now when it had come he bore it impassively, for the struggle which, though he was scarcely twenty-six, had crushed all mirth and brightness out of his life, had given him endurance in place of them. Just then a man came bustling towards him, with the girl who bore a tray close behind.

"What are you doing with that coat on?" he said. "Get it off and sit down right there. The boys are about through with the mail and supper's ready,"

Witham glanced at the steaming dishes hungrily, for he had passed most of the day in the bitter frost, eating very little, and there was still a drive of twenty miles before him.

"It is time I was taking the trail," he said.

He was sensible of a pain in his left side, which, as other men have discovered, not infrequently follows enforced abstinence from food, but he remembered what he wanted the half-dollar in his pocket for. The hotel-keeper had possibly some notion of the state of affairs, for he laughed a little.

"You've got to sit down," he said. "Now, after the way you fixed me up when I stopped at your ranch, you don't figure I'd let you go before you had some supper with me."

Witham may have been unduly sensitive, but he shook his head. "You're very good, but it's a long ride, and I'm going now," he said. "Good-night, Nettie."

He turned as he spoke, with the swift decision that was habitual with him, and when he went out the girl glanced at her father reproachfully.

"You always get spoiling things when you put your hand in," she said. "Now that man's hungry, and I'd have fixed it so he'd have got his supper if you had left it to me."

The hotel-keeper laughed a little. "I'm kind of sorry for Witham because there's grit in him, and he's never had a show," he said. "Still, I figure he's not worth your going out gunning after, Nettie."

The girl said nothing, but there was a little flush in her face which had not been there before, when she busied herself with the dishes.

In the meanwhile Witham was harnessing two bronco horses to a very dilapidated wagon. They were vicious beasts, but he had bought them cheap from a man who had some difficulty in driving

them, while the wagon had been given him, when it was apparently useless, by a neighbour. The team had, however, already covered thirty miles that day, and started homewards at a steady trot without the playful kicking they usually indulged in. Here and there a man sprang clear of the rutted road, but Witham did not notice him or return his greeting. He was abstractedly watching the rude frame houses flit by, and wondering, while the pain in his side grew keener, when he would get his supper, for it happens not infrequently that the susceptibilities are dulled by a heavy blow, and the victim finds a distraction that is almost welcome in the endurance of a petty trouble.

Witham was very hungry, and weary alike in body and mind. The sun had not risen when he left his homestead, and he had passed the day under a nervous strain, hoping, although it seemed improbable, that the mail would bring him relief from his anxieties. Now he knew the worst he could bear it as he had borne the loss of two harvests, and the disaster which followed in the wake of the blizzard that killed off his stock; but it seemed unfair that he should endure cold and hunger too, and when one wheel sank in a rut and the jolt shook him in every stiffened limb, he broke out with a hoarse expletive. It was his first protest against the fate that was too strong for him, and almost as he made it he laughed.

"Pshaw! There's no use kicking against what has to be, and I've got to keep my head just now," he said.

There was no great comfort in the reflection, but it had sustained him before, and Witham's head was a somewhat exceptional one, though there was as a rule nothing in any way remarkable about his conversation, and he was apparently merely one of the many quietly-spoken, bronze-faced men who are even by their blunders building up a great future for the Canadian dominion. He accordingly drew his old rug tighter round him, and instinctively pulled his fur cap lower down when the lights of the settlement faded behind him and the creaking wagon swung out into the blackness of the prairie. It ran back league beyond league across three broad provinces, and the wind that came up out of the great emptiness emphasized its solitude. A man from the cities would have heard nothing but the creaking of the wagon and the drumming fall of hoofs, but Witham heard the grasses patter as they swayed beneath the bitter blasts stiff with frost, and the moan of swinging boughs in a far-off willow bluff. It was these things that guided him, for he had left the rutted trail, and here and there the swishen beneath the wheels told of taller grass, while the bluff ran black athwart the horizon when that had gone. Then twigs crackled beneath them as the horses picked their way amidst the shadowy trees stunted by a ceaseless struggle with the wind, and Witham shook the creeping drowsiness from him when they came out into the open again, for he knew it is not advisable for any man with work still to do to fall asleep under the frost of that country.

Still, he grew a trifle dazed as the miles went by, and because of it indulged in memories he had shaken off at other times. They were blurred recollections of the land he had left eight years ago, pictures of sheltered England, half-forgotten music, the voices of friends who no longer remembered him, and the smiles in a girl's bright eyes. Then he settled himself more firmly in the driving-seat, and with numbed fingers sought a tighter grip of the reins as the memory of the girl's soft answer to a question he had asked brought his callow ambitions back.

He was to hew his way to fortune in the West, and then come back for her, but the girl who had clung to him with wet cheeks when he left her had apparently grown tired of waiting, and Witham sent back her letters in return for a silver-printed card. That was six years ago, and now none of the dollars he had brought into the country remained to him. He realized, dispassionately and without egotism, that this was through no fault of his, for he knew that better men had been crushed and beaten.

It was, however, time he had done with these reflections, for while he sat half-dazed and more than half-frozen the miles had been flitting by, and now the team knew they were not very far from home. Little by little their pace increased, and Witham was almost astonished to see another bluff black against the night ahead of him. As usual in that country, the willows and birches crawled up the sides and just showed their heads above the sinuous crest of a river hollow. It was very dark when

the wagon lurched in among them, and it cost the man an effort to discern the winding trail which led down into the blackness of the hollow. In places the slope was almost precipitous, and it behoved him to be careful of the horses, which could not be replaced. Without them he could not plough in spring, and his life did not appear of any especial value in comparison with theirs just then.

The team, however, were evidently bent on getting home as soon as possible, and Witham's fingers were too stiff to effectively grasp the reins. A swinging bough also struck one of the horses, and when it plunged and flung up its head the man reeled a little in his seat. Before he recovered the team were going down-hill at a gallop. Witham flung himself bodily backwards with tense muscles, and the reins slipping a trifle in his hands, knowing that though he bore against them with all his strength the team were leaving the trail. Then the wagon jolted against a tree, one horse stumbled, picked up its stride, and went on at a headlong gallop. The man felt the wind rush past him and saw the dim trees whirl by, but he could only hold on and wonder what would take place when they came to the bottom. The bridge the trail went round by was some distance to the right and because the frost had just set in he knew the ice on the river would not bear the load, even if the horses could keep their footing.

He had not, however, long to wonder. Once more a horse stumbled, there was a crash, and a branch hurled Witham backwards into the wagon, which came to a standstill suddenly. When he rose something warm was running down his face, and there was a red smear on the hand he lighted the lantern with. When that was done he flung himself down from the wagon, dreading what he would find. The flickering radiance showed him that the pole had snapped, and while one bronco still stood trembling on its feet the other lay inert amidst a tangle of harness. The man's face grew a trifle grimmer as he threw the light upon it, and then, stooping, glanced at one doubled leg. It was evident that fate, which did nothing by halves, had dealt him a crushing blow. The last faint hope he clung to had vanished now.

He was, however, a humane man, and considerate of the beasts that worked for him, and accordingly thrust his hand inside the old fur coat, when he had loosed the uninjured horse, and drew out a long-bladed knife. Then he knelt and, setting down the lantern, felt for the place to strike. When he found it his courage almost deserted him, and meeting the eyes that seemed to look up at him with dumb appeal, turned his head away. Still, he was a man who would not shirk a painful duty, and shaking off the sense of revulsion turned again and stroked the beast's head.

"It's all I can do for you," he said.

Then his arm came down, and a tremor ran through the quivering frame, while Witham set his lips tightly as his hand grew warm. The thing was horrible to him, but the life he led had taught him the folly of weakness, and he was too pitiful to let his squeamishness overcome him.

Still, he shivered when it was done, and rubbing the knife in the withered leaves, rose and made shift to gird a rug about the uninjured horse. Then he cut the reins and tied them, and mounting without stirrups rode towards the bridge. The horse went quietly enough now, and the man allowed it to choose its way. He was going home to find shelter from the cold, because his animal instincts prompted him, but otherwise, almost without volition, in a state of dispassionate indifference. Nothing more he fancied, could well befall him.

CHAPTER II – LANCE COURTHORNE

It was late when Witham reached his log-built house, but he set out once more with his remaining horse before the lingering daylight crept out of the east, to haul the wagon home. He also spent most of the day in repairing it, because occupation of any kind that would keep him from unpleasant reflections appeared advisable, and to allow anything to fall out of use was distasteful to him, although as the wagon had been built for two horses he had little hope of driving it again. It was a bitter, grey day, with a low, smoky sky, and seemed very long to Witham; but evening came at last, and he was left with nothing between him and his thoughts.

He lay in a dilapidated chair beside the stove, and the little bare room through which its pipe ran was permeated with the smell of fresh shavings, hot iron, and the fumes of indifferent tobacco. A carpenter's bench ran along one end of it, and was now occupied by a new wagon pole the man had fashioned out of a slender birch. A Marlin rifle, an axe, and a big saw hung beneath the head of an antelope on the wall above the bench, and all of them showed signs of use and glistened with oil. Opposite to them a few shelves were filled with simple crockery and cooking utensils, and these also shone spotlessly. There was a pair of knee boots in one corner with a patch partly sewn on to one of them, and the harness in another showed traces of careful repair. A bookcase hung above them, and its somewhat tattered contents indicated that the man who had chosen and evidently handled them frequently possessed tastes any one who did not know that country would scarcely have expected to find in a prairie farmer. A table and one or two rude chairs made by their owner's hands completed the furniture; but while all hinted at poverty, it also suggested neatness, industry, and care, for the room bore the impress of its occupier's individuality, as rooms not infrequently do.

It was not difficult to see that he was frugal, though possibly from necessity rather than taste, not sparing of effort, and had a keen eye for utility, and if that suggested the question why, with such capacities, he had not attained to greater comfort, the answer was simple. Witham had no money, and the seasons had fought against him. He had done his uttermost with the means at his disposal, and now he knew he was beaten.

A doleful wind moaned about the lonely building and set the roof shingles rattling overhead. Now and then the stove crackled, or the lamp flickered, and any one unused to the prairie would have felt the little loghouse very desolate and lonely. There was no other human habitation within a league, only a great waste of whitened grass relieved about the homestead by the raw clods of the fall ploughing; for, while his scattered neighbours, for the most part, put their trust in horses and cattle, Witham had been among the first to realize the capacities of that land as a wheat-growing country.

Now, clad in well-worn jean trousers and an old deerskin jacket, he looked down at the bundle of documents on his knee, accounts unpaid, a banker's intimation that no more cheques would be honoured and a mortgage deed. They were not pleasant reading, and the man's face clouded as he pencilled notes on some of them, but there was no weakness or futile protest in it. Defeat was plain between the lines of all he read, but he was going on stubbornly until the struggle was ended, as others of his kind had done, there at the western limit of the furrows of the plough and in the great province further east which is one of the world's granaries. They went under and were forgotten, but they showed the way, and while their guerdon was usually six feet of prairie soil, the wheat-fields, mills, and railroads came, for it is written plainly on the new North-West that no man may live and labour for himself alone, and there are many who, realizing it, instinctively ask very little, and freely give their best for the land that but indifferently shelters them.

Presently, however, there was a knocking at the door, and though this was most unusual, Witham only quietly moved his head when a bitter blast came in, and a man wrapped in furs stood in the opening.

"I'll put my horse in the stable while I've got my furs on. It's a bitter night," he said.

Witham nodded. "You know where the lantern is," he said. "There's some chop in the manger, and you needn't spare the oats in the bin. At present prices it doesn't pay to haul them in."

The man closed the door silently, and it was ten minutes before he returned, and sloughing off his furs dropped into a chair beside the stove. "I got supper at Broughton's, and don't want anything but shelter to-night," he said. "Shake that pipe out and try one of these instead."

He laid a cigar case on the table, and though well worn it was of costly make, with a good deal of silver about it, while Witham, who lighted one, knew that the cigars were good. He had no esteem for his visitor, but men are not censorious upon the prairie, and Western hospitality is always free.

