

THE IMPROVISOR



BY
**HAROLD
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SYNOPSIS: Rancher Witham was in hard luck in the early days of the Canadian West. Two harvests had been frosted and his banker would take no further risks. Then comes Lance Courthorne, a cattle "rustler" and whiskey smuggler, with an offer of a hundred dollars if Witham will ride Courthorne's black charger down to Montana so as to throw the Police off Courthorne's trail. Witham, facing starvation, accepts.

CHAPTER III.

Trooper Shannon's Quarrel.

THERE was bitter frost in the darkness outside when two young men stood talking in the stables of a little outpost lying a long ride back from the settlement in the lonely prairie. One leaned against a manger with a pipe in his hand, while the spotless, softly-gleaming harness hung up behind him showed what his occupation had been. The other stood bolt upright with lips set, and a faint greyness which betokened strong emotion showing through his tan. The lantern above them flickered in the icy draughts, and from out of the shadows beyond its light came the stamping of restless horses and the smell of prairie hay which is pungent with the odours of wild peppermint.

The two lads, and they were very little more, were friends, in spite of the difference in their upbringing, for there are few distinctions between caste and caste in that country where manhood is still esteemed the greatest thing, and the primitive virtues count for more than wealth or intellect. Courage and endurance still command respect in the North-West, and that both the lads possessed them was made evident by the fact that they were troopers of the North-West police.

Trooper Shannon was an Irishman from the bush of Ontario, Trooper Payne, English, and a scion of a somewhat distinguished family in the old country, but while he told nobody why he left it suddenly, nobody thought of asking him. He was known to be a bold rider and careful of his beast, and that was sufficient for his comrades and the keen-eyed Sergeant Stimson. He glanced at his companion thoughtfully as he said, "She was a pretty girl. You knew her in Ontario?"

Shannon's hands trembled a little. "Sure," he said, "Larry's place was just a mile beyond our clearing, an' there was never a bonnier thing than Ailly Blake came out from the old country—but is it need there is for talking when ye've seen her? There was once I watched her smile at ye with the black eyes that would have melted the heart out of any man. Waking and sleeping they're with me still."

Three generations of the Shannons had hewn the lonely clearing further into the bush of Ontario and married the daughters of the soil, but the Celtic strain, it was evident, had not run out yet. Payne, however, came of English stock, and expressed himself differently.

"It was a — shame," he said. "Of course he flung her over. I think you saw him, Pat?"

Shannon's face grew greyer, and he quivered visibly as his passion shook him, while Payne felt his own blood pulse faster as he remembered the graceful dark-eyed girl who had given him and his comrade many a welcome meal when their duty took them near her brother's homestead. That was, however, before one black day for Ailly and Larry Blake when Lance Courthorne also rode that way.

"Yes," said the lad from Ontario, "I was driving in for the stores when I met him in the willow bluff, an' Courthorne pulls his devil of a black horse

up with a little ugly smile on the lips of him when I swung the waggon right across the trail.

"That's not civil, trooper," says he.

"I'm wanting a word," says I, with the black hate choking me at the sight of him. "What have ye done with Ailly?"

"Is it anything to you?" says he.

"It's everything," says I. "And if ye will not tell me I'll tear it out of ye."

"Courthorne laughs a little, but I saw the devil in his eyes. 'I don't think you're quite man enough,' says he, sitting very quiet on the big black horse. 'Anyway, I can't tell you where she is just now, because she left the dancing saloon she was in down in Montana when I last saw her.'

"I had the big whip that day, and I forgot everything as I heard the hiss of it round my shoulder. It came home across the ugly face of him, and then I flung it down and grabbed the carbine as he swung the black round with one hand fumbling in his jacket. It came out empty, an' we sat there a moment, the two of us, Courthorne white as death, his eyes like burning coals, and the fingers of me trembling on the carbine. Sorrow on the man that he hadn't a pistol, or I'd have sent the black soul of him to the devil it came from."

The lad panted, and Payne, who had guessed at his hopeless devotion to the girl who had listened to Courthorne, made a gesture of disapproval that was tempered by sympathy. It was for her sake, he fancied, Shannon had left the Ontario clearing and followed Larry Blake to the West.

"I'm glad he hadn't, Pat," said Payne. "What was the end of it?"

"I remembered," said the other with a groan, "remembered I was Trooper Shannon an' dropped the carbine into the waggon. Courthorne wheels the black horse round, an' I saw the red line across the face of him.

"You'll be sorry for this, my lad," says he."

"He's a dangerous man," Payne said thoughtfully. "Pat, you came near being a — ass that day. Any way, it's time we went in, and as Larry's here I shouldn't wonder if we saw Courthorne again before the morning."

