

"If he had waited a few minutes longer, you would have known," he said. "He is Lance Courthorne!"

This time the murmurs implied incredulity, but the man who stood swaying a little with his hand on the chair, and a smile in his half-closed eyes, made an ironical inclination.

"It's evident you don't believe it, or wish to. Still, it's true," he said.

One of the men nearest him rose and quietly thrust him into the chair.

"Sit down in the meanwhile," he said dryly. "By and by, Colonel Barrington will talk to you."

Barrington thanked him with a gesture, and glanced at the rest. "One would have preferred to carry out this inquiry more privately," he said, very slowly, but with hoarse distinctness. "Still, you have already heard so much."

Dane nodded. "I fancy you are right, sir. Because we have known and respected the man who has, at least, done a good deal for us, it would be better that we should hear the rest."

Barrington made a little gesture of agreement, and once more fixed his eyes on Witham. "Then will you tell us who you are?"

"A struggling prairie farmer," said Witham quietly. "The son of an English country doctor, who died in penury, and one who, from your point of view, could never have been entitled to more than courteous toleration from any of you."

He stopped, but—for the astonishment was passing—there was negation in the murmurs which followed, while somebody said, "Go on!"

Dane stood up. "I fancy our comrade is mistaken," he said. "Whatever he may have been, we recognize our debt to him. Still, I think he owes us a more complete explanation."

Then Maud Barrington, sitting where all could see her, signed imperiously to Alfreton, who was on his feet next moment, with Macdonald and more of the men following him.

"I," he said with a little ring in his voice and a flush in his young face, "owe him everything, and I'm not the only one. This, it seems to me, is the time to acknowledge it."

Barrington checked him with a gesture. "Sit down, all of you. Painful and embarrassing as it is, now we have gone so far, this affair must be elucidated. It would be better if you told us more."

Witham drew back a chair, and when Courthorne moved, the man who sat next to him laid a grasp on his arm. "You will oblige me by not making any remarks just now," he said dryly. "When Colonel Barrington wants to hear anything from you he'll ask you."

"There is little more," said Witham.

"I could see no hope in the old country, and came out to this one with one hundred pounds, a distant connection lent me. That sum will not go very far anywhere, as I found when, after working for other men, I bought stock and took up Government land. To hear how I tried to do three men's work for six weary years, and at times went for months together half-fed, might not interest you, though it has its bearing on what came after. The seasons were against me, and I had not the dollars to tide me over the time of drought and blizzard until a good one came. Still, though my stock died, and I could scarcely haul in the little wheat the frost and hail left me, with my worn-out team, I held on, feeling that I could achieve prosperity if I once had the chances of other men."

He stopped a moment, and Macdonald poured out a glass of wine and passed it across to him in a fashion that made the significance of what he did evident.

"We know what kind of a struggle you made by what we have seen at Silverdale," he said.