"Where have you come from, Courthorne?" he said quietly.

The other man laughed a little. "The long trail," he said. "The Dakotas, Colorado, Montana. Cleaned up one thousand dollars at Regent, and might have got more, but some folks down there seemed tired of me. The play was quite regular, but they have apparently been getting virtuous lately."

"And now?" said Witham, with polite indifference.

Courthorne made a little gesture of deprecation.

"I'm back again with the rustlers."

Witham's nod signified comprehension, for the struggle between the great range-holders across the frontier and the smaller settlers who with legal right invaded their cattle runs was just over. It had been fought out bitterly with dynamite and rifles, and when at last, with the aid of the United States cavalry, peace was made, sundry broken men and mercenaries who had taken the pay of both parties, seeing their occupation gone, had found a fresh scope for their energies in smuggling liquor, and on opportunity transferring cattle, without their owners' sanction, across the frontier. That was then a prohibition country, and the profits and risks attached to supplying it and the Blackfeet on the reserves with liquor were heavy.

"Business this way?" said Witham.

Courthorne appeared to consider a moment, and there was a curious little glint which did not escape his companion's attention in his eyes, but he laughed.

"Yes, we're making a big run," he said, then stopped and looked straight at the rancher. "Did it ever strike you, Witham, that you were not unlike me?"

Witham smiled, but made a little gesture of dissent as he returned the other's gaze. They were about the same height and had the same English type of face, while Witham's eyes were grey and his companion's an indefinite blue that approached the former colour, but there the resemblance, which was not more than discernible, ended. Witham was quietly-spoken and somewhat grim, a plain prairie farmer in appearance, while a vague but recognizable stamp of breeding and distinction still clung to Courthorne. He would have appeared more in place in the States upon the southern Atlantic seaboard, where the characteristics the Cavalier settlers brought with them are not extinct, than he did upon the Canadian prairie. His voice had even in his merriment a little imperious ring, his face was refined as well as sensual, and there was a languid gracefulness in his movements and a hint of pride in his eyes. They, however, lacked the steadiness of Witham's, and there were men who had seen the wild devil that was born in Courthorne look out of them. Witham knew him as a pleasant companion, but surmised from stories he had heard that there were men, and more women, who bitterly rued the trust they had placed in him.

"No," he said dryly. "I scarcely think I am like you, although only last night Nettie at the settlement took me for you. You see, the kind of life I've led out here has set its mark on me, and my folks in the old country were distinctly middle-class people. There is something in heredity."

Courthorne did not parry the unexpressed question. "Oh, yes," he said, with a little sardonic smile. "I know. The backbone of the nation – solemn, virtuous, and slow. You're like them, but my folks were different, as you surmise. I don't think they had many estimable qualities from your point of view, but if they all didn't go quite straight they never went slow, and they had a few prejudices, which is why I found it advisable to leave the old country. Still, I've had my fill of all that life can

offer most folks out here, while you scarcely seem to have found virtue pay you. They told me at the settlement things were bad with you.”

Witham, who was usually correct in his deductions, surmised that his companion had an object, and expected something in return for this confidence. There was also no need for reticence when every farmer in the district knew all about his affairs, while something urged him to follow Courthorne’s lead.

“Yes,” he said quietly. “They are. You see, when I lost my cattle in the blizzard, I had to sell out or mortgage the place to the hilt, and during the last two years I haven’t made the interest. The loan falls due in August, and they’re going to foreclose on me.”

“Then,” said Courthorne, “what is keeping you here when the result of every hour’s work you put in will go straight into another’s man’s pocket?”

Witham smiled a little. “In the first place, I’ve nowhere else to go, and there’s something in the feeling that one has held on to the end. Besides, until a few days ago I had a vague hope that by working double tides, I might get another crop in. Somebody might have advanced me a little on it because the mortgage only claims the house and land.”

Courthorne looked at him curiously. “No. We are not alike,” he said. “There’s a slow stubborn devil in you, Witham, and I think I’d be afraid of you if I ever did you an injury. But go on.”

“There’s very little more. My team ran away down the ravine, and I had to put one beast out of its misery. I can’t do my ploughing with one horse, and that leaves me stranded for the want of the dollars to buy another with. It’s usually a very little thing that turns the scale, but now the end has come, I don’t know that I’m sorry. I’ve never had a good time, you see, and the struggle was slowly crushing the life out of me.”

Witham spoke quietly, without bitterness, but Courthorne, who had never striven at all but stretched out his hand and taken what was offered, the more willingly when it was banned alike by judicial and moral law, dimly understood him. He was a fearless man, but he knew his courage would not have been equal to the strain of that six years’ struggle against loneliness, physical fatigue, and adverse seasons, during which disaster followed disaster. He looked at the bronzed farmer as he said, “Still, you would do a little in return for a hundred dollars that would help you to go on with the fight?”

A faint sparkle crept into Witham’s eyes. It was not hope, but rather the grim anticipation of the man offered a better weapon when standing with his back to the wall.

“Yes,” he said slowly. “I would do almost anything.”

“Even if it was against the law?”

Witham sat silent for almost a minute, but there was no indecision in his face, which slightly perplexed Courthorne. “Yes,” he said. “Though I kept it while I could, the law was made for the safeguarding of prosperous men, but with such as I am it is every man for his own hand and the devil to care for the vanquished. Still, there is a reservation.”

Courthorne nodded. “It’s unlawful, but not against the unwritten code.”

“Well,” said Witham quietly, “when you tell me what you want I should have a better opinion.”

Courthorne laughed a little, though there was something unpleasant in his eyes. “When I first came out to this country I should have resented that,” he said. “Now, it seems to me that I’m putting too much in your hands if I make the whole thing clear before you commit yourself in any way.”

Witham nodded. “In fact, you have got to trust me. You can do so safely.”

“The assurance of the guileless is astonishing and occasionally hard to bear,” said Courthorne. “Why not reverse the position?”

Witham’s gaze was steady, and free from embarrassment. “I am,” he said, “waiting for your offer.”

“Then,” said Courthorne dryly, “here it is. We are running a big load through to the northern settlements and the reserves to-morrow, and while there’s a good deal of profit attached to the venture, I have a notion that Sergeant Stimson has had word of it. Now, the Sergeant knows just how I stand

with the rustlers, though he can fasten no charge on me, and he will have several of his troopers looking out for me. Well, I want one of them to see and follow me south along the Montana trail. There's no horse in the Government service can keep pace with that black of mine, but it would not be difficult to pull him and just keep the trooper out of carbine shot behind. When he finds he can't overtake the black he'll go off for his comrades, and the boys will run our goods across the river while they're picking up the trail."

"You mentioned the horse, but not yourself," said Witham quietly.

Courthorne laughed. "Yes," he said; "I will not be there. I'm offering you one hundred dollars to ride the black for me. You can put my furs on, and anybody who saw you and knew the horse would certify it was me."

"And where will you be?"

"Here," said Courthorne dryly. "The boys will have no use for me until they want a guide, but they'll leave an unloaded packhorse handy, and, as it wouldn't suit any of us to make my connexion with them too plain, it will be a night or two later when I join them. In the meanwhile your part's quite easy. No trooper could ride you down unless you wanted him to, and you'll ride straight on to Montana – I've a route marked out for you. You'll stop at the places I tell you, and the testimony of anybody who saw you on the black would be quite enough to clear me if Stimson's men are too clever for the boys."

Witham sat still a moment, and it was not avarice which prompted him when he said, "Considering the risk, one hundred dollars is very little."

"Of course," said Courthorne. "Still, it isn't worth any more to me, and there will be your expenses. If it doesn't suit you, I will do the thing myself and find the boys another guide."

He spoke indifferently, but Witham was not a fool, and knew that he was lying.

"Turn your face to the light," he said sharply.

A little ominous glint became visible in Courthorne's eyes, and there was just a trace of darker colour in his forehead, but Witham saw it and was not astonished. Still Courthorne did not move.

"What made you ask me that?" he said.

Witham watched him closely, but his voice betrayed no special interest as he said, "I fancied I saw a mark across your cheek. It seemed to me that it had been made by a whip."

The deeper tint was more visible on Courthorne's forehead, where the swollen veins showed a trifle, and he appeared to swallow something before he spoke. "Aren't you asking too many questions? What has a mark on my face to do with you?"

"Nothing," said Witham quietly. "Will you go through the conditions again?"

Courthorne nodded. "I pay you one hundred dollars – now," he said. "You ride south to-morrow along the Montana trail and take the risk of the troopers overtaking you. You will remain away a fortnight at my expense, and pass in the meanwhile for me. Then you will return at night as rancher Witham, and keep the whole thing a secret from everybody."

Witham sat silent and very still again for more than a minute. He surmised that the man who made the offer had not told him all and there was more behind, but that was, after all, of no great importance. He was prepared to do a good deal for one hundred dollars, and his bare life of effort and self-denial had grown almost unendurable. He had now nothing to lose, and while some impulse urged him to the venture, he felt that it was possible fate had in store for him something better than he had known in the past. In the meanwhile the cigar he held went out, and the striking of a match as Courthorne lighted another roused him suddenly from the retrospect he was sinking into. The bitter wind still moaned about the ranch, emphasizing its loneliness, and the cedar shingles rattled dolefully overhead, while it chanced that as Witham glanced towards the roof his eyes rested on the suspended piece of rancid pork which with a little flour and a few potatoes had during the last few months provided him with a sustenance. It was of course a trifle, but it tipped the beam, as trifles often do, and the man who was tired of all it symbolized straightened himself with a little mirthless laugh.

“On your word of honour there is nothing beyond the risk of a few days’ detention which can affect me?” he said.

“No,” said Courthorne solemnly, knowing that he lied. “On my honour. The troopers could only question you. Is it a deal?”

“Yes,” said Witham simply, stretching out his hand for the roll of bills the other flung down on the table, and, while one of the contracting parties knew that the other would regret it bitterly, the bargain was made.

Then Courthorne laughed in his usual indolent fashion as he said, “Well, it’s all decided, and I don’t even ask your word. To-morrow will see the husk sloughed off and for a fortnight you’ll be Lance Courthorne. I hope you feel equal to playing the rôle with credit, because I wouldn’t entrust my good fame to everybody.”

Witham smiled dryly. “I fancy I shall,” he said, and long afterwards recalled the words. “You see, I had ambitions in my callow days, and it’s not my fault that hitherto I’ve never had a part to play.”

Rancher Witham was, however, wrong in this. He had played the part of an honest man with a courage which had brought him to ruin, but there was now to be a difference.

CHAPTER III – TROOPER SHANNON’S QUARREL

There was bitter frost in the darkness outside when two young men stood talking in the stables of a little outpost lying a long ride back from the settlement in the lonely prairie. One leaned against a manger with a pipe in his hand, while the spotless, softly-gleaming harness hung up behind him showed what his occupation had been. The other stood bolt upright with lips set, and a faint greyness which betokened strong emotion showing through his tan. The lantern above them flickered in the icy draughts, and from out of the shadows beyond its light came the stamping of restless horses and the smell of prairie hay, which is pungent with the odours of wild peppermint.

The two lads, and they were very little more, were friends, in spite of the difference in their upbringing, for there are few distinctions between caste and caste in that country where manhood is still esteemed the greatest thing, and the primitive virtues count for more than wealth or intellect. Courage and endurance still command respect in the new North-West, and that both the lads possessed them was made evident by the fact that they were troopers of the North-West police, a force of splendid cavalry whose duty it is to patrol the wilderness at all seasons and in all weathers, under scorching sun and in blinding snow.

The men who keep the peace of the prairie are taught what heat and thirst are, when they ride in couples through a desolate waste wherein there is only bitter water, parched by pitiless sunrays and whitened by the intolerable dust of alkali. They also discover just how much cold the human frame can endure, when they lie down with only the stars above them, long leagues from the nearest outpost, in a trench, scooped in the snow, and they know how near one may come to suffocation and yet live through the grassfire’s blinding smoke. It happens now and then that two who have answered to the last roster in the icy darkness do not awaken when the lingering dawn breaks across the great white waste, and only the coyote knows their resting-place, but the watch and ward is kept, and the lonely settler dwells as safe in the wilderness as he would in an English town.

