

THE IMPROVISOR



BY
**HAROLD
BINDLOSS**

CHAPTER XIX.

Courthorne Blunders.

LANCE COURTHORNE had lightly taken a good many risks in his time, for he usually found a spice of danger stimulating, and there was in him an irresponsible daring that not infrequently served him better than a well-laid plan. There are also men of his type who, for a time at least, appear immune from the disasters which follow the one rash venture the prudent make, and it was half in frolic and half in malice he rode to Silverdale dressed as a prairie farmer in the light of day, and forgot that their occupation sets a stamp he had never worn upon the tillers of the soil. The same spirit induced him to imitate one or two of Witham's gestures for the benefit of his cook, and afterwards wait for a police trooper, who apparently desired to overtake him when he had just left the homestead.

He pulled his horse up when the other man shouted to him, and trusting to the wide hat that hid most of his face, smiled out of half-closed eyes when he handed a packet.

"You have saved me a ride, Mr. Courthorne. I heard you were at the bridge," the trooper said. "If you'll sign for those documents I needn't keep you."

He brought out a pencil, and Courthorne scribbled on the paper handed him. He was quite aware that there was a risk attached to this, but if Witham had any communications with the police it appeared advisable to discover what they were about. Then he laughed, as riding on again he opened the packet.

"Agricultural Bureau documents," he said. "This lot to be returned filled in! Well, if I can remember, I'll give them to Witham."

As it happened, he did not remember; but he made a worse mistake just before his departure from the railroad settlement. He had spent two nights at a little wooden hotel, which was not the one where Witham put up when he drove into the place, and to pass the time commenced a flirtation with the proprietor's daughter. The girl was pretty, and Courthorne a man of different type from the wheat-growers she had been used to. When his horse was at the door, he strolled into the saloon where he found the girl alone in the bar.

"I'm a very sad man to-day, my dear," he said, and his melancholy became him.

THE girl blushed prettily. "Still," she said, "whenever you want to, you can come back again."

"If I did, would you be pleased to see me?"

"Of course!" said the girl. "Now, you wait a minute, and I'll give you something to remember me by. I don't mix this up for everybody."

She busied herself with certain decanters and essences, and Courthorne held the glass she handed him high.

"The brightest eyes and the reddest lips between Winnipeg and the Rockies!" he said. "This is nectar, but I would like to remember you by something sweeter still!"

Their heads were not far apart when he laid down his glass, and before the girl quite knew what was happening an arm was round her neck. Next moment she had flung the man backwards, and stood very straight, quivering with anger and crimson in face, for Courthorne, as occasionally happens with men of his type, assumed too much, and did not always know when to stop. Then she called sharply, "Jake."

There was a tramp of feet outside, and when a big, grim-faced man looked in at the door Courthorne decided it was time for him to effect his retreat while it could be done with safety. He knew already that there were two doors to the saloon, and his finger closed on the neck of a decanter. Next moment it smote the newcomer on the chest, and while he staggered backwards with the fluid trickling from him, Courthorne departed through the opposite entrance. Once outside, he mounted leisurely, but nobody came out from the hotel, and shaking the bridle with a little laugh he cantered out of the settlement.

In the meanwhile, the other man carefully wiped his garments, and then turned to his companion.

"Now what's all this about?" he said.

THE girl told him. The man ruminated for a minute. "Well," he's gone, and I don't know that I'm sorry there wasn't a circus here," he said. "I figured there was something not square about that fellow, anyway. Registered as Guyler from Minnesota, but I've seen somebody like him among the boys from Silverdale. Guess I'll find out when I ride over about the horse, and then I'll have a talk with him quietly."

In the meanwhile, the police trooper who had handed him the packet returned to the outpost, and, as it happened, found the grizzled Sergeant Stimson, who appeared astonished to see him back so soon there.

"I met Courthorne near his homestead, and gave him the papers, sir," he said.

"You did?" said the Sergeant. "Now that's kind of curious, because he's at the bridge."

