

The Impostor

(Continued from page 20.)

dently take, I presume it is."

A flush of crimson suffused the girl's cheeks. "I never meant that, and I can scarcely forgive you for fancying I did. Of course I could trust you with—you have made me use the word—the dollars, but you must realize that I could not do anything in public opposition to my uncle's opinion."

Witham was sensible of a great relief, but it did not appear advisable to show it. "There are so many things you apparently find it difficult to forgive me—and we will let this one pass," he said. "Still, I cannot help thinking that Colonel Barrington will have a good deal to answer for."

Maud Barrington made no answer, but she was sensible of a respect which appeared quite unwarranted for the dry-spoken man who, though she guessed her words stung him now and then, bore them without wincing. While she sat silent, shivering under her furs, darkness crept down. The smoky cloud dropped lower, the horizon closed in as the grey obscurity rolled up to meet them across a rapidly-narrowing strip of snow. Then she could scarcely see the horses, and the muffled drumming of their hoofs was lost in a doleful wail of wind. It also seemed to her that the cold, which was already almost insupportable, suddenly increased, as it not infrequently does in that country before the snow. Then a white powder was whirled into her face, filling her eyes and searing the skin, while, when she could see anything again, the horses were plunging at a gallop through a nlmly haze, and Witham, whitened all over, leaned forward with lowered head hurling hoarse encouragement at them. His voice reached her fitfully through the roar of wind, until sight and hearing were lost alike as the white haze closed about them, and it was not until the wild gust had passed she heard him again. He was apparently shouting, "Come nearer."

Maud Barrington was not sure whether she obeyed him or he seized and drew her towards him. She, however, felt the furs piled high about her neck and that there was an arm round her shoulder, and for a moment was sensible of an almost overwhelming revulsion from the contact. She was proud and very dainty, and fancied she knew what this man had been, while now she was drawn in to his side, and felt her chilled blood respond to the warmth of his body. Indeed, she grew suddenly hot to the neck, and felt that henceforward she could never forgive him or herself, but the mood passed almost as swiftly, for again the awful blast shrieked about them and she only remembered her companion's humanity as the differences of sex and character vanished under that destroying cold. They were no longer man and woman, but only beings of flesh and blood, clinging desperately to the life that was in them, for the first rush of the Western snowstorm has more than a physical effect, and man exposed to its fury loses all but his animal instincts in the primitive struggle with the elements.

Then, while the snow folded them closely in its white embrace during a lull, the girl recovered herself, and her strained voice was faintly audible.

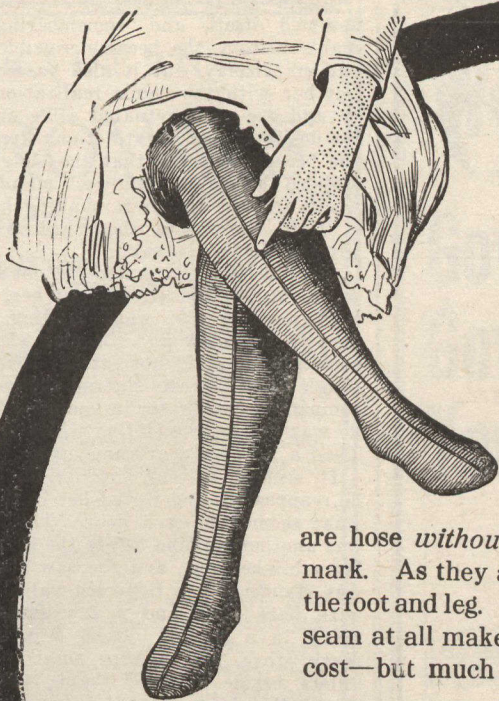
"This is my fault; why don't you tell me so?" she said.

A hoarse laugh seemed to issue from the whitened object beside her, and she was drawn object to it again. "We needn't go into that just now. You have one thing to do, and that is to keep warm."

One of the horses stumbled, the grasp that was around her became relaxed and she heard the swish of the whip followed by hoarse expletives, and did not resent it. The man, it seemed, was fighting for her life as well as his own, and even brutal virility was necessary. After that there was a space of oblivion, while the storm raged about them, until, when the wind fell a trifle, it became evident that the horses had left the trail.

"You are off the track, and will never make the Grange unless you find it!" she said.

Witham seemed to nod. "We are not going there," he said, and if he added anything, it was lost in the scream of a returning gust.



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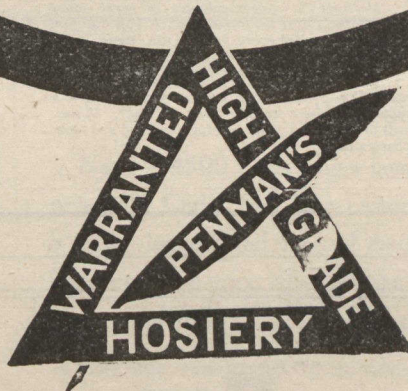
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