Trooper Shannon was an Irishman from the bush of Ontario, Trooper Payne, English, and a scion of a somewhat distinguished family in the old country, but while he told nobody why he left it suddenly, nobody thought of asking him. He was known to be a bold rider and careful of his beast, and that was sufficient for his comrades and the keen-eyed Sergeant Stimson. He glanced at his companion thoughtfully as he said, “She was a pretty girl. You knew her in Ontario?”

Shannon’s hands trembled a little. “Sure,” he said, “Larry’s place was just a mile beyond our clearing, an’ there was never a bonnier thing than Ailly Blake came out from the old country – but is it need there is for talking when ye’ve seen her? There was once I watched her smile at ye with the black eyes that would have melted the heart out of any man. Waking and sleeping they’re with me still.”

Three generations of the Shannons had hewn the lonely clearing further into the bush of Ontario and married the daughters of the soil, but the Celtic strain, it was evident, had not run out yet. Payne, however, came of English stock, and expressed himself differently.

“It was a – shame,” he said. “Of course he flung her over. I think you saw him, Pat?”

Shannon’s face grew greyer, and he quivered visibly as his passion shook him, while Payne felt his own blood pulse faster as he remembered the graceful dark-eyed girl who had given him and his comrade many a welcome meal when their duty took them near her brother’s homestead. That was, however, before one black day for Ailly and Larry Blake when Lance Courthorne also rode that way.

“Yes,” said the lad from Ontario, “I was driving in for the stores when I met him in the willow bluff, an’ Courthorne pulls his divil of a black horse up with a little ugly smile on the lips of him when I swung the wagon right across the trail.

“‘That’s not civil, trooper,’ says he.

“‘I’m wanting a word,’ says I, with the black hate choking me at the sight of him. ‘What have ye done with Ailly?’

“Is it anything to you?” says he.

“It’s everything,” says I. ‘And if ye will not tell me I’ll tear it out of ye.’

“Courthorne laughs a little, but I saw the divil in his eyes. ‘I don’t think you’re quite man enough,’ says he, sitting very quiet on the big black horse. ‘Anyway, I can’t tell you where she is just now, because she left the dancing saloon she was in down in Montana when I last saw her.’

“I had the big whip that day, and I forgot everything as I heard the hiss of it round my shoulder. It came home across the ugly face of him, and then I flung it down and grabbed the carbine as he swung the black round with one hand fumbling in his jacket. It came out empty, an’ we sat there a moment, the two of us, Courthorne white as death, his eyes like burning coals, and the fingers of me trembling on the carbine. Sorrow on the man that he hadn’t a pistol, or I’d have sent the black soul of him to the divil it came from.”

The lad panted, and Payne, who had guessed at his hopeless devotion to the girl who had listened to Courthorne, made a gesture of disapproval that was tempered by sympathy. It was for her sake, he fancied, Shannon had left the Ontario clearing and followed Larry Blake to the West.

“I’m glad he hadn’t, Pat,” said Payne. “What was the end of it?”

“I remembered,” said the other with a groan, “remembered I was Trooper Shannon, an’ dropped the carbine into the wagon. Courthorne wheels the black horse round, an’ I saw the red line across the face of him.

“You’ll be sorry for this, my lad,” says he.”

“He’s a dangerous man,” Payne said thoughtfully. “Pat, you came near being a – ass that day. Anyway, it’s time we went in, and as Larry’s here I shouldn’t wonder if we saw Courthorne again before the morning.”

The icy cold went through them to the bone as they left the stables, and it was a relief to enter the loghouse, which was heated to fustiness by the glowing stove. A lamp hung from a rough birch beam, and its uncertain radiance showed motionless figures wrapped in blankets in the bunks round the walls. Two men were, however, dressing, and one already in uniform sat at a table talking to another swathed in furs, who was from his appearance a prairie farmer. The man at the table was lean and weather-bronzed, with grizzled hair and observant eyes. They were fixed steadily upon the farmer, who knew that very little which happened upon the prairie escaped the vigilance of Sergeant Stimson.

“It’s straight talk you’re giving me, Larry? What do you figure on making by it?” he said.

The farmer laughed mirthlessly. “Not much, anyway, beyond the chance of getting a bullet in me back or me best steer lifted one dark night. ’Tis not forgiving the rustlers are, and Courthorne’s the divil,” he said. “But listen now, Sergeant; I’ve told ye where he is, and if ye’re not fit to corral him I’ll ride him down meself.”

Sergeant Stimson wrinkled his forehead. “If anybody knows what they’re after, it should be you,” he said, watching the man out of the corner of his eyes. “Still, I’m a little worried as to why, when you’ll get nothing for it, you’re anxious to serve the State.”

The farmer clenched a big hand. “Sergeant, you that knows everything, will ye drive me mad, an’ to – with the State!” he said. “Sure, it’s gospel I’m telling ye, an’ as you’re knowing well, it’s me could tell where the boys who ride at midnight drop many a keg. Well, if ye will have your reason, it was Courthorne who put the black shame on me an’ mine.”

Sergeant Stimson nodded, for he had already suspected this.

“Then,” he said dryly, “we’ll give you a chance of helping us to put the handcuffs on him. Now, because they wouldn’t risk the bridge, and the ice is not thick yet everywhere, there are just two ways they could bring the stuff across, and I figure we’d be near the thing if we fixed on Graham’s Pool. Still, Courthorne’s no kind of fool, and just because that crossing seems the likeliest he might try the other one. You’re ready for duty, Trooper Payne?”

The lad stood straight. “I can turn out in ten minutes, sir,” he said.

“Then,” and Sergeant Stimson raised his voice a trifle, “you will ride at once to the rise a league outside the settlement, and watch the Montana trail. Courthorne will probably be coming over from Witham’s soon after you get there, riding the big black, and you’ll keep out of sight and follow him. If he heads for Carson’s Crossing ride for Graham’s at a gallop, where you’ll find me with the rest. If he makes for the bridge, you will overtake him if you can and find out what he’s after. It’s quite likely he’ll tell you nothing, and you will not arrest him, but bearing in mind that every minute he spends there will be a loss to the rustlers you’ll keep him so long as you can. Trooper Shannon, you’ll ride at once to the bluff above Graham’s Pool, and watch the trail. Stop any man who rides that way, and if it’s Courthorne keep him until the rest of the boys come up with me. You’ve got your duty quite straight, both of you?”

The lads saluted, and went out, while the Sergeant smiled a little as he glanced at the farmer, and the men who were dressing.

“It’s steep chances we’ll have Mr. Courthorne’s company to-morrow, boys,” he said. “Fill up the kettle, Tom, and serve out a pint of coffee. There are reasons why we shouldn’t turn out too soon. We’ll saddle in an hour or so.”

Two of the men went out, and the stinging blast that swept in through the open door smote a smoky smear across the blinking lamp and roused a sharper crackling from the stove. Then one returned with the kettle and there was silence, when the fusty heat resumed its sway. Now and then a tired trooper murmured in his sleep, or there was a snapping in the stove, while the icy wind moaned about the building and the kettle commenced a soft sibilation, but nobody moved or spoke. Three shadowy figures in uniform sat just outside the light soaking in the grateful warmth while they could, for they knew that they might spend the next night unsheltered from the Arctic cold of the wilderness. The Sergeant sat with thoughtful eyes and wrinkled forehead where the flickering radiance forced up his lean face and silhouetted his spare outline on the rough boarding behind him, and close by the farmer sucked silently at his pipe, waiting, with a stony calm that sprang from fierce impatience, the reckoning with the man who had brought back shame upon him.

It was about this time when Witham stood shivering a little with the bridle of a big black horse in his hand just outside the door of his homestead. A valise and two thick blankets were strapped to the saddle, and he had donned the fur cap and coat Courthorne usually wore. Courthorne himself stood close by, smiling at him sardonically.

“If you keep the cap down and ride with your stirrups long, as I’ve fixed them, anybody would take you for me,” said he. “Go straight through the settlement, and let any man you come across see you. His testimony would come in useful if Stimson tries to fix a charge on me. You know your part of the bargain. You’re to be Lance Courthorne for a fortnight from to-day.”

“Yes,” said Witham dryly. “I wish I was equally sure of yours.”

Courthorne laughed. “I’m to be Rancher Witham until to-morrow night, anyway. Don’t worry about me. I’ll borrow those books of yours and improve my mind. Possible starvation is the only thing that threatens me, and it’s unfortunate you’ve left nothing fit to eat behind you.”

Witham swung himself into the saddle, a trifle awkwardly, for Courthorne rode with longer stirrup leathers than he was accustomed to, then he raised one hand, and the other man laughed a little as he watched him sink into the darkness of the shadowy prairie. When the drumming of hoofs was lost in the moaning of the wind he strode towards the stable, and taking up the lantern surveyed Witham’s horse thoughtfully.

“The thing cuts with both edges, and the farmer only sees one of them,” he said. “That beast’s about as difficult to mistake as my black is.”

Then he returned to the loghouse, and presently put on Witham’s old fur coat and tattered fur cap. Had Witham seen his unpleasant smile as he did it, he would probably have wheeled the black horse and returned at a gallop, but the farmer was sweeping across the waste of whitened grass at least a league away by this time. Now and then a half-moon blinked down between wisps of smoky

cloud, but for the most part grey dimness hung over the prairie, and the drumming of hoofs rang stridently through the silence. Witham knew a good horse, and had bred several of them – before a blizzard which swept the prairie killed off his finest yearlings as well as their pedigree sire – and his spirits rose as the splendid beast swung into faster stride beneath him.

For two weeks at least he would be free from anxiety, and the monotony of his life at the lonely homestead had grown horribly irksome. Witham was young, and, now when for a brief space he had left his cares behind, the old love of adventure which had driven him out from England once more awakened and set his blood stirring. For the first time in six years of struggle he did not know what lay before him, and he had a curious, half-instinctive feeling that the trail he was travelling would lead him farther than Montana. It was borne in upon him that he had left the old hopeless life behind, and, stirred by some impulse, he broke into a little song he had sung in England, long and forgotten. He had a clear voice, and the words, which were filled with the hope of youth, rang bravely through the stillness of the frozen wilderness until the horse blundered, and Witham stopped with a little smile.

“It’s four long years since I felt as I do to-night,” he said.

Then he drew bridle and checked the horse as the lights of the settlement commenced to blink ahead, for the trail was rutted deep and frozen into the likeness of adamant, but when the first frame houses flung tracks of yellow radiance across the whitened grass he dropped his left arm a trifle and rode in at a canter as he had seen Courthorne do. Witham did not like Courthorne, but he meant to keep his bargain.

As he passed the hotel more slowly a man who came out called to him. “Hello, Lance! Taking the trail?” he said. “Well, it kind of strikes me it’s time you did. One of Stimson’s boys was down here, and he seemed quite anxious about you.”

Witham knew the man, and was about to urge the horse forward, but in place of it drew bridle, and laughed with a feeling that was wholly new to him as he remembered that his neighbours now and then bantered him about his English and that Courthorne only used the Western colloquialism when it suited him.

“Sergeant Stimson is an enterprising officer, but there are as keen men as he is,” he said. “You will, in case he questions you, remember when you met me.”

“Oh, yes,” said the other. “Still, I wouldn’t fool too much with him – and where did you get those mittens from? That’s the kind of outfit that would suit Witham.”

Witham nodded, for though he had turned his face from the light the hand he held the bridle with was visible, and his big fur gloves were very old.

“They are his. The fact is, I’ve just come from his place,” he said. “Well, you can tell Stimson you saw me starting out on the Montana trail.”

