

inquiringly at Alfreton when one of the sleighs went on. The lad smiled at him. "Yes," he said. "He is going on to tell them we have got you."

"They would have found it out in a few more hours," said Witham.

Alfreton's eyes twinkled. "No doubt they would," he said dryly. "Still, you see, somebody was offering two to one that Dane couldn't bring you, and you know we're generally keen about any kind of wager."

The explanation, which was not quite out of keeping with the customs of the younger men at Silverdale did not content Witham, but he said nothing. So far his return had resembled a triumph, and while the sincerity of the welcome had its effect on him, he shrank a little from what he fancied might be waiting him.

The creeping darkness found them still upon the waste, and the cold grew keener when the stars peeped out. Even sound seemed frozen, and the faint muffled beat of hoofs unreal and out of place in the icy stillness of the wilderness. Still, the horses knew they were nearing home, and swung into faster pace, while the men drew fur caps down and the robes closer round them as the draught their passage made stung them with a cold that seemed to sear the skin where there was an inch left uncovered on the face. Now and then a clump of willows or a birch bluff flitted out of the dimness, grew a trifle blacker, and was left behind; but there was still no sign of habitation, and Alfreton, too chilled at last to speak, passed the reins to Witham and beat his mittened hands. Witham could scarcely grasp them, for he had lived of late in the cities, and the cold he had been sheltered from was numbing.

For another hour they slid onwards, and then a dim blur crept out of the white waste. It rose higher, cutting more blackly against the sky; and Witham recognized with a curious little quiver the birch bluff that sheltered Silverdale Grange. Then, as they swept through the gloom of it, a row of ruddy lights blinked across the snow; and Witham felt his heart beat as he watched the homestead grow into form. He had first come there an impostor, and had left it an outcast; while now it was amidst the acclamations of those who had once looked on him with suspicion he was coming back again.

Still, he was almost too cold for any definite feeling but the sting of the frost, and it was very stiffly he stood up, shaken by vague emotions, when at last the horses stopped. A great door swung open, somebody grasped his hand, there was a murmur of voices, and partly dazed by the change of temperature he blundered into the warmth of the hall. The blaze of light bewildered him, and he was but dimly sensible that the men who greeted him were helping him to shake off his furs; while the next thing he was sure of was that a little white-haired lady was holding out her hand.

"We are very glad to see you back," she said, with a simplicity that yet suggested stateliness. "Your friends insisted on coming over to welcome you, and Dane will not let you keep them waiting too long. Dinner is almost ready."

Witham could not remember what he answered, but Miss Barrington smiled at him as she moved away, for the flush in his face was very eloquent. The man was very grateful for that greeting, and what it implied. It was a few minutes later when he found himself alone with Dane, who laughed softly as he nodded to him.

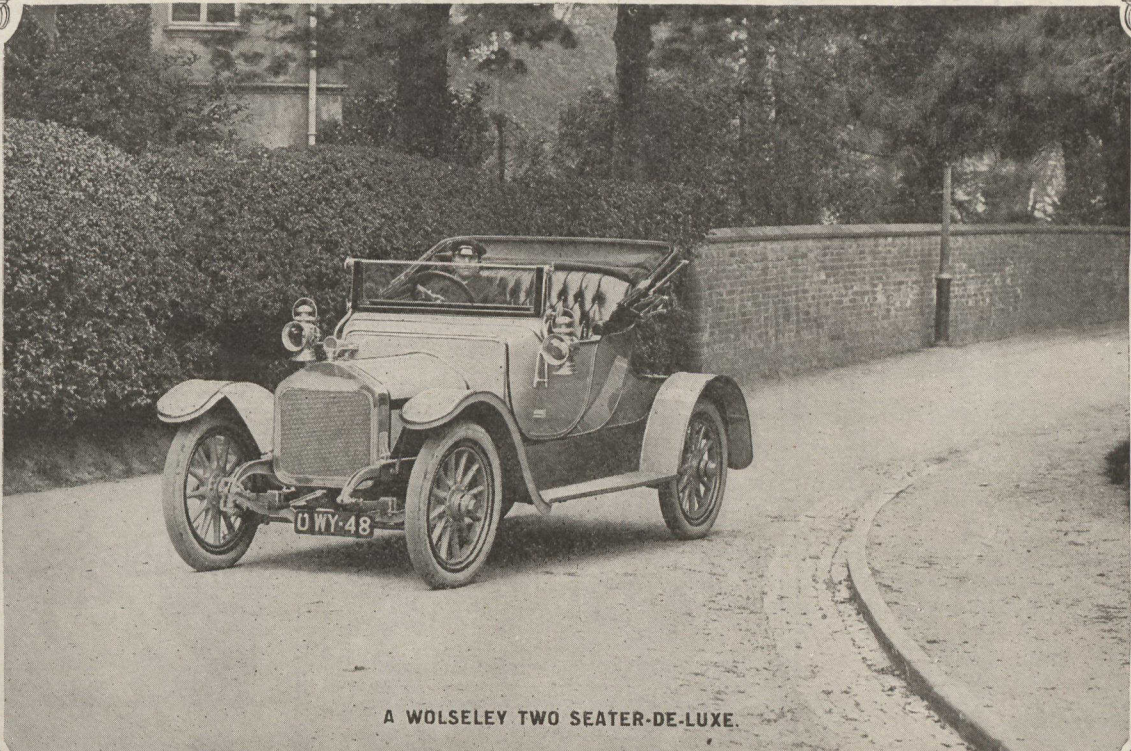
"You are convinced at last?" he said. "Still there is a little more of the same thing to be faced; and, if it would relieve you, I will send for Alfreton, who has some taste in that direction, to fix that tie for you. You have been five minutes over it, and it evidently does not please you. It's the first time I've ever seen you worry about your dress."

Witham turned, and a curious smile crept into his face as he laid a lean hand that shook a little on the toilet table.

"I also think it's the first time these fingers wouldn't do what I wanted them. You can deduce what you please from that," he said.

Dane only nodded, and when they went down together laid a kindly grasp upon his comrade's arm as he led him into the great dining-room. Every man

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