

fully. "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 whiskey 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. 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.



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