He shook the bridle, laughed softly as the frame houses flitted by, and then grew intent when the darkness of the prairie once more closed down. It was, he knew probable that some of Stimson’s, men would be looking out for him, and he had not sufficient faith in Courthorne’s assurances to court an encounter with them.

The lights had faded, and the harsh grass was, crackling under the drumming hoofs when the blurred outline of a mounted man showed up on the crest of a rise, and a shout came down.

“Hallo! Pull up there a moment, stranger.”

There was nothing alarming in the greeting, but Witham recognized the ring of command, as well as the faint jingle of steel which had preceded it, and pressed his heels home. The black swung forward faster, and Witham glancing over his shoulder, saw, the dusky shape was now moving down the incline, Then the voice rose again more commandingly.

“Pull up; I want a talk with you.”

Witham turned his head a moment, and remembering Courthorne’s English, flung back the answer, “Sorry, I haven’t time.”

The faint musical jingle grew plainer, there was a thud of hoofs behind, and the curious, exhilaration returned to Witham as the big black horse stretched out at a gallop. The soil was hard as granite, but the matted grasses formed a covering that rendered fast riding possible to a man who took the risks and Witham knew there were few horses in the Government service to match the one he rode. Still, it was evident that the trooper meant to overtake him, and recollecting his compact he tightened his grip on the bridle. It was a long way to the ranch where he was to spend the night, and he knew that the further he drew the trooper on the better it would suit Courthorne.

So they swept on through the darkness over the empty waste, the trooper who was riding hard slowly creeping up behind. Still, Witham held the horse in until a glance over his shoulder showed him that there was less than a hundred yards between them, and he fancied he heard a portentous rattle as well as the thud of hoofs. It was not unlike that made by a carbine flung across the saddle. This suggested unpleasant possibilities, and he slackened his grip on the bridle. Then a breathless shout rang out, "Pull up or I'll fire."

Witham wondered if the threat was genuine or what is termed "bluff" in that country, but as he had decided objections to being shot in the back to please Courthorne, sent his heels home. The horse shot forward beneath him, and though no carbine flashed, the next backward glance showed him that the distance between him and the pursuer was drawing out, while when he stared ahead again the dark shape of willows or birches cut the skyline. As they came back to him the drumming of hoofs swelled into a staccato roar, while presently the trail grew steep, and dark boughs swayed above him. In another few minutes something smooth and level flung back a blink of light, and the timbers of a wooden bridge rattled under his passage. Then he was racing upwards through the gloom of wind-dwarfed birches on the opposite side, listening for the rattle behind him on the bridge, and after a struggle with the horse pulled him up smoking when he did not hear it.

There was a beat of hoofs across the river, but it was slower than when he had last heard it and grew momentarily less audible, and Witham laughed as he watched the steam of the horse and his own breath rise in a thin white cloud.

"The trooper has given it up, and now for Montana," he said.

CHAPTER IV – IN THE BLUFF

It was very dark amidst the birches where Trooper Shannon sat motionless in his saddle, gazing down into the denser blackness of the river hollow. The stream ran deep below the level of the prairie, as the rivers of that country usually do, and the trees, which there alone found shelter from the winds, straggled, gnarled and stunted, up either side of the steep declivity. Close behind the trooper a sinuous trail seamed by ruts and the print of hoofs stretched away across the empty prairie. It forked on the outskirts of the bluff, and one arm dipped steeply to the river where, because the stream ran slow just there and the bottom was firm, a horseman might cross when the water was low, and heavy sledges make the passage on the ice in winter time. The other arm twisted in and out among the birches towards the bridge, but that detour increased the distance to any one travelling north or south by two leagues or so.

The ice, however was not very thick as yet, and Shannon, who had heard it ring hollowly under him, surmised that while it might be possible to lead a laden horse across, there would be some risk attached to the operation. For that very reason, and although his opinion had not been asked, he agreed with Sergeant Stimson that the whisky-runners would attempt the passage. They were men who took the risks as they came, and that route would considerably shorten the journey it was especially desirable for them to make at night, while it would, Shannon fancied, appear probable to them that if the police had word of their intentions they would watch the bridge. Between it and the frozen ford the stream ran faster, and the trooper decided that no mounted man could cross the thinner ice.

It was very cold as well as dark, for although the snow, which usually precedes the frost in that country, had not come as yet, it was evidently not far away, and the trooper shivered in the blasts from the pole which cut through fur and leather with the keenness of steel. The temperature had fallen steadily since morning, and now there was a presage of a blizzard in the moaning wind and murky sky. If it broke and scattered its blinking whiteness upon the roaring blast there would be but little hope for any man or beast caught shelterless in the empty wilderness, for it is beyond the power of anything made of flesh and blood to withstand that cold.

Already a fine haze of snow swirled between the birch twigs every now and then, and stung the few patches of the trooper's unprotected skin as though they had been pricked with red-hot needles. It, however, seldom lasted more than a minute, and when it whirled away, a half-moon shone down for a moment between smoky clouds. The uncertain radiance showed the thrashing birches rising from the hollow, row on row, struck a faint sparkle from the ice beneath them, and then went out, leaving the gloom intensified. It was evident to Shannon that his eyes would not be much use to him that night, for which reason he kept his ears uncovered at the risk of losing them, but though he had been born in the bush and all the sounds of the wilderness had for him a meaning, hearing did not promise to be of much assistance. The dim trees roared about him with a great thrashing of twigs, and when the wilder gusts had passed there was an eery moaning, through which came the murmur of leagues of tormented grasses. The wind was rising rapidly, and it would, he fancied, drown the beat of approaching hoofs as well as any cry from his comrades.

Four of them were hidden amidst the birches where the trail wound steeply upwards through the bluff across the river, two on the nearer side not far below, and Trooper Shannon's watch would serve two purposes. He was to let the rustlers pass him if they rode for the ford, and then help to cut off the retreat of any who escaped the sergeant, while if they found the ice too thin for loaded beasts or rode towards the bridge, a flash from his carbine would bring his comrades across in time to join the others who were watching that trail. It had, as usual with Stimson's schemes, all been carefully thought out and the plan was eminently workable, but unfortunately for the grizzled sergeant a better brain than his had foreseen the combination.

In the meanwhile the lad felt his limbs grow stiff and almost useless, and a lethargic numbness blunt the keenness of his faculties as the heat went out of him. He had more than usual endurance, and utter cold, thirst, and the hunger that most ably helps the frost, are not infrequently the portion of the wardens of the prairie; but there is a limit to what man can bear, and the troopers who watched by the frozen river that night had almost reached it. Shannon could not feel the stirrups with his feet. One of his ears was tingling horribly as the blood that had almost left it resumed its efforts to penetrate the congealing flesh, while the mittened hands he beat upon his breast fell solidly on his wrappings without separate motion of the fingers. Once or twice the horse stamped fretfully, but a touch of hand and heel quieted him, for though the frozen flesh may shrink, unwavering obedience is demanded equally from man and beast enrolled in the service of the North-West police.

“Stiddy now,” said the lad, partly to discover if he still retained the power of speech. “Sure ye know the order that was given me, and if it’s a funeral that comes of it the Government will bury ye.”

He sighed as he beat his hands upon his breast again, and when a flicker of moonlight smote a passing track of brightness athwart the tossing birches his young face was very grim. Like many another trooper of the North-West police, Shannon had his story, and he remembered the one trace of romance that had brightened his hard, bare life that night as he waited for the man who had dissipated it.

When Larry Blake moved West from Ontario, Shannon, drawn by his sister’s dark eyes, followed him, and took up a Government grant of prairie sod. His dollars were few, but he had a stout heart and two working oxen, and nothing seemed impossible while Ailly Blake smiled on him, and she smiled tolerably frequently, for Shannon was a well-favoured lad. He had worked harder than most grown men could do, won one good harvest, and had a few dollars in the bank when Courthorne rode up to Blake’s homestead on his big black horse. After that, all Shannon’s hopes and ambitions came down with a crash; and the day he found Blake grey in face with shame and rage he offered Sergeant Stimson his services. Now he was filled with an unholy content that he had done so, for he came of a race that does not forget an injury, and had sufficient cause for a jealous pride in the virtue of its women. He and Larry might have forgiven a pistol shot, but they could not forget the shame.

Suddenly he stiffened to attention, for though a man of the cities would probably have heard nothing but the wailing of the wind, he caught a faint rhythmic drumming which might have been made by a galloping horse. It ceased, and he surmised, probably correctly, that it was Trooper Payne returning. It was, however, his business to watch the forking of the trail, and when he could only hear the thrashing of the birches, he moved his mittened hand from the bridle, and patted the restive horse. Just then the bluff was filled with sound as a blast that drove a haze of snow before it roared down. It was followed by a sudden stillness that was almost bewildering, and when a blink of moonlight came streaming down, Trooper Shannon grabbed at his carbine, for a man stood close beside him in the trail. The lad, who had neither seen nor heard him come, looked down on the glinting barrel of a Marlin rifle and saw a set white face behind it.

“Hands up!” said a hoarse voice. “Throw that thing down,”

Trooper Shannon recognized it, and all the fierce hate he was capable of flamed up. It shook him with a gust of passion, and it was not fear that caused his stiffened fingers to slip upon the carbine. It fell with a rattle, and while he sat still, almost breathless and livid in face, the man laughed a little.

“That’s better; get down,” he said.

Trooper Shannon swung himself from the saddle, and alighted heavily as a flung-off sack would have done, for his limbs refused to bend. Still it was not from lack of courage that he obeyed, and during one moment he had clutched the bridle with the purpose of riding over his enemy. He had, however, been taught to think for himself swiftly and shrewdly from his boyhood up, and realized instinctively that if he escaped scathless the ringing of the rifle would warn the rustlers who, he surmised, were close behind. He was also a police trooper broken to the iron bond of discipline, and if a bullet from the Marlin was to end his career, he determined it should, if possible, also terminate

his enemy's liberty. The gust of rage had gone, and left him with the cold vindictive cunning the Celt who has a grievous injury to remember is also capable of, and there was contempt in his voice as he turned to Courthorne quietly.

"Sure it's your turn now," he said. "The last time I put my mark on the devil's face of ye."

Courthorne laughed wickedly. "It was a bad day's work for you; I haven't forgotten yet," he said. "I'm only sorry you're not a trifle older, but it will teach Sergeant Stimson the folly of sending a lad to deal with me. Well, walk straight into the bush, and remember that the muzzle of the rifle is scarcely three feet behind you!"

Trooper Shannon did so with black rage in his heart, and his empty hands at his sides. He was a police trooper and a bushman born, and knew that the rustlers' laden horses would find some difficulty in remounting the steep trail and could not escape to left or right once they were entangled amidst the trees. Then it would be time to give the alarm, and go down with a bullet in his body, or by some contrivance evade the deadly rifle and come to grips with his enemy. He also knew Lance Courthorne, and, remembering how the lash had seamed his face, expected no pity. One of them it was tolerably certain would have set out on the long trail before the morning, but they breed grim men in the bush of Ontario, and no other kind ride very long with the wardens of the prairie.

"Stop where you are," said Courthorne presently. "Now then, turn round. Move a finger or open your lips, and I'll have great pleasure in shooting you. In the meanwhile you can endeavour to make favour with whatever saint is honoured by the charge of you."

Shannon smiled in a fashion that resembled a snarl as once more a blink of moonlight shone down upon them, and in place of showing apprehension, his young white face, from which the bronze had faded, was venomous.

"And my folks were Orange, but what does that matter now?" said he. "There'll be one of us in – to-morrow, but for the shame ye put on Larry ye'll carry my mark there with ye."

Courthorne looked at him with a little glow in his eyes. "You haven't felt mine yet," he said. "You will probably talk differently when you do."

It may have been youthful bravado, but Trooper Shannon laughed. "In the meanwhile," he said, "I'm wondering why you're wearing an honest man's coat and cap. Faith, if he saw them on ye, Witham would burn them."

