

dows, outside which one or two of the older men were sitting.

"The room is very hot," said Witham tentatively.

"Yes," said the girl, "I fancy it would be cooler in the hall."

They passed out together into the shadowy hall, but a little gleam of light from the doorway behind them rested on Maud Barrington as she sat down. She looked, inquiringly at the man as though in wait for something.

"It is distinctly cooler here," he said. Maud Barrington laughed impatiently. "It is," she said.

"Well," said Witham, with a little smile. "I will try again. Wheat has made another advance lately."

The girl turned towards him with a little sparkle in her eyes. Witham saw it, and the faint shimmer of the pearls upon the whiteness of her neck and then moved his head so that he looked out upon the dusky prairie.

"Pshaw!" she said. "You know why you were brought here to-night."

Witham admired her courage, but did not turn round, for there were times when he feared his will might fail him. "I fancy I know why your aunt was so gracious to me. Do you know that her confidence almost hurts me."

"Then why don't you vindicate it and yourself? Dane would be your mouthpiece, and two or three words would be sufficient."

Witham made no answer for a space. Somebody was singing in the room behind them, and through the open window he could see the stars in the soft indigo above the great sweep of prairie. He noticed them vacantly, and took a curious impersonal interest in the two dim figures standing close together outside the window. One was a young English lad, and the other a girl in a long white dress. What they were doing there was no concern of his, but any trifle that diverted his attention a moment was welcome in that time of strain, for he had felt of late that exposure was close at hand, and was fiercely anxious to finish his work before it came. Maud Barrington's finances must be made secure before he left Silverdale, and he must remain at any cost until the wheat was sold.

Then he turned slowly towards her. "It is not your aunt's confidence that hurts me the most."

The girl looked at him steadily, the colour a trifle plainer in her face, which she would not turn from the light, and a growing wonder in her eyes.

"Lance," she said, "we both know that it is not misplaced. Still, your impassiveness does not please us."

WITHAM groaned inwardly. The swollen veins showed on his brow. His companion had leaned forward a little, so that she could see him, and one white shoulder almost touched his own. The perfume of her hair was in his nostrils, and when he remembered how cold she had once been to him, a longing that was stronger than the humiliation that came with it grew almost overwhelming. Still, because of her very trust in him, there was a wrong he could not do, and it dawned on him that a means of placing himself beyond further temptation was opening to him. Maud Barrington, he knew, would have scanty sympathy with an intrigue of the kind Courthorne's recent adventure pointed to.

"You mean, why do I not deny what you have no doubt heard?" he said. "What could one gain by that if you had heard the truth?"

Maud Barrington laughed softly. "Isn't the question useless?"

"No," said Witham, a trifle hoarsely.

The girl touched his arm almost imperceptibly as he turned his head again.

"Lance," she said, "men of your kind need not deal in subterfuge. The wheat and the bridge you built speak for you."

"Still—" persisted Witham, and the girl checked him with a smile.

"I fancy you are wasting time," she said. "Now, I wonder whether, when you were in England, you ever saw a play founded on an incident in the life of a once famous actor. At the time it rather appealed to me. The hero, with a chivalric purpose, assumed various shortcomings he had really no sympathy with—but while there is, of course, no similarity beyond the generous impulse between the cases, he did not do it clumsily. It is, however, a

trifle difficult to understand what purpose you could have, and one cannot help fancying that you owe a little to Silverdale and yourself."

It was a somewhat daring parallel; for Witham, who dare not look at his companion and saw that he had failed, knew the play.

"Isn't the subject a trifle difficult?" he asked.

"Then," said Maud Barrington, "we will end it. Still, you promised that I should understand—a good deal—when the time came."

Witham nodded gravely. "You shall," he said.

Then, somewhat to his embarrassment, the two figures moved further across the window, and as they were silhouetted against the blue duskiness, he saw that there was an arm about the waist of the girl's white dress. He became sensible that Maud Barrington saw it too, and then that, perhaps to save the situation, she was smiling. The two figures, however, vanished, and a minute later a young girl in a long white dress came in and stood still, apparently dismayed, when she saw Maud Barrington. She did not notice Witham, who sat further in the shadow. He, however, saw her face suddenly crimson.

"Have you been here long?" she asked.

"Yes," said Maud Barrington, with a significant glance towards the window. "At least ten minutes. I am sorry, but I really couldn't help it. It was very hot in the other room, and Allender was singing."

"Then," said the girl, with a little tremor in her voice, "you will not tell?"

"No," said Maud Barrington. "But you must not do it again."

The girl stooped swiftly and kissed her, then recoiled with a gasp when she saw the man, but Maud Barrington laughed.

"I think," she said, "I can answer for Mr. Courthorne's silence. Still, when I have an opportunity, I am going to lecture you."

Witham turned with a twinkle he could not repress in his eyes, and with a flutter of her dress the girl whisked away.

"I'm afraid this makes me an accessory, but I can only neglect my manifest duty, which would be to warn her mother," said Maud Barrington.

"Is it a duty?" asked Witham, feeling that the further he drifted away from the previous topic, the better it would be for him.

"Some people would fancy so," said his companion. "Lily will have a good deal of money by and by, and she is very young. Atterly has nothing but an unprofitable farm; but he is an honest lad, and I know she is very fond of him."

"And would that count against the dollars?"

Maud Barrington laughed a little. "Yes," she said quietly. "I think it would if the girl is wise. Even now such things do happen; but I fancy it is time I went back again."

She moved away, but Witham stayed where he was until the lad came in with a cigar in his hand.

"Hallo, Courthorne!" he said. "Did you notice anybody pass the window a little while ago?"

"You are the first come in through it," said Witham dryly. "The kind of things you wear admit of climbing."

The lad glanced at him with a trace of embarrassment.

"I don't quite understand you; but I meant a man," he said. "He was walking curiously, as if he was half asleep, but he slipped round the corner of the building, and I lost him."

Witham laughed. "There's a want of finish in the tale, but you needn't worry about me. I didn't see a man."

"There's rather less wisdom than usual in your remarks to-night; but I tell you I saw him," said the lad.

He passed on, and a minute later there was a cry from the inner room. "It's there again! Can't you see the face at the window?"

Witham was in the larger room next moment, and saw, as a startled girl had evidently done, a face that showed at the window?"

(To be continued.)

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