

such capacities, he had not attained to greater comfort, the answer was simple. Witham had no money, and the seasons had fought against him. He had done his uttermost with the means at his disposal, and now he knew he was beaten.

A doleful wind moaned about the lonely building and set the roof shingles rattling overhead. Now and then the stove crackled, or the lamp flickered, and any one unused to the prairie would have felt the little log-house very desolate and lonely. There was no other human habitation within a league, only a great waste of whitened grass relieved about the homestead by the raw clods of the fall ploughing; for, while his scattered neighbours, for the most part, put their trust in horses and cattle, Witham had been among the first to realize the capacities of that land as a wheat-growing country.

Now, clad in well-worn jean trousers and an old deerskin jacket, he looked down at the bundle of documents on his knee, accounts unpaid, a banker's intimation that no more cheques would be honoured, and a mortgage deed. They were not pleasant reading, and the man's face clouded as he pencilled notes on some of them, but there was no weakness or futile protest in it. Defeat was plain between the lines of all he read, but he was going on stubbornly until the struggle was ended, as others of his kind had done, there at the western limit of the furrows of the plough and in the great province further east which is one of the world's granaries. They went under and were forgotten, but they showed the way, and while their guerdon was usually six feet of prairie soil, the wheatfields, mills, and railroads came, for it is written plainly on the new North-West that no man may live and labour for himself alone, and there are many who, realizing it, instinctively ask very little, and freely give their best for the land that but indifferently shelters them.

Presently, however, there was a knocking at the door, and though this was most unusual, Witham only quietly moved his head when a bitter blast came in, and a man wrapped in furs stood in the opening.

"I'll put my horse in the stable while I've got my furs on. It's a bitter night," he said.

Witham nodded. "You know where the lantern is," he said. "There's some chop in the manger, and you needn't spare the oats in the bin. At present prices it doesn't pay to haul them in."

The man closed the door silently, and it was ten minutes before he returned, and sloughing off his furs dropped into a chair beside the stove. "I got supper at Broughton's, and don't want anything but shelter to-night," he said. "Shake that pipe out and try one of these instead."

He laid a cigar case on the table, and though well worn it was of costly make, with a good deal of silver about it, while Witham, who lighted one, knew that the cigars were good. He had no esteem for his visitor, but men are not censorious upon the prairie, and Western hospitality is always free.

"Where have you come from, Courthorne?" he said quietly.

The other man laughed a little. "The long trail," he said. "The Dakotas, Colorado, Montana. Cleaned up one thousand dollars at Regent, and might have got more, but some folks down there seemed tired of me. The play was quite regular, but they have apparently been getting virtuous lately."

"And now?" said Witham, with polite indifference.

Courthorne made a little gesture of deprecation.

"I'm back again with the rustlers."

Witham's nod signified comprehension, for the struggle between the great range-holders across the frontier and the smaller settlers who with legal right invaded their cattle runs was just over. It had been fought out bitterly with dynamite and rifles, and when at last, with the aid of the United States cavalry, peace was made, sundry broken men and mercenaries who had taken the pay of both parties, seeing their occupation gone, had found a fresh scope for their energies in smuggling liquor, and on opportunity transferring cattle, without their owners' sanction, across the frontier. That was then a prohibition country, and the profits and risks



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