Courthorne returned no answer and the moonlight went out, but they stood scarcely three feet apart, and one of them knew that any move he made would be followed by the pressure of the other's finger on the trigger. He, however, did not move at all, and while the birches roared about them they stood silently face to face, the man of birth and pedigree with a past behind him and blood already upon his head, and the raw lad from the bush, his equal before the tribunal that would presently judge their quarrel.

In the meanwhile Trooper Shannon heard a drumming of hoofs that grew steadily louder before Courthorne apparently noticed the sound, and his trained ears told him that the rustlers' horses were coming down the trail. Now they had passed the forking, and when the branches ceased roaring again he knew they had floundered down the first of the declivity, and it would be well to wait a little until they had straggled out where the trail was narrow and deeply rutted. No one could turn them hastily there, and the men who drove them could scarcely escape the troopers who waited them, if they blundered on through the darkness of the bush. So five breathless minutes passed, Trooper Shannon standing tense and straight with every nerve tingling as he braced himself for an effort, Courthorne stooping a little with forefinger on the trigger, and the Marlin rifle at his hip. Then through a lull there rose a clearer thud of hoofs. It was lost in the thrashing of the twigs as a gust roared down again, and Trooper Shannon launched himself like a panther upon his enemy.

He might have succeeded, and the effort was gallantly made, but Courthorne had never moved his eyes from the shadowy object before him, and even as it sprang, his finger contracted further on the trigger. There was a red flash and because he fired from the hip the trigger guard gashed his mitten.

He sprang sideways, scarcely feeling the bite of the steel, for the lad's hand brushed his shoulder. Then there was a crash as something went down heavily amidst the crackling twigs. Courthorne stooped a little, panting in the smoke that blew into his eyes, jerked the Marlin lever, and, as the moon came through again, had a blurred vision of a white, drawn face that stared up at him still with defiance in its eyes. He looked down into it as he drew the trigger once more.

Shannon quivered a moment, and then lay very still, and it was high time for Courthorne to look to himself, for there was a shouting in the bluff, and something came crashing through the undergrowth. Even then his cunning did not desert him, and flinging the Marlin down beside the trooper, he slipped almost silently in and out among the birches and swung himself into the saddle of a tethered horse. Unlooping the bridle from a branch, he pressed his heels home, realizing as he did it that there was no time to lose, for it was evident that one of the troopers was somewhat close behind him, and others were coming across the river. He knew the bluff well, and having no desire to be entangled in it was heading for the prairie, when a blink of moonlight showed him a lad in uniform riding at a gallop between him and the crest of the slope. It was Trooper Payne, and Courthorne knew him for a very bold horseman.

Now, it is possible that had one of the rustlers, who were simple men with primitive virtues as well as primitive passions, been similarly placed, he would have joined his comrades and taken his chance with them, but Courthorne kept faith with nobody unless it suited him, and was equally dangerous to his friends and enemies. Trooper Shannon had also been silenced for ever, and if he could cross the frontier unrecognized, nobody would believe the story of the man he would leave to bear the brunt in place of him. Accordingly he headed at a gallop down the winding trail, while sharp orders and a drumming of hoofs grew louder behind him, and hoarse cries rose in front. Trooper Payne was, it seemed, at least keeping pace with him, and he glanced over his shoulder as he saw something dark and shadowy across the trail. It was apparently a horse from which two men were struggling to loose its burden.

Courthorne guessed that the trail was blocked in front of it by other loaded beasts, and he could not get past in time, for the half-seen trooper was closing with him fast, and another still rode between him and the edge of the bluff cutting off his road to the prairie. It was evident he could not go on, while the crackle of twigs, roar of hoofs, and jingle of steel behind him, made it plain that to turn was to ride back upon the carbines of men who would be quite willing to use them. There alone remained the river. It ran fast below him, and the ice was thin, and for just a moment he tightened his grip on the bridle.

"We've got you!" a hoarse voice reached him. "You're taking steep chances if you go on."

Courthorne swung off from the trail. There was a flash above him, something whirled through the twigs above his head, and the horse plunged as he drove his heels in.

"One of them gone for the river," another shout rang out, and Courthorne was crashing through the undergrowth straight down the declivity, while thin snow whirled about him, and now and then he caught the faint glimmer flung back by the ice beneath.

Swaying boughs lashed him, his fur cap was whipped away, and he felt that his face was bleeding, but there was another crackle close behind him, for Trooper Payne was riding as daringly, and he carried a carbine. Had he desired it Courthorne could not turn. The bronco he bestrode was madly excited and less than half broken, and it is probable no man could have pulled him up just then. It may also have been borne in upon Courthorne, that he owed a little to those he had left behind him in the old country, and he had not lost his pride. There was, it seemed, no escape, but he had at least a choice of endings, and with a little breathless laugh he rode straight for the river.

It was with difficulty Trooper Payne pulled his horse up on the steep bank a minute later. A white haze was now sliding down the hollow between the two dark walls of trees, and something seemed to move in the midst of it while the ice rang about it. Then, as the trooper pitched up his carbine, there was a crash that was followed by a horrible floundering and silence again. Payne sat

still, shivering a little in his saddle until the snow that whirled about him blotted out all the birches, and a roaring blast came down.

He knew there was now nothing that he could do. The current had evidently sucked the fugitive under, and, dismounting, he groped his way up the slope, leading the horse by the bridle, and only swung himself into the saddle when he found the trail again. A carbine flashed in front of him, two dim figures went by at a gallop, and a third one flung an order over his shoulder as he passed.

“Go back. The Sergeant’s hurt and Shannon has got a bullet in him.”

Trooper Payne had surmised as much already, and went back as fast as he could ride, while the beat of hoofs grew fainter down the trail. Ten minutes later he drew bridle close by a man who held a lantern, and saw Sergeant Stimson sitting very grim in face on the ground. It transpired later that his horse had fallen and thrown him, and it was several weeks before he rode again.

“You lost your man?” he said. “Get down.”

Payne dismounted. “Yes, sir, I fancy he is dead,” he said. “He tried the river, and the ice wouldn’t carry him. I saw him ride away from here just after the first shot, and fancied he fired at Shannon. Have you seen him, sir?”

The other trooper moved his lantern, and Payne gasped as he saw a third man stooping, with the white face of his comrade close by his feet. Shannon appeared to recognize him, for his eyes moved a little and the grey lips fell apart. Then Payne turned his head aside while the other trooper nodded compassionately in answer to his questioning glance.

“I’ve sent one of the boys to Graham’s for a wagon,” said the Sergeant. “You saw the man who fired at him?”

“Yes, sir,” said Trooper Payne.

“You knew him?” and there was a ring in the Sergeant’s voice.

“Yes, sir,” said the trooper. “At least he was riding Witham’s horse, and had on the old, long coat of his.”

Sergeant Stimson nodded, and pointed to the weapon lying with blackened muzzle at his feet. “And I think you could recognize that rifle? There’s F. Witham cut on the stock of it.”

Payne said nothing, for the trooper signed to him.

“I fancy Shannon wants to talk to you,” he said.

The lad knelt down, slipped one arm about his comrade’s neck, and took the mittened hand in his own. Shannon smiled up at him feebly.

“Witham’s horse and his cap,” he said, and then stopped, gasping horribly.

“You will remember that, boys,” said the Sergeant.

Payne could say nothing. Trooper Shannon and he had ridden through icy blizzard and scorching heat together, and he felt his manhood melting as he looked down into his dimming eyes. There was a curious look in them which suggested a strenuous endeavour and an appeal, and the lips moved again.

“It was,” said Shannon, and moved his head a little on Payne’s arm, apparently in an agony of effort.

Then the birches roared about them, and drowned the feeble utterance, while, when the gust passed, all three, who had not heard what preceded it, caught only one word – “Witham.”

Trooper Shannon’s eyes closed, and his head fell back, while the snow beat softly in to his upturned face, and there was a very impressive silence, intensified by the moaning of the wind, until the rattle of wheels came faintly down the trail.

CHAPTER V – MISS BARRINGTON COMES HOME

The long train was slackening speed and two whistles rang shrilly through the roar of wheels when Miss Barrington laid down the book with which she had beguiled her journey of fifteen hundred miles, and rose from her seat in a corner of the big first-class car. The car was sumptuously upholstered, and its decorations tasteful as well as lavish, but just then it held no other passenger, and Miss Barrington smiled curiously as she stood, swaying a little, in front of the mirror at one end of it, wrapping her furs about her. There was, however, a faint suggestion of regret in the smile, and the girl's eyes grew grave again, for the soft cushions, dainty curtains, gleaming gold and nickel, and equable temperature formed a part of the sheltered life she was about to leave behind her, and there would, she knew, be a difference in the future. Still, she laughed again as, drawing a little fur cap well down upon her broad, white forehead, she nodded at her own reflection.

"One cannot have everything, and you might have stayed there and revelled in civilization if you had liked," she said.

Crossing to the door of the portico she stood a moment with fingers on its handle, and once more looked about her. The car was very cosy, and Maud Barrington had all the average young woman's appreciation of the smoother side of life, although she had also the capacity, which is by no means so common, for extracting the most it had to give from the opposite one. Still, it was with a faint regret she prepared to complete what had been a deed of renunciation. Montreal, with its gaieties and luxuries, had not seemed so very far away while she was carried West amid all the comforts artisans who were also artists could provide for the traveller, but once that door closed behind her she would be cut adrift from it all, and left face to face with the simple, strenuous life of the prairie.

Maud Barrington had, however, made her mind up some weeks ago; and when the lock closed with a little clack that seemed to emphasize the fact that the door was shut, she had shaken the memories from her, and was quietly prepared to look forward instead of back. It also needed some little courage, for, as she stood with the furs fluttering about her on the lurching platform, the cold went through her like a knife, and the roofs of the little prairie town rose up above the willows the train was now crawling through. The odours that greeted her nostrils were the reverse of pleasant, and glancing down with the faintest shiver of disgust, her eyes rested on the litter of empty cans, discarded garments, and other even more unsightly things which are usually dumped in the handiest bluff by the citizens of a springing Western town. They have, for the most part, but little appreciation of the picturesque, and it would take a good deal to affect their health.

Then the dwarfed trees opened out, and flanked by two huge wheat elevators and a great water tank, the prairie city stood revealed. It was crude and repellent, devoid of anything that could please the most lenient eye, for the bare frame houses rose with their rough boarding weathered and cracked by frost and sun, hideous almost in their simplicity, from the white prairie. Paint was apparently an unknown luxury, and pavement there was none, though a rude plank platform straggled some distance above the ground down either side of the street, so that the citizens might not sink knee-deep in the mire of the spring thawing. Here and there a dilapidated wagon was drawn up in front of a store, but with a clanging of the big bell the locomotive rolled into the little station, and Maud Barrington looked down upon a group of silent men who had sauntered there to enjoy the one relaxation the desolate place afforded them.

There was very little in their appearance to attract the attention of a young woman of Miss Barrington's upbringing. They had grave, bronzed faces, and wore, for the most part, old fur coats stained here and there with soil. Nor were their mittens and moccasins in good repair, but there was a curious steadiness in their gaze which vaguely suggested the slow, stubborn courage that upheld them through the strenuous effort and grim self-denial of their toilsome lives. They were small wheat-growers who had driven in to purchase provisions or inquire the price of grain, and here and there

a mittened hand was raised to a well-worn cap, for most of them recognized Miss Barrington of Silverdale Grange. She returned their greetings graciously, and then swung herself from the platform, with a smile in her eyes as a man came hastily and yet, as it were, with a certain deliberation in her direction.

He was elderly, but held himself erect, while his furs, which were good, fitted him in a fashion which suggested a uniform. He also wore boots which reached half-way to the knee, and were presumably lined to resist the prairie cold, which few men at that season would do, and scarcely a speck of dust marred their lustrous exterior, while as much of his face as was visible beneath the great fur cap was lean and commanding. Its salient features were the keen and somewhat imperious grey eyes and long, straight nose, while something in the squareness of the man's shoulders and his pose set him apart from the prairie farmers and suggested the cavalry officer. He was, in fact, Colonel Barrington, founder and autocratic ruler of the English community of Silverdale, and had been awaiting his niece somewhat impatiently. Colonel Barrington was invariably punctual, and resented the fact that the train had come in an hour later than it should have done.

