

about the lonely building, but smiled incredulously.

"I fancy you are wrong, and I wish my brother were here," she said. "We could not refuse Mr. Witham permission to call, but whatever passes between us will have more than its individual significance. Anything we tacitly promise the others will agree to, and I feel the responsibility of deciding for Silverdale."

Miss Barrington went out; but her niece, who understood her smile and that she had received a warning, sat still with a strained expression in her eyes. The prosperity of Silverdale had been dear to her, but she knew she must let something that was dearer still slip away from her, or, since they must come from her, trample on her pride as she made the first advances. It seemed a very long while before there was a knocking at the outer door, and she rose with a little quiver when light steps came up the stairway.

In the meanwhile, two men stood beside the stove in the hall until an English maid returned to them.

"Colonel Barrington is away, but Miss Barrington and Miss Maud are at home," she said. "Will you go forward into the morning-room when you have taken off your furs?"

"Did you know Barrington was not here?" asked Witham, when the maid moved away.

Dane appeared embarrassed. "The fact is, I did."

"Then," said Witham dryly, "I am a little astonished you did not think fit to tell me."

Dane's face flushed, but he laid his hand on his comrade's arm. "No," he said. "I didn't. Now, listen to me for the last time, Witham. I've not been blind, you see; and, as I told you, your comrades have decided that they wish you to stay. Can't you sink your confounded pride and take what is offered you?"

Witham shook his grasp off, and there was weariness in his face. "You need not go through it all again. I made my decision a long while ago."

"Well," said Dane, with a gesture of hopelessness, "I've done all I could and, since you are going on, I'll look at that trace clip while you tell Miss Barrington. I mean the younger one."

"The harness can wait," said Witham. "You are coming with me."

A little grim smile crept into Dane's eyes. "I am not. I wouldn't raise a finger to help you now," he said, and retreated hastily.

It was five minutes later when he walked quietly into Maud Barrington's presence, and sat down when the girl signed to him. He wondered if she guessed how his heart was beating.

"It is very good of you to receive me, but I felt I could not slip away without acknowledging the kindness you and Miss Barrington have shown me," he said. "I did not know Colonel Barrington was away."

The girl smiled a little. "Or you would not have come? Then we should have had no opportunity of congratulating you on your triumphant acquittal. You see it must be mentioned."

"I'm afraid there was a miscarriage of justice," said Witham quietly. "Still, though it is a difficult subject, the deposition of the man I supplanted went a long way, and the police did not seem desirous of pressing a charge against me. Perhaps I should have insisted on implicating myself, but you would scarcely have looked for that after what you now know of me."

Maud Barrington braced herself for an effort, though she was outwardly very calm. "No," she said, "no one would have looked for it from any man placed as you were, and you are purposing to do more than is required of you. Why will you go away?"

"I am a poor man," said Witham. "One must have means to live at Silverdale."

"Then," said the girl with a soft laugh which cost her a good deal, "it is because you prefer poverty, and you have at least one opportunity at Silverdale. Courthorne's land was mine to all intents and purposes before it was his, and now it reverts to me. I owe him nothing, and he did not give it me. Will you stay and farm it on whatever arrangement Dane and Macdonald may

consider equitable? My uncle's hands are too full for him to attempt it."

"No," said Witham, and his voice trembled a little. "Your friends would resent it."

"Then," said the girl, "why have they urged you to stay?"

"A generous impulse. They would repent of it by and by. I am not one of them, and they know it now, as I did at the beginning. No doubt they would be courteous, but you see a half-contemptuous toleration would gall me."

There was a little smile on Maud Barrington's lips, but it was not in keeping with the tinge in her cheek and the flash in her eyes.

"I once told you that you were poor at subterfuge, and you know you are wronging them," she said. "You also know that even if they were hostile to you, you could stay and compel them to acknowledge you. I fancy you once admitted as much to me. What has become of this pride of the democracy you showed me?"

Witham made a deprecatory gesture. "You must have laughed at me. I had not been long at Silverdale then," he said dryly. "I should feel very lonely now. One man against long generations. Wouldn't it be a trifle unequal?"

Maud Barrington smiled again. "I did not laugh, and this is not England, though what you consider prejudices do not count for so much as they used to there, while there is, one is told quite frequently, no limit to what a man may attain to here, if he dares sufficiently."

A little quiver ran through Witham, and he rose and stood looking down on her, with one brown hand clenched on the table and the veins showing on his forehead.

"You would have me stay?" he said.

Maud Barrington met his eyes, for the spirit that was in her was the equal of his. "I would have you be yourself—what you were when you came here in defiance of Colonel Barrington, and again when you sowed the last acre of Courthorne's land, while my friends, who are yours too, looked on wondering. Then you would stay—if it pleased you. Where has your splendid audacity gone?"

Witham slowly straightened himself and the girl noticed the damp the struggle had brought there on his forehead, for he understood that if he would stretch out his hand and take it what he longed for might be his.

"I do not know, any more than I know where it came from, for until I met Courthorne I had never made a big venture in my life," he said. "It seems it has served its turn and left me—for now there are things I am afraid to do."

"So you will go away and forget us?"

Witham stood very still a moment, and the girl, who felt her heart beating noticed that his face was drawn. Still, she could go no further. Then he said very slowly, "I should be under the shadow always if I stay, and my friends would feel it even more deeply than I would do. I may win the right to come back again if I go away."

Maud Barrington made no answer, but both knew no further word could be spoken on that subject until, if fate ever willed it, the man returned again, and it was a relief when Miss Barrington came in with Dane. He glanced at his comrade keenly, and then, seeing the grimness in his face, quietly declined the white-haired lady's offer of hospitality. Five minutes later the farewells were said and Maud Barrington stood with the stinging flakes whirling about her in the doorway, while the sleigh slid out into the filmy whiteness that drove across the prairie. When it vanished she turned back into the warmth and brightness with a little shiver and one hand tightly closed.

The great room seemed very lonely when, while the wind moaned outside, she and her aunt sat down to dinner. Neither of them appeared communicative, and both felt it a relief when the meal was over. Then Maud Barrington smiled curiously as she rose and stood with hands stretched out towards the stove.

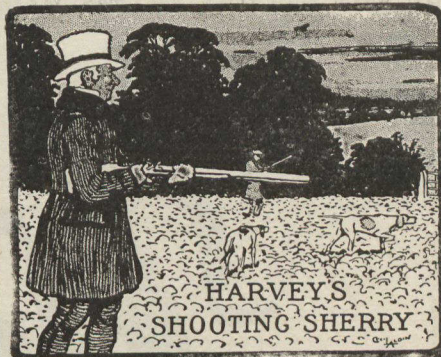
"Aunt," she said, "Twonette has twice asked me to go back to Montreal, and I think I will. The prairie is very dreary in the winter."

(To be continued.)

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