

ham. It was not the abandon of the swashbuckler stock-rider from across the frontier, but something more finished and distinguished that suggested the bygone cavalier. Maud Barrington, it was evident, also noticed it.

"Geoffrey Courthorne rode as that man does," she said. "I remember hearing my mother once tell him that he had been born too late, because his attributes and tastes would have fitted him to follow Prince Rupert."

Witham made no answer, and the man rode on until he drew bridle in front of them. Then he swung his hat off, and while the moonlight shone into his face looked down with a little ironical smile at the man and woman standing beside the horse. Witham closed one hand a trifle, and slowly straightened himself, feeling that there was need of all his self-control, for he saw his companion glance at him, and then almost too steadily at Lance Courthorne.

The latter said nothing for a space of seconds, for which Witham hated him, and yet in the tension of the suspense he noticed that the signs of indulgence he had seen on the last occasion were plainer in Courthorne's face. The little bitter smile upon his lips was also not quite in keeping with the restlessness of his fingers upon the bridle.

"Is that bridge fit for crossing, farmer?" he asked.

"Yes," said Witham quietly. "You must lead your horse."

Maud Barrington had in the meanwhile stood very still, and now moved as by an effort. "It is time I rode on, and you can show the stranger across," she said. "I have kept you at least five minutes longer than was necessary."

Courthorne, Witham fancied, shifted one foot from the stirrup, but then sat still as the farmer held his hand for the girl to mount by, while when she rode away he looked at his companion with a trace of anger as well as irony in his eyes.

"Yes," said Witham. "What you heard was correct. Miss Barrington's horse fell lame coming from one of the farms, which accounts for her passing here so late. I had just led the beast across the incompleting bridge. Still, it is not on my account I tell you this. Where have you been and why have you broken one of my conditions?"

COURTHORNE laughed. "It seems you adopt a somewhat curious tone. I went to my homestead to look for you."

"You have not answered my other question, and in the meanwhile I am your tenant, and the place is mine."

"We really needn't quibble," said Courthorne. "I came for the very simple reason that I wanted money."

"You had a thousand dollars," he said.

Courthorne made a little gesture of resignation. "It is, however, certain that I haven't got them now. They went as dollars usually do. The fact is, I have met one or two men recently who apparently know rather more about games of chance than I do, and I passed on the fame, which was my most valuable asset, to you."

"You passed me on the brand of a crime I never committed," said Witham grimly. "That, however, is not the question now. Not one dollar, except at the time agreed upon, will you get from me. Why did you come here dressed as we usually are on the prairie?"

Courthorne glanced down at the deer-skin jacket and smiled as he straightened himself into a caricature of Witham's mounted attitude. It was done cleverly.

"When I ride in this fashion we are really not very unlike, you see, and I let one or two men I met get a good look at me," he said. "I meant it as a hint that it would be wise of you to come to terms with me."

"I have done so already. You made the bargain."

"Well," said Courthorne smiling, "a contract may be modified at any time when both parties are willing."

"One is not," said Witham dryly. "You heard my terms, and nothing that you can urge will move me a hairsbreadth from them."

Courthorne looked at him steadily, and some men would have found his glance disconcerting, for now and then all the wickedness that was in him showed in his half-closed eyes. Still, he saw that the farmer was unyielding.



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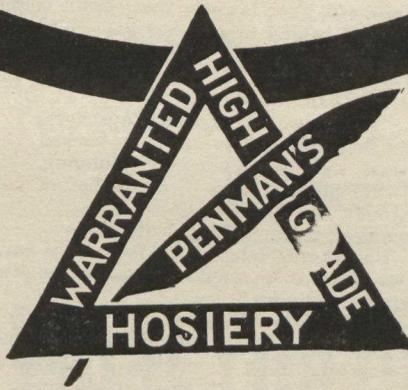
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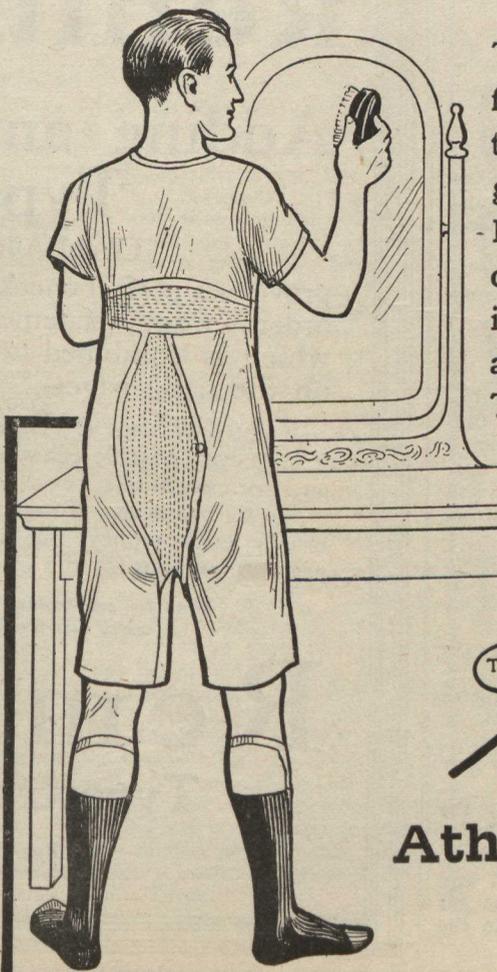
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62