"So you have come back to us. We have been longing for you, my dear," he said. "I don't know what we should have done had they kept you in Montreal altogether."

Maud Barrington smiled, though there was a brightness in her eyes and a faint warmth in her cheek, for the sincerity of her uncle's welcome was evident.

"Yes," she said, "I have come back. It was very pleasant in the city, and they were all kind to me; but I think, henceforward, I would sooner stay with you on the prairie."

Colonel Barrington patted the hand he drew through his arm, and there was a very kindly smile in his eyes as they left the station and crossed the tract towards a little, and by no means very comfortable, wooden hotel. He stopped outside it.

"I want to see the horses put in and get our mail," he said. "Mrs. Jasper expects you, and will have tea ready."

He disappeared behind the wooden building, and his niece standing a moment on the veranda watched the long train roll away down the faint blur of track that ran west to the farthest verge of the great white wilderness. Then with a little impatient gesture she went into the hotel.

"That is another leaf turned down, and there is no use in looking back; but I wonder what is written on the rest," she said.

Twenty minutes later she watched Colonel Barrington cross the street with a bundle of letters in his hand. She fancied that his step was slower than it had been, and that he seemed a trifle preoccupied and embarrassed; but he spoke with quiet kindness when he handed her into the waiting sleigh, and the girl's spirits rose as they swung smoothly northwards behind two fast horses across the prairie. It stretched away before her, ridged here and there with a dusky birch bluff or willow grove under a vault of crystalline blue. The sun that had no heat in it struck a silvery glitter from the snow, and the trail swept back to the horizon a sinuous blue-grey smear, while the keen, dry cold and sense of swift motion set the girl's blood stirring. After all, it seemed to her, there were worse lives than those the Western farmers led on the great levels under the frost and sun.

Colonel Barrington watched her with a little gleam of approval in his eyes. "You are not sorry to come back to this and Silverdale?" he said, sweeping his mittened hand vaguely round the horizon.

"No," said the girl, with a little laugh. "At least, I shall not be sorry to return to Silverdale. It has a charm of its own, for while one is occasionally glad to get away from it, one is even more pleased to come home again. It is a somewhat purposeless life our friends are leading yonder in the cities. I, of course, mean the women."

Barrington nodded. "And some of the men! Well, we have room here for the many who are going to the devil in the old country for the lack of something worth while to do; though I am afraid there is considerably less prospect than I once fancied there would be of their making money."

His niece noticed the gravity in his face, and sat thoughtfully silent for several minutes, while, with the snow hissing beneath it, the sleigh nipped into and swung out of a hollow.

Colonel Barrington had founded the Silverdale settlement ten years earlier, and gathered about him other men with a grievance who had once served their nation, and the younger sons of English gentlemen who had no inclination for commerce, and found that lack of brains and capital debarred them from either a political or military career. He had settled them on the land, and taught them to farm, while, for the community had prospered at first when Western wheat was dear, it had taken ten years to bring home to him the fact that men who dined ceremoniously each evening and spent at least a third of their time in games and sport, could not well compete with the grim bushmen from Ontario, or the lean Dakota ploughmen, who ate their meals in ten minutes and toiled at least twelve hours every day.

Colonel Barrington was slow to believe that the race he sprang from could be equalled and much less beaten at anything, while his respect for and scrupulous observance of insular traditions had cost him a good deal, and left him a poorer man than he had been when he founded Silverdale. Maud Barrington had been his ward, and he still directed the farming of a good many acres of wheat land which she now held in her own right. The soil was excellent, and would in all probability have provided one of the Ontario men with a very desirable revenue, but Colonel Barrington had no taste for small economies.

"I want to hear all the news," said the girl. "You can begin at the beginning – the price of wheat. I fancied, when I saw you, it had been declining."

Barrington sighed a little. "Hard wheat is five cents down, and I am sorry I persuaded you to hold your crop. I am very much afraid we shall see the balance the wrong side again next half-year."

Maud Barrington smiled curiously. There was no great cause for merriment in the information given her, but it emphasized the contrast between the present and the careless life she had lately led when her one thought had been how to extract the greatest pleasure from the day. One had frequently to grapple with the problems arising from scanty finances at Silverdale.

"It will go up again," she said. "Is there anything else?"

Barrington's face grew a trifle grim as he nodded. "There is; and while I have not much expectation of an advance in prices, I have been worrying over another affair lately."

His niece regarded him steadily. "You mean, Lance Courthorne?"

"Yes," said Barrington, who flicked the near horse somewhat viciously with the whip. "He is also sufficient to cause any man with my responsibilities anxiety."

Maud Barrington looked thoughtful. "You fancy he will come to Silverdale?"

Barrington appeared to be repressing an inclination towards vigorous speech with some difficulty, and a little glint crept into his eyes. "If I could by any means prevent it, the answer would be, No. As it is, you know that, while I founded it, Silverdale was one of Geoffrey Courthorne's imperialistic schemes, and a good deal of the land was recorded in his name. That being so, he had every right to leave the best farm on it to the man he had disinherited, especially as Lance will not get a penny of the English property. Still, I do not know why he did so, because he never spoke of him without bitterness."

"Yes," said the girl, while a little flush crept into her face. "I was sorry for the old man. It was a painful story."

Colonel Barrington nodded. "It is one that is best forgotten – and you do not know it all. Still, the fact that the man may settle among us is not the worst. As you know, there was every reason to believe that Geoffrey intended all his property at Silverdale for you."

"I have much less right to it than his own son, and the colonial cure is not infrequently efficacious," said Miss Barrington. "Lance may, after all, quieten down, and he must have some good qualities."

The Colonel's smile was very grim. "It is fifteen years since I saw him at Westham, and they were not much in evidence then. I can remember two little episodes, in which he figured, with painful distinctness, and one was the hanging of a terrier which had in some way displeased him. The beast was past assistance when I arrived on the scene, but the devilish pleasure in the lad's face sent a chill through me. In the other, the gardener's lad flung a stone at a blackbird on the wall above the vinery, and Master Lance, who, I fancy, did not like the gardener's lad, flung one through the glass. Geoffrey, who was angry, but had not seen what I did, haled the boy before him, and Lance looked him in the face and lied with the assurance of an ambassador. The end was that the gardener, who was admonished, cuffed the innocent lad. These, my dear, are somewhat instructive memories."

"I wonder," said Maud Barrington, glancing out across the prairie which was growing dusky now, "why you took the trouble to call them up for me?"

The Colonel smiled dryly. "I never saw a Courthorne who could not catch a woman's eye, or had any undue diffidence about making the most of the fact; and that is partly why they have brought so much trouble on everybody connected with them. Further, it is unfortunate that women are not infrequently more inclined to be gracious to the sinner who repents, when it is worth his while, than they are to the honest man who has done no wrong. Nor do I know that it is only pity which influences them. Some of you take an exasperating delight in picturesque rascality."

Miss Barrington laughed, and fearlessly met her uncle's glance. "Then you don't believe in penitence?"

"Well," said the Colonel dryly, "I am, I hope, a Christian man, but it would be difficult to convince me that the gambler, cattle-thief, and whisky-runner who ruined every man and woman who trusted him will be admitted to the same place as clean-lived English gentlemen. There are, my dear, plenty of them still."

Barrington spoke almost fiercely, and then flushed through his tan, when the girl, looking into his eyes, smiled a little. "Yes," she said, "I can believe it, because I owe a good deal to one of them."

The ring in the girl's voice belied the smile, and the speech was warranted; for, dogmatic, domineering, and vindictive as he was apt to be occasionally, the words he had used applied most fitly to Colonel Barrington. His word at least had never been broken, and had he not adhered steadfastly to his own rigid code, he would have been a good deal richer man than he was then. Nor did his little shortcomings, which were burlesqued virtues, and ludicrous now and then, greatly detract from the stamp of dignity which, for speech was his worst point, sat well upon him. He was innately conservative to the backbone, though since an ungrateful Government had slighted him, he had become an ardent Canadian, and in all political questions aggressively democratic.

"My dear, I sometimes fancy I am a hypercritical old fogey!" he said, and sighed a little, while once more the anxious look crept into his face. "Just now I wish devoutly I was a better business man."

Nothing more was said for a little, and Miss Barrington watched the crimson sunset burn out low down on the prairie's western rim. Then the pale stars blinked out through the creeping dusk, and a great silence and an utter cold settled down upon the waste. The muffled thud of hoofs, and the crunching beneath the sliding steel, seemed to intensify it, and there was a suggestion of frozen brilliancy in the sparkle flung back by the snow. Then a coyote howled dolefully in a distant bluff, and the girl shivered as she shrank down further amidst the furs.

"Forty degrees of frost," said the Colonel. "Perhaps more. This is very different from the cold of Montreal. Still, you'll see the lights of Silverdale from the crest of the next rise."

It was, however, an hour before they reached them, and Miss Barrington was almost frozen when the first square loghouse rose out of the prairie. It and others that followed it flitted by, and then, flanked by a great birch bluff, with outlying barns, granaries and stables, looming black about it against a crystalline sky, Silverdale Grange grew into shape across their way. Its rows of ruddy windows cast streaks of flickering orange down the trail, the baying of dogs changed into a joyous clamour when the Colonel reined in his team, half-seen men in furs waved a greeting, and one who

risked frost-bite, with his cap at his knee, handed Miss Barrington from the sleigh and up the veranda stairway.

She had need of the assistance, for her limbs were stiff and almost powerless, and she gasped a little when she passed into the drowsy warmth and brightness of the great log-walled hall. The chilled blood surged back tingling to her skin, and swaying with a creeping faintness she found refuge in the arms of a grey-haired lady who stooped and kissed her gently. Then the door swung to, and she was home again in the wooden grange of Silverdale, which stood far remote from any civilization but its own on the frozen levels of the great white plain.

CHAPTER VI – ANTICIPATIONS

It was late at night, and outside the prairie lay white and utterly silent under the Arctic cold, when Maud Barrington, who glanced at it through the double windows, flung back the curtains with a little shiver, and turning towards the fire, sat down on a little velvet footstool beside her aunt's knee. She had shaken out the coils of lustrous brown hair which flowed about her shoulders glinting in the light of the shaded lamp, and it was with a little gesture of physical content she stretched her hands towards the hearth. A crumbling birch log still gleamed redly amidst the feathery ashes, but its effect was chiefly artistic, for no open fire could have dissipated the cold of the prairie, and a big tiled stove brought from Teutonic Minnesota furnished the needful warmth.

The girl's face was partly in shadow, and her figure foreshortened by her pose, which accentuated its rounded outline and concealed its willowy slenderness; but the broad white forehead and straight nose became visible when she moved her head a trifle, and a faintly humorous sparkle crept into the clear brown eyes. Possibly Maud Barrington looked her best just then, for the lower part of the pale-tinted face was a trifle too firm in its modelling.

"No, I am not tired, aunt, and I could not sleep just now," she said. "You see, after leaving all that behind one, one feels, as it were, adrift, and it is necessary to realize one's self again."

The little silver-haired lady who sat in the big basket chair smiled down upon her and laid a thin white hand that was still beautiful upon the gleaming hair.

"I can understand, my dear, and am glad you enjoyed your stay in the city, because sometimes when I count your birthdays, I can't help a fancy that you are not young enough," she said. "You have lived out here with two old people who belong to the past too much."

