

THE IMPOSTOR



BY
**HAROLD
BINDLOSS**

CHAPTER XXIII.—(Continued.)

Payne called to a comrade outside, who was, as it happened, new to the force, and they spent at least ten minutes questioning the servants and going up and down the house. Then, as they glanced into the general room again, the trooper looked deprecatingly at his officer.

"I fancied I heard somebody riding by the bluff just before we reached the house," he said.

Payne wheeled round with a flash in his eyes. "Then you have lost us our man. Out with you, and tell Jackson to try the bluff for a trail."

They had gone in another moment, and Witham still sat at the foot of the table and Barrington at the head, while the rest of the company were scattered, some wonderingly silent, though others talked in whispers, about the room. As yet they felt only consternation and astonishment.

CHAPTER XXIV.

Courthorne Makes Reparation.

THE silence in the big room had grown oppressive when Barrington raised his head and sat stiffly upright.

"What has happened has been a blow to me, and I am afraid I am scarcely equal to entertaining you to-night," he said. "I should, however, like Dane and Macdonald, and one or two of the older men, to stay a while. There is still, I fancy, a good deal for us to do."

The others turned towards the door, but as they passed Witham Miss Barrington turned and touched his shoulder. The man, looking up suddenly, saw her and her niece standing close beside her.

"Madam," he said hoarsely, though it was Maud Barrington he glanced at, "the comedy is over. Well, I promised you an explanation, and now you have it you will try not to think too bitterly of me. I cannot ask you to forgive me."

The little white-haired lady pointed to the ears of wheat which stood gleaming ruddy-bronze in front of him.

"That," she said, very quietly, "will make it easier."

Maud Barrington said nothing, but everyone in the room saw her standing a moment beside the man with a little flush in her face and no blame in her eyes. Then she passed on, but, short as it was, the pause had been very significant, for it seemed that whatever the elders of the community might decide, the two women, whose influence was supreme at Silverdale, had given the imposter absolution.

The girl could not analyse her feelings, but through them all a vague relief was uppermost; for whatever he had been, it was evident the man had done one wrong only, and daringly, and that was a good deal easier to forgive than several incidents in Courthorne's past would have been. Then she was conscious that Miss Barrington's eyes were upon her.

"Aunt," she said with a little tremor in her voice, "it is almost bewildering. Still one seemed to feel that what that man has done could never have been the work of Lance Courthorne."

Miss Barrington made no answer, but her face was very grave; and just then those nearest it drew back a little from the door. A trooper stood outside it, and his carbine glinting in the light, and another was silhouetted against the sky, sitting motionless in his saddle further back on the prairie.

"The police are still there," said somebody.

One by one they passed out under the trooper's gaze, but there was the

usual delay in harnessing and saddling, and the first vehicle had scarcely rolled away when again the beat of hoofs and thin jingle of steel came portentously out of the silence. Maud Barrington shivered a little as she heard it.

In the meanwhile, the few who remained had seated themselves about Colonel Barrington. When there was quietness again he glanced at Witham, who still sat at the foot of the table.

"Have you anything more to tell us?" he asked. "These gentlemen are here to advise me if necessary."

"Yes," said Witham quietly. "I shall probably leave Silverdale before morning, and have now to hand you a statement of my agreement with Courthorne and the result of my farming here, drawn up by a Winnipeg accountant. Here is also a document in which I have taken the liberty of making you and Dane my assigns. You will, as authorized by it, pay to Courthorne the sum due to him, and with your consent, which you have power to withhold, I purpose taking one thousand dollars only of the balance that remains to me. I have it here now, and in the meanwhile surrender it to you. Of the rest, you will make whatever use that appears desirable for the general benefit of Silverdale. Courthorne has absolutely no claim upon it."

He laid a wallet on the table, and Dane glanced at Colonel Barrington, who nodded when he returned it unopened.

"We will pass it without counting. You accept the charge, sir?" he said.

"Yes," said Barrington gravely. "It seems it is forced on me. Well, we will glance through the statement."

For at least ten minutes nobody spoke, and then Dane said, "There are prairie farmers who would consider what he is leaving behind him a competence."

"If this agreement, which was apparently verbal, is confirmed by Courthorne, the entire sum rightfully belongs to the man he made his tenant," said Barrington; and Macdonald smiled gravely as he glanced at Witham.

"I think we can accept the statement that it was made, without question, sir," he said.