"It couldn't have been anybody else, because he took the documents and signed for them," said the trooper. "Big bay horse?"

"No, sir," said the trooper. "It was a broncho, and a screw at that."

"Well," said Stimson dryly, "let me have your book. If Payne has come in, tell him I want him."

The trooper went out, and when his comrade came in Stimson laid a strip of paper before him. "You have seen Courthorne's writing," he said; "would you call it anything like that?"

"No, sir," said Trooper Payne. "I would not!"

Stimson nodded. "Take a good horse and ride round by the bridge. If you find Courthorne there, as you probably will, head for the settlement and see if you can come across a man who might pass for him. Ask your question as though the answer didn't count, and tell nobody what you hear but me."

Payne rode out, and when he returned three days later, Sergeant Stimson made a journey to confer with one of his superiors. The officer was a man who had risen in the service somewhat rapidly, and when he heard the tale said nothing, while he turned over a bundle of papers a trooper brought him. Then he glanced at Stimson thoughtfully.

"I have a report of the Shannon shooting case here," he said. "How did it strike you at the time?"

Stimson's answer was guarded. "As a curious affair. You see, it was quite easy to get at Witham's character from anybody down there, and he wasn't the kind of man to do the thing. There were one or two other trifles I couldn't quite figure out the meaning of."

"Witham was drowned?" said the officer.

"Well," said Stimson, "the trooper who rode after him heard him break through the ice, but nobody ever found

him, though a farmer came upon his horse."

The officer nodded. "I fancy you are right, and the point is this. There were two men, who apparently bore some resemblance to each other, engaged in an unlawful venture, and one of them commits a crime nobody believed him capable of, but which would have been less out of keeping with the other's character. Then the second man comes into an inheritance, and leads a life which seems to have astonished everybody who knows him. Now, have you ever seen these two men side by side?"

"No, sir," said Stimson. "Courthorne kept out of our sight when he could in Alberta, and I don't think I or any of the boys, except Shannon, ever saw him for more than a minute or two. Now and then we passed Witham on the prairie or saw him from the trail, but I think I only once spoke to him."

"Well," said the officer, "it seems to me I had better get you sent back to your old station, where you can quietly pick up the threads again. Would the trooper you mentioned be fit to keep an eye on things at Silverdale?"

"No one better, sir," said Stimson. "Then it shall be done," said the officer. "The quieter you keep the affair the better."

It was a week or two later when Witham returned to his homestead from the bridge, which was almost completed. Dusk was closing in, but as he rode down the rise he could see the wheat roll in slow ripples back into the distance. The steady beat of its rhythmic murmur told of heavy ears, and where the stalks stood waist-high on the rise, the last flush of saffron in the north-west was flung back in a dull bronze gleam. The rest swayed athwart the shadowy hollow, dusky indigo and green, but that flash of gold and red told that harvest was nigh again.

Witham had seen no crop to compare with it during the eight years he had spent in the Dominion. There had been neither drought nor hail that year, and now, when the warm western breezes kept sweet and wholesome the splendid ears they fanned, there was removed from him the terrors of the harvest frost, which not infrequently blights the fairest prospects in one bitter night. Fate, which had tried him hardly hitherto, denying the seed its due share of fertilizing rain, sweeping his stock from existence with icy blizzard, and mowing down the tall green corn with devastating hail, was now showering favours on him when it was too late. Still, though he felt the irony of it, he was glad, for others had followed his lead, and while the lean years had left a lamentable scarcity of dollars at Silverdale, wealth would now pour in to every man who had had the faith to sow.

HE dismounted beside the oats he would harvest first, and heard with a curious stirring of his pulses their musical patter. It was not the full-toned song of the wheat, but there was that in the quicker beat of it which told that each graceful tassel would redeem its promise. He could not see the end of them, but by the right of the producer they were all his. He knew that he could also hold them by right of conquest, too, for that year a knowledge of his strength had been forced upon him. Still, from something he had seen in the eyes of a girl and grasped at in the words of a white-haired lady, he realized that there is a limit beyond which man's ambition may not venture, and

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