The girl moved a little, and swept her glance slowly round the room. It was small and scantily furnished, though great curtains shrouded door and window, and here and there a picture relieved the bareness of the walls, which were panelled with roughly-dressed British-Columbian cedar. The floor was of redwood, diligently polished and adorned, not covered, by one or two skins brought by some of Colonel Barrington's younger neighbours from the Rockies. There were two basket-chairs and a plain, redwood table; but in contrast to them a cabinet of old French workmanship stood in one corner bearing books in dainty bindings, and two great silver candlesticks. The shaded lamp was also of the same metal, and the whole room with its faint resinous smell conveyed, in a fashion not uncommon on the prairie, a suggestion of taste and refinement held in check by the least comparative poverty. Colonel Barrington was a widower who had been esteemed a man of wealth, but the founding of Silverdale had made a serious inroad on his finances. Even yet, though he occasionally practised it, he did not take kindly to economy.

"Yes," said the girl, "I enjoyed it all – and it was so different from the prairie."

There was comprehension, and a trace of sympathy, in Miss Barrington's nod. "Tell me a little, my dear," she said. "There was not a great deal in your letters."

Her niece glanced dreamily into the sinking fire as though she would call up the pictures there. "But you know it all – the life I have only had glimpses of. Well, for the first few months I almost lost my head, and was swung right off my feet by the whirl of it. It was then I was, perhaps, just a trifle thoughtless."

The white-haired lady laughed softly. "It is difficult to believe it, Maud."

The girl shook her head reproachfully. "I know what you mean, and perhaps you are right, for that was what Twoinette insinuated," she said. "She actually told me that I should be thankful I had a brain since I had no heart. Still, at first I let myself go, and it was delightful – the opera, the dances, and the covered skating rink with the music and the black ice flashing beneath the lights. The whirr of the toboggans down the great slide was finer still, and the torchlight meets of the snowshoe clubs on the mountain. Yes, I think I was really young while it lasted."

“For a month,” said the elder. “And after?”

“Then,” said the girl slowly, “it all seemed to grow a trifle purposeless, and there was something that spoiled it. Twoinette was quite angry, and I know her mother wrote you – but it was not my fault, aunt. How was I, a guileless girl from the prairie, to guess that such a man would fling the handkerchief to me?”

The evenness of tone and entire absence of embarrassment was significant. It also pointed to the fact that there was a closer confidence between Maud Barrington and her aunt than often exists between mother and daughter, and the elder lady stroked the lustrous head that rested against her knee with a little affectionate pride.

“My dear, you know you are beautiful, and you have the cachet that all the Courthornes wear. Still, you could not like him. Tell me about him.”

Maud Barrington curled herself up further. “I think I could have liked him, but that was all,” she said. “He was nice to look at and did all the little things gracefully; but he had never done anything else, never would, and, I fancy, had never wanted to. Now, a man of that kind would very soon pall on me, and I should have lost my temper trying to waken him to his responsibilities.”

“And what kind of man would please you?”

Maud Barrington’s eyes twinkled, but the fact that she answered at all was a proof of the sympathy between herself and the questioner. “I do not know that I am anxious any of them should,” she said. “But, since you ask, he would have to be a man first: a toiling, striving animal, who could hold his own amidst his fellows wherever he was placed. Secondly, one would naturally prefer a gentleman, though I do not like the word, and one would fancy the combination a trifle rare, because brains and birth do not necessarily tally, and the man educated by the struggle for existence is apt to be taught more than he ever would be at Oxford or in the army. Still, men of that stamp forget a good deal, and learn so much that is undesirable, you see. In fact, I only know one man who would have suited me, and he is debarred by age and affinity – but, because we are so much alike, I can’t help fancying that you once knew another.”

The smile in Miss Barrington’s face, which was still almost beautiful as well as patient, became a trifle wistful.

“There are few better men than my brother, though he is not clever,” she said and dropped her voice a little. “As to the other, he died in India – beside his mountain gun – long ago.”

“And you have never forgotten? He must have been worth it – I wonder if loyalty and chivalric faith belong only to the past,” said the girl, reaching up a rounded arm and patting her aunt’s thin hand. “And now we will be practical. I fancied the head of the settlement looked worried when he met me, and he is not very proficient at hiding his feelings.”

Miss Barrington sighed. “I am afraid that is nothing very new, and with wheat steadily falling and our granaries full, he has cause for anxiety. Then the fact that Lance Courthorne has divided your inheritance and is going to settle here has been troubling him.”

“The first is the lesser evil,” said the girl, with a little laugh. “I wore very short frocks when I last saw Lance in England, and so far as I can remember he had the face of an angel and the temper of a devil. But did not my uncle endeavour to buy him off, and – for I know you have been finding out things – I want you to tell me all about him.”

“He would not take the money,” said Miss Barrington, and sat in thoughtful silence a space. Then, and perhaps she had a reason, she quietly recounted Courthorne’s Canadian history so far as her brother’s agents had been able to trace it, not omitting, dainty in thought and speech as she was, one or two incidents which a mother might have kept back from her daughter’s ears. Still, it was very seldom that Miss Barrington made a blunder. There was a faint pinkness in her face when she concluded, but she was not surprised when, with a slow, sinuous movement, the girl rose to her feet. Her cheeks were very slightly flushed, but there was a significant sparkle in her eyes.

“Oh,” she said, with utter contempt. “How sickening! Are there men like that?”

There was a little silence, emphasized by the snapping in the stove, and if Miss Barrington had spoken with an object she should have been contented. The girl was imperious in her anger, which was caused by something deeper than startled prudery.

"It is," said the little white-haired lady, "all quite true. Still, I must confess that my brother and myself were a trifle astonished at the report of the lawyer he sent to confer with Lance in Montana. One would almost have imagined that he had of late been trying to make amends."

The girl's face was very scornful. "Could a man with a past like that ever live it down?"

"We have a warrant for believing it," said Miss Barrington quietly, as she laid her hand on her companion's arm. "My dear, I have told you what Lance was, because I felt it was right that you should know; but none of us can tell what he may be, and if the man is honestly trying to lead a different life, all I ask is that you should not wound him by any manifest suspicion. Those who have never been tempted can afford to be merciful."

Maud Barrington laughed somewhat curiously. "You are a very wise woman, aunt, but you are a little transparent now and then," she said. "At least, he shall have a fair trial without prejudice or favour – and if he fails, as fail he will, we shall find the means of punishing him."

"We?" said the elder lady a trifle maliciously.

The girl nodded as she moved towards the doorway, and then turned a moment with the folds of the big red curtain flung behind her. It forced up the sweeping lines of a figure so delicately moulded that its slenderness was scarcely apparent, for Maud Barrington still wore a long, sombre dress that had assisted in her triumphs in the city. It emphasized the clear pallor of her skin and the brightness of her eyes, as she held herself very erect in a pose which, while assumed in mockery, had yet in it something that was almost imperial.

"Yes," she said. "We. You know who is the power behind the throne at Silverdale, and what the boys call me. And now, good night. Sleep well, dear."

She went out, and Miss Barrington sat very still gazing, with eyes that were curiously thoughtful, into the fire. "Princess of the Prairie – and it fits her well," she said, and then sighed a little. "And if there is a trace of hardness in the girl it may be fortunate. We all have our troubles – and wheat is going down."

In the meanwhile, late as it was, Colonel Barrington and his chief lieutenant, Gordon Dane, sat in his log-walled smoking-room talking with a man he sold his wheat through in Winnipeg. The room was big and bare. There were a few fine heads of antelope upon the walls, and beneath them an armoury of English-made shot guns and rifles, while a row of riding crops, silver-mounted, and some handled with ivory, stood in a corner. All these represented amusement, while two or three treatises on veterinary surgery and agriculture lying amidst English stud-books and racing records, presumably stood for industry. The comparison was significant, and Graham, the Winnipeg wheat-broker, noticed it as he listened patiently to the views of Colonel Barrington, who nevertheless worked hard enough in his own fashion. Unfortunately, it was rather the fashion of the English gentleman than that common on the prairie.

"And now," he said, with a trace of the anxiety he had concealed in his eyes, "I am open to hear what you can do for me."

Graham smiled a little. "It isn't very much, Colonel. I'll take all your wheat off you at three cents down."

Now Barrington did not like the broker's smile. It savoured too much of equality; and, though he had already unbent as far as he was capable of doing, he had no great esteem for men of business. Nor did it please him to be addressed as "Colonel."

"That," he said coldly, "is out of the question, I would not sell at the last market price. Besides, you have hitherto acted as my broker."

Graham nodded. "The market price will be less than what I offered you in a week, and I could scarcely sell your wheat at it to-day. I was going to hold it myself, because I can occasionally get a

little more from one or two millers who like that special grade. Usual sorts I'm selling for a fall. Quite sure the deal wouldn't suit you?"

Barrington lighted a fresh cigar, though Graham, noticed that he had smoked very little of the one he flung away. This was, of course, a trifle, but it is the trifles that count in the aggregate upon the prairie, as they not infrequently do elsewhere.

"I fancy I told you so," he said.

The broker glanced at Dane, who was a big, bronzed man, and, since Barrington could not see him, shook his head deprecatingly.

"You can consider that decided, Graham," he said. "Still, can you as a friendly deed give us any notion of what to do? As you know, farming, especially at Silverdale, costs money, and the banks are demanding an iniquitous interest just now, while we are carrying over a good deal of wheat."

Graham nodded. He understood why farming was unusually expensive at Silverdale, and was, in recollection of past favours, inclined to be disinterestedly friendly.

"If I were you I would sell right along for forward delivery at a few cents under the market."

"It is a trifle difficult to see how that would help us," said Barrington, with a little gesture of irritation, for it almost seemed that the broker was deriding him.

"No!" said the man from Winnipeg, "on the contrary, it's quite easy. Now I can predict that wheat will touch lower prices still before you have to make delivery, and it isn't very difficult to figure out the profit on selling a thing for a dollar and then buying it, when you have to produce it at ninety cents. Of course, there is a risk of the market going against you, but you could buy at the first rise, and you've your stock to dole out in case anybody cornered you."

"That," said Dane thoughtfully, "appears quite sensible. Of course, it's a speculation, but presumably we couldn't be much worse off than we are. Have you any objections to the scheme, sir?"

Barrington laid down his cigar, and glanced with astonished severity at the speaker. "Unfortunately, I have. We are wheat growers, and not wheat stock jugglers. Our purpose is to farm, and not swindle and lie in the wheat pits for decimal differences. I have a distinct antipathy to anything of the kind."

"But, sir," said Dane, and Barrington stopped with a gesture.

"I would," he said, "as soon turn gambler. Still, while it has always been a tradition at Silverdale that the head of the settlement's lead is to be followed, that need not prevent you putting on the gloves with the wheat-ring blacklegs in Winnipeg."

Dane blushed a little under his tan, and then smiled as he remembered the one speculative venture his leader had indulged in, for Colonel Barrington was a somewhat hot-tempered and vindictive man. He made a little gesture of deprecation as he glanced at Graham, who straightened himself suddenly in his chair.

"I should not think of doing so in face of your opinion, sir," he said. "There is an end to the thing, Graham!"

The broker's face was a trifle grim. "I gave you good advice out of friendship, Colonel, and there are men with dollars to spare who would value a hint from me," he said. "Still, as it doesn't seem to strike you the right way, I've no use for arguing. Keep your wheat – and pay bank interest if you want any help to carry over."

"Thanks," said Dane quietly. "They charge tolerably high, but I've seen what happens to the man who meddles with the mortgage-broker."

Graham nodded. "Well, as I'm starting out at six o'clock, it's time I was asleep," he said. "Good-night to you, Colonel."

Barrington shook hands with Graham, and then sighed a little when he went out. "I believe the man is honest, and he is a guest of mine, or I should have dressed him down," he said. "I don't like the way things are going, Dane; and the fact is we must find accommodation somewhere, because now I

have to pay out so much on my ward's account to that confounded Courthorne, it is necessary to raise more dollars than the banks will give me. Now, there was a broker fellow wrote me a very civil letter."

Dane, who was a thoughtful man, ventured to lay his hand upon his leader's arm. "Keep yourself and Miss Barrington out of those fellows' clutches, at any cost," he said.

Barrington shook off his hand and looked at him sternly. "Are you not a trifle young to adopt that tone?" he asked.