Witham shook his head. "I claim one thousand dollars as the fee of my services, and they should be worth that much; but I will take no more."

"Are we not progressing a little too rapidly, sir?" said Dane. "It seems to me we have yet to decide whether it is necessary that the man who has done so much for us should leave Silverdale."

Witham smiled a trifle grimly. "I think," he said, "that question will very shortly be answered for you."

Macdonald held his hand up, and a rapid thud of hoofs came faintly through the silence.

"TROOPERS! They are coming here," he said.

"Yes," said Witham. "I fancy they will relieve you from any further difficulty."

Dane strode to one of the windows, and glanced at Colonel Barrington as he pulled back the catch. Witham, however, shook his head, and a little flush crept into Dane's bronzed face.

"Sorry. Of course, you are right," he said. "It will be better that they should acquit you."

No one moved for a few more minutes, and then with a trooper behind him Sergeant Stimson came in, and laid his hand on Witham's shoulder.

"I have a warrant for your apprehension, Farmer Witham," he said. "You

probably know the charge against you."

"Yes," said Witham, simply. "I hope to refute it. I will come with you."

He went out, and Barrington stared at the men about him. "I did not catch the name before. That was the man who shot the police trooper in Alberta?"

"No, sir," said Dane very quietly. "Nothing would induce me to believe it of him."

Barrington looked at him in bewilderment. "But he must have done—unless," he said, and ended with a little gasp. "Good Lord! There was the faint resemblance, and they changed horses—it is horrible."

Dane's eyes were very compassionate as he laid his hand gently on his leader's shoulder.

"Sir," he said, "you have our sympathy, and I am sorry that to offer it is all we can do. Now, I think, we have stayed too long already."

They went out and left Colonel Barrington sitting alone with a grey face at the head of the table.

IT was a minute or two later when

Witham swung himself into the saddle at the door of the Grange. All the vehicles had not left as yet, and there was a little murmur of sympathy—when the troopers closed in about him. Still before they rode away, one of the men wheeled his horse aside, and Witham saw Maud Barrington standing bare-headed by his stirrup. The moonlight showed that her face was impassive but curiously pale.

"We could not let you go without a word; and you will come back to us with your innocence made clear," she said.

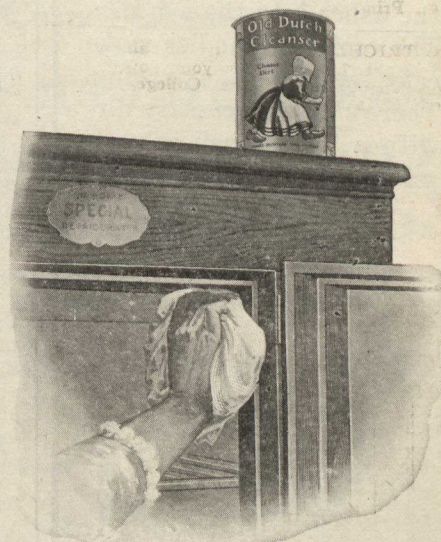
Her voice had a little ring in it that carried far, and her companions heard her. What Witham said, they could not hear, and he did not remember it, but he swung his hat off, and those who saw the girl at his stirrup recognized with confusion that she alone had proclaimed her faith, while they had stood aside from him. Then the Sergeant raised his hand and the troopers rode forward with their prisoner.

In the meanwhile, Courthorne was pressing south for the American frontier and daylight was just creeping across the prairie when the pursuers, who had found his trail and the ranch he obtained a fresh horse at, had sight of him. There were three of them, riding wearily, grimed with dust, when a lonely mounted figure showed for a moment on the crest of a rise. In another minute it dipped into a hollow, and Corporal Payne smiled grimly.

"I think we have him now. The creek can't be far away, and he's west of the bridge," he said. "While we try to head him off, you'll follow behind him Hilton."

One trooper sent the spurs in and, while the others swung off, rode straight on. Courthorne was at least a mile from them, but they were nearer the bridge, and Payne surmised that his jaded horse would fail him if he essayed to ford the creek and climb the farther side of the deep ravine it flowed through. They saw nothing of him when they swept across the rise, for here and there a grove of willows stretched out across the prairie from the sinuous band of trees in front of them. These marked the river hollow, and Payne knowing that the chase might be ended in a few more minutes did not spare the spur. He also remembered, as he tightened his grip on the bridle, the white face of Trooper Shannon flecked with the drifting snow.

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