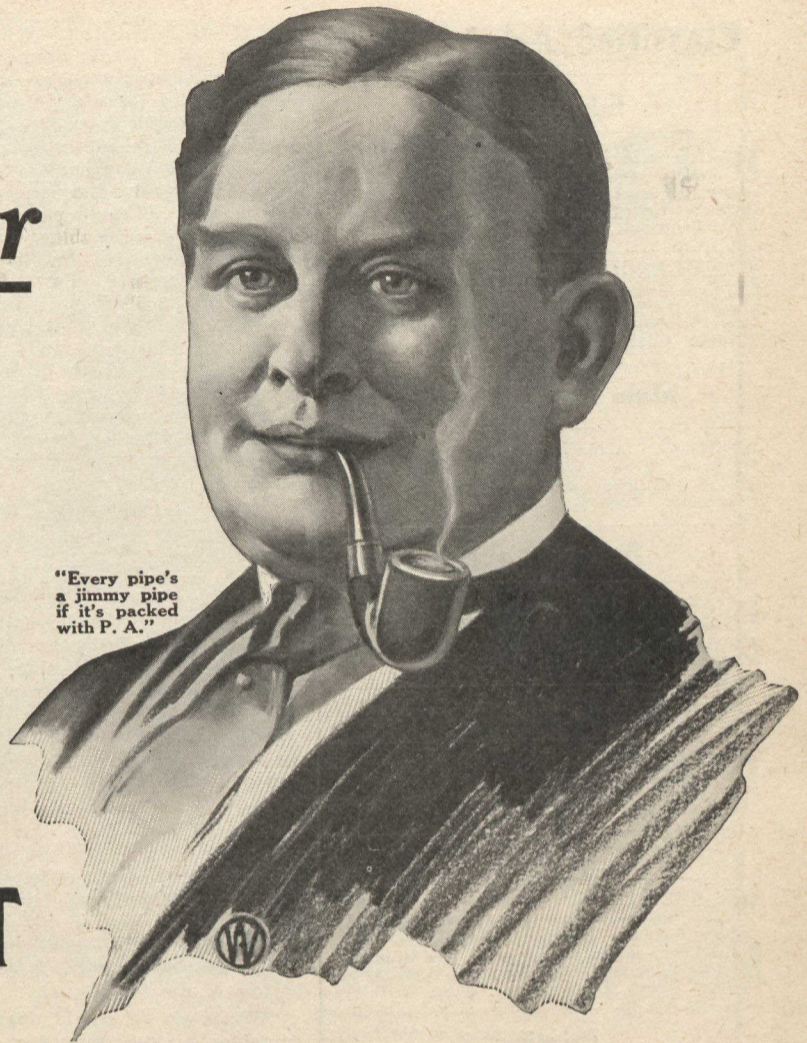
Witham put the glass aside, and turned once more to Colonel Barrington.

"Still," he said, "until Courthorne crossed my path, I had done no wrong, and I was in dire need of the money that tempted me to take his offer. He made a bargain with me that I should ride his horse and personate him, that the police troopers might leave him unsuspected to lead his comrades running whisky, while they followed me. I kept my part of the bargain, and it cost me what I fancy I can never recover, unless the trial I shall shortly face will

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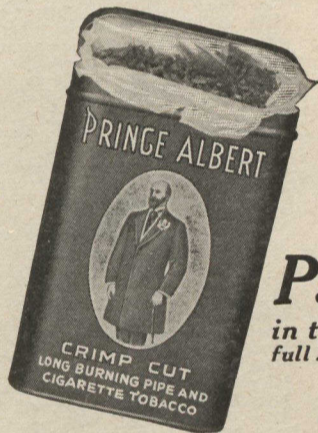
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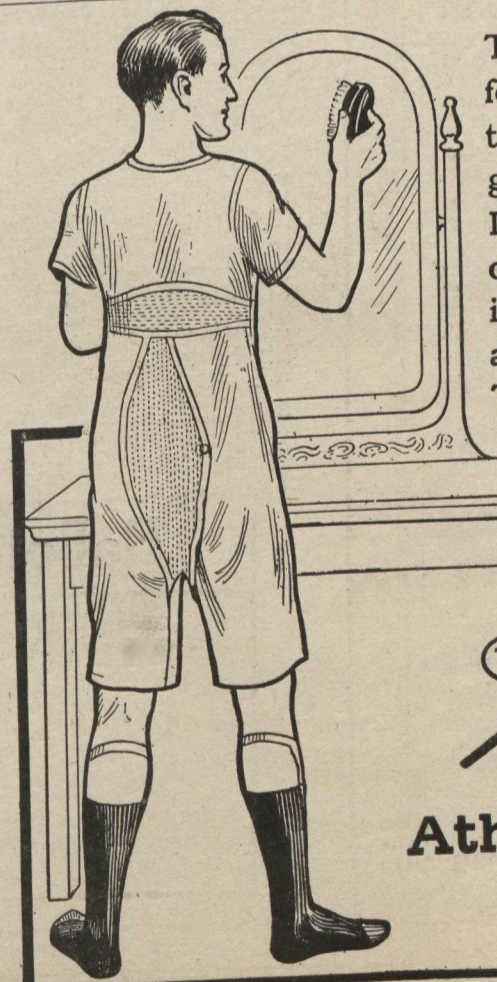
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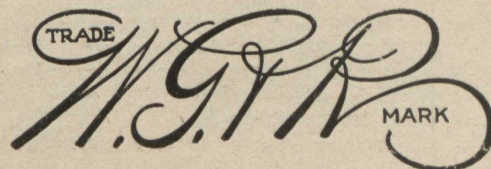
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