Dane nodded. "No doubt I am, but I've seen a little of mortgage jobbing. You must try to overlook it. I did not mean to offend."

He went out, and, while Colonel Barrington sat down before a sheaf of accounts, sprang into a waiting sleigh. "It's no use; we've got to go through," he said to the lad who shook the reins, "Graham made a very sensible suggestion, but our respected leader came down on him, as he did on me. You see, one simply can't talk to the Colonel; and it's unfortunate Miss Barrington didn't marry that man in Montreal."

"I don't know," said the lad. "Of course, there are not many girls like Maud Barrington, but is it necessary she should go outside Silverdale?"

Dane laughed. "None of us would be old enough for Miss Barrington when we were fifty. The trouble is, that we spend half our time in play, and I've a notion it's a man, and not a gentleman dilettante, she's looking for."

"Isn't that a curious way of putting it?" asked his companion.

Dane nodded. "It may be the right one. Woman is as she was made, and I've had more than a suspicion lately that a little less refinement would not come amiss at Silverdale. Anyway, I hope she'll find him, for it's a man with grit and energy, who could put a little desirable pressure on the Colonel occasionally, we're all wanting. Of course, I'm backing my leader, though it's going to cost me a good deal, but it's time he had somebody to help him."

"He would never accept assistance," said the lad thoughtfully. "That is, unless the man who offered it was, or became by marriage, one of the dynasty."

"Of course," said Dane. "That's why I'm inclined to take a fatherly interest in Miss Barrington's affairs. It's a misfortune we've heard nothing very reassuring about Courthorne."

CHAPTER VII – WITHAM'S DECISION

Farmer Witham crossed the frontier without molestation and spent one night in a little wooden town, where several people he did not speak to apparently recognized him. Then he pushed on southwards, and passed a week in the especially desolate settlement he had been directed to. A few dilapidated frame houses rose out of the white wilderness beside the broad, beaten trail, and, for here the prairie rolled south in long rises like the wakes of a frozen sea, a low wooden building on the crest of one cut the skyline a league away. It served as outpost for a squadron of United States cavalry, and the troopers daily maligned the Government which had sent them into that desolation on police duty.

There was nothing else visible but a few dusky groves of willows and dazzling snow. The ramshackle wooden hotel was rather more than usually badly kept and comfortless, and Witham, who had managed to conciliate his host, felt relieved one afternoon when the latter flung down the cards disgustedly.

"I guess I've had enough," he said. "Playing for stakes of this kind isn't good enough for you!"

Witham laughed a little to hide his resentment, as he said, "I don't quite understand."

"Pshaw!" said the American with a contemptuous gesture. "Three times out of four I've spoiled your hand, and if I didn't know that black horse I'd take you for some blamed Canadian rancher. You didn't handle the pictures that way when you stripped the boys to the hide at Regent, Mr. Courthorne?"

"Regent?" said Witham.

The hotel-keeper laughed. "Oh yes," he said. "I wouldn't go back there too soon, anyway. The boys seem quite contented, and I don't figure they would be very nice to you. Well, now, I've no use for fooling with a man who's too proud to take my dollars, and I've a pair of horses just stuffed with wickedness in the stable. There's not much you don't know about a beast, anyway, and you can take them out a league or two if you feel like it."

Witham, who had grown very tired of his host, was glad of any distraction, especially as he surmised that while the man had never seen Courthorne, he knew rather more than he did himself about his doings. Accordingly, he got into the sleigh that was brought out by and by, and enjoyed the struggle with the half-tamed team which stood with ears laid back, prepared for conflict. Oats had been very plentiful, and prices low that season. Witham, who knew at least as much about a horse as Lance Courthorne, however, bent them to his will and the team were trotting quietly through the shadow of a big birch bluff a league from town, when he heard a faint clip-clop coming down the trail behind him. It led straight beneath the leafless branches, and was beaten smooth and firm; while Witham, who had noticed already that whenever he strayed any distance from the hotel there was a mounted cavalryman somewhere, in the vicinity, shook the reins.

The team swung into faster stride, the cold wind whistled past him, and the snow whirled up from beneath the runners; but while he listened the rhythmic drumming behind him also quickened a little. Then a faintly musical jingle of steel accompanied the beat of hoofs, and Witham glanced about him with a little laugh of annoyance. The dusk was creeping across the prairie, and a pale star or two growing into brilliancy in the cloudless sweep of indigo.

"It's getting a trifle tiresome. I'll find out what the fellow wants," he said.

Wheeling the team, he drove back the way he came, and, when a dusky object materialized out of the shadows beneath the birches, swung the horses right across the trail. The snow lay deep on either side of it just there, with a sharp crust upon its surface, which rendered it inadvisable to take a horse round the sleigh. The mounted man accordingly drew bridle, and the jingle and rattle betokened his profession, though it was already too dark to see him clearly.

"Hallo!" he said. "Been buying this trail up, stranger?"

“No,” said Witham quietly, though he still held his team across the way. “Still, I’ve got the same right as any other citizen to walk or drive along it without anybody prowling after me, and just now I want to know if there is a reason I should be favoured with your company.”

The trooper laughed a little. “I guess there is. It’s down in the orders that whoever’s on patrol near the settlement should keep his eye on you. You see, if you lit out of here we would want to know just where you were going to.”

“I am,” said Witham, “a Canadian citizen, and I came out here for quietness.”

“Well,” said the other, “you’re an American too. Anyway, when you were in a tight place down in Regent there, you told the boys so. Now, no sensible man would boast of being a Britisher unless it was helping him to play out his hand.”

Witham kept his temper. “I want a straight answer. Can you tell me what you and the boys are trailing me for?”

“No,” said the trooper. “Still, I guess our commander could. If you don’t know of any reason, you might ask him.”

Witham tightened his grip on the reins. “I’ll ride back with you to the outpost now.”

The trooper shook his bridle, and trotted behind the sleigh, while, as it swung up and down over the billowy rises of the prairie, Witham became sensible of a curious expectancy. The bare, hopeless life he had led seemed to have slipped behind him, and though he suspected that there was no great difference between his escort and a prisoner’s guard, the old love of excitement he once fancied he had outgrown for ever awoke again within him. Anything that was different from the past would be a relief, and the man who had for eight long years of strenuous toil practised the grimmest self-denial wondered with a quickening of all his faculties what the future, that could not be more colourless, might have in store for him.

It was dark, and very cold, when they reached the wooden building, but Witham’s step was lighter, and his spirits more buoyant than they had been for some months when, handing the sleigh over to an orderly, he walked into the guard-room, where bronzed men in uniform glanced at him curiously. Then he was shown into a bare, log-walled hall, where a young man in blue uniform with a weather-darkened face was writing at a table.

“I’ve been partly expecting a visit,” he said. “I’m glad to see you, Mr. Courthorne.”

Witham laughed with a very good imitation of the outlaw’s recklessness, and wondered the while because it cost him no effort. He who had, throughout the last two adverse seasons, seldom smiled at all, and then but grimly, experienced the same delight in an adventure that he had done when he came out to Canada.

“I don’t know that I can return the compliment just yet,” he said. “I have one or two things to ask you.”

The young soldier smiled good-humouredly, as he flung a cigar case on the table. “Oh, sit down and shake those furs off,” he said. “I’m not a worrying policeman, and we’re white men, anyway. If you’d been twelve months in this forsaken place you’d know what I’m feeling. Take a smoke, and start in with your questions when you feel like it.”

Witham lighted a cigar, flung himself down in a hide chair, and stretched out his feet towards the stove. “In the first place, I want to know why your boys are shadowing me. You see, you couldn’t arrest me unless our folks in the Dominion had got their papers through.”

The officer nodded. “No. We couldn’t lay hands on you, and we only had orders to see where you went to when you left this place, so the folks there could corral you if they got the papers. That’s about the size of it at present, but, as I’ve sent a trooper over to Regent, I’ll know more to-morrow.”

Witham laughed. “It may appear a little astonishing, but I haven’t the faintest notion why the police in Canada should worry about me. Is there any reason you shouldn’t tell me?”

The officer looked at him thoughtfully. “Bluff? I’m quite smart at it myself,” he said.

“No,” and Witham shook his head. “It’s a straight question. I want to know.”

“Well,” said the other, “it couldn’t do much harm if I told you. You were running whisky a little while ago, and, though the folks didn’t seem to suspect it, you had a farmer or a rancher for a partner – it appears he has mixed up things for you.”

“Witham?” and the farmer turned to roll the cigar which did not need it between his fingers.

“That’s the man,” said his companion. “Well, though I guess it’s no news to you, the police came down upon your friends at a river-crossing, and farmer Witham put a bullet into a young trooper, Shannon, I fancy.”

Witham sat upright, and the blood that surged to his forehead sank from it suddenly, and left his face grey with anger.

“Good Lord!” he said hoarsely. “He killed him?”

“Yes, sir,” said the officer, “Killing’s not quite the word, because one shot would have been enough to free him of the lad, and the rancher fired twice into him. They figured, from the way the trooper was lying and the footprints, that he meant to finish him.”

The farmer’s face was very grim as he said, “They were sure it was Witham?”

“Yes,” and the soldier watched him curiously. “Anyway, they were sure of his horse, and it was Witham’s rifle. Another trooper nearly got him, and he left it behind him. It wasn’t killing, for the trooper don’t seem to have had a show at all, and I’m glad to see it makes you kind of sick. Only that one of the troopers allows he was trailing you at a time which shows you had no hand in the thing, you wouldn’t be sitting there smoking that cigar.”

It was almost a minute before Witham could trust his voice. Then he said slowly, “And what do they want me for?”

“I guess they don’t quite know whether they do or not,” said the officer. “They crawl slow in Canada. In the meanwhile they wanted to know where you were, so they could take out papers if anything turned up against you.”

“And Witham?” said the farmer.

“Got away with a trooper close behind him. The rest of them had headed him off from the prairie, and he took to the river. Went through the ice and drowned himself, though as there was a blizzard nobody quite saw the end of him, and in case there was any doubt they’ve got a warrant out. Farmer Witham’s dead, and if he isn’t he soon will be, for the troopers have got their net right across the prairie, and the Canadians don’t fool time away as we do when it comes to hanging anybody. The tale seems to have worried you.”

Witham sat rigidly still and silent for almost a minute. Then he rose up with a curious little shake of his shoulders.

“And farmer Witham’s dead. Well he had a hard life. I knew him rather well,” he said. “Thank you for the story. On my word this is the first time I’ve heard it, and now it’s time I was going.”

The officer laughed a little. “Sit right down again. Now, there’s something about you that makes me like you, and as I can’t talk to the boys, I’ll give you the best supper we can raise in the whole forsaken country, and you can camp here until to-morrow. It’s an arrangement that will meet the views of everybody, because I’ll know whether the Canadians want you or not in the morning.”

Witham did not know what prompted him to agree, but it all seemed part of a purpose that impelled him against his reasoning will, and he sat still beside the stove while his host went out to give orders respecting supper and the return of the sleigh. He was also glad to be alone for a while, for now and then a fit of anger shook him as he saw how he had been duped by Courthorne. He had heard Shannon’s story, and, remembering it, could fancy that Courthorne had planned the trooper’s destruction with a devilish cunning that recognized by what means the blame could be laid upon a guiltless man. Witham’s face became mottled with grey again as he realized that if he revealed his identity he had nothing but his word to offer in proof of his innocence.

Still, it was anger and not fear that stirred him, for nobody could arrest a man who was dead, and there was no reason that would render it undesirable for him to remain so. His farm would, when sold,

realize the money borrowed upon it, and the holder of the mortgage had received a profitable interest already. Had the unforeseen not happened, Witham would have held out to the end of the struggle, but now he had no regret that this was out of the question. Fate had been too strong for him as farmer Witham, but it might deal more kindly with him as the outlaw Courthorne. He could also make a quick decision, and when the officer returned to say that supper was ready, he rose with a smile.

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