THE icy cold went through them to the bone as they left the stables, and it was a relief to enter the loghouse, which was heated to fustiness by the glowing stove. A lamp hung from a rough birch beam, and its uncertain radiance showed motionless figures wrapped in blankets in the bunks round the walls. Two men were, however, dressing, and one already in uniform sat at a table talking to another swathed in furs, who was from his appearance a prairie farmer. The man at the table was lean and weather-bronzed, with grizzled hair and observant eyes. They were fixed steadily upon the farmer, who knew that very little which happened upon the prairie escaped the vigilance of Sergeant Stimson.

"It's straight talk you're giving me, Larry? What do you figure on making by it?" he said.

The farmer laughed mirthlessly. "Not much, anyway, beyond the chance of getting a bullet in me back or me best steer lifted one dark night. 'Tis not forgiving the rustlers are, and Courthorne's the devil," he said. "But listen now, Sergeant; I've told ye where he is, and if ye're not fit to corral him I'll ride him down meself."

Sergeant Stimson wrinkled his forehead. "If anybody knows what they're after, it should be you," he said, watching the man out of the corner of his eyes. "Still, I'm a little worried as to

why, when you'll get nothing for it, you're anxious to serve the State."

The farmer clenched a big hand. "Sergeant, you that knows everything, will ye drive me mad, an' to — with the State!" he said. "Sure, it's gospel I'm telling ye, an', as you're knowing well, it's me could tell where the boys who ride at midnight drop many a keg. Well, if ye will have your reason, it was Courthorne who put the black shame on me an' mine."

Sergeant Stimson nodded, for he had already suspected this.

"Then," he said dryly, "we'll give you a chance of helping us to put the handcuffs on him. Now, because they wouldn't risk the bridge, and the ice is not thick everywhere, there are just two ways they could bring the stuff across, and I figure we'd be near the thing if we fixed on Graham's Pool. Still, Courthorne's no kind of fool, and just because that crossing seems the likeliest he might try the other one. You're ready for duty, Trooper Payne?"

The lad stood straight. "I can turn out in ten minutes, sir," he said.

"Then," and Sergeant Stimson raised his voice a trifle, "you will ride at once to the rise a league outside the settlement, and watch the Montana trail. Courthorne will probably be coming over from Witham's soon after you get there, riding the big black, and you'll keep out of sight and follow him. If he heads for Carson's Crossing ride for Graham's at a gallop, where you'll find me with the rest. If he makes for the bridge, you will overtake him if you can and find out what he's after. It's quite likely he'll tell you nothing, and you will not arrest him, but bearing in mind that every minute he spends there will be a loss to the rustlers you'll keep him as long as you can. Trooper Shannon, you'll ride at once to the bluff above Graham's Pool, and watch the trail. Stop any man who rides that way, and if it's Courthorne keep him until the rest of the boys come up with me. You've got your duty quite straight, both of you?"

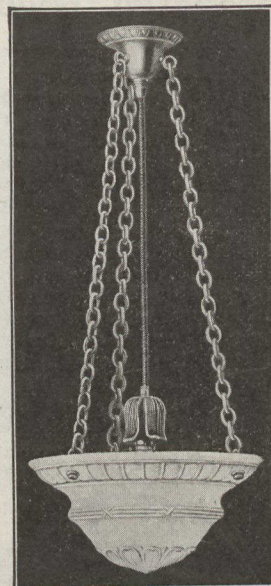
The lads saluted, and went out, while the Sergeant smiled a little as he glanced at the farmer, and the men who were dressing.

"It's steep chances we'll have Mr. Courthorne's company to-morrow, boys," he said. "Fill up the kettle, Tom, and serve out a pint of coffee. There are reasons why we shouldn't turn out too soon. We'll saddle in an hour or so."

Two of the men went out, and the stinging blast that swept in through the open door smote a smoky smear across the blinking lamp and roused a sharper crackling from the stove. Then one returned with the kettle and there was silence, when the fusty heat resumed its sway. Now and then a tired trooper murmured in his sleep, or there was a snapping in the stove, while the icy wind moaned about the building and the kettle commenced a soft sibilation, but nobody moved or spoke. Three shadowy figures in uniform sat just outside the light soaking in the grateful warmth while they could, for they knew that they might spend the next night unsheltered from the Arctic cold of the wilderness. The Sergeant sat with thoughtful eyes and wrinkled forehead where the flickering radiance forced up his lean face and silhouetted his spare outline on the rough boarding behind him, and close by the farmer sucked silently at his pipe, waiting, with a stony calm that sprang from fierce impatience the reckoning with the man who had brought black shame upon him.

It was about this time when Witham stood shivering a little with the bridle

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