

The Impostor

(Continued from page 18.)

back league beyond league across these broad provinces, and the wind that came up out of the great emptiness emphasized its solitude. A man from the cities would have heard nothing but the creakings of the waggon and the drumming fall of hoofs, but Witham heard the grasses patter as they swayed beneath the bitter blasts stiff with frost, and the moan of swinging boughs in a far-off willow bluff. It was these things that guided him, for he had left the rutted trail, and here and there the swish beneath the wheels told of taller grass, while the bluff ran black athwart the horizon when that had gone. Then twigs crackled beneath them as the horses picked their way amidst the shadowy trees stunted by a ceaseless struggle with the wind, and Witham shook the creeping drowsiness from him when they came out into the open again.

Still, he grew a trifle dazed as the miles went by, and because of it indulged in memories he had shaken off at other times. They were blurred recollections of the land he had left eight years ago, pictures of sheltered England, half-forgotten music, the voices of friends who no longer remembered him, and the smiles in a girl's bright eyes. Then he settled himself more firmly in the driving seat, and with numbed fingers sought a tighter grip of the reins as the memory of the girl's soft answer to a question he had asked brought his callow ambitions back.

He was to hew his way to fortune in the West, and then come back for her, but the girl who had clung to him with wet cheeks when he left her had apparently grown tired of waiting, and Witham sent back her letters in return for a silver-printed card. That was six years ago, and now none of the dollars he had brought into the country remained to him. He realized, dispassionately, and without egotism, that this was through no fault of his, for he knew that better men had been crushed and beaten.

It was, however, time he had done with these reflections, for while he sat half-dazed and more than half-frozen the miles had been flitting by, and now the team knew they were not very far from home. Little by little their pace increased, and Witham was almost astonished to see another bluff black against the night ahead of him. As usual in that country, the willows and birches crawled up the sides and just showed their heads above the sinuous crest of a river hollow. It was very dark when the waggon lurched in among them, and it cost the man an effort to discern the winding trail which led down into the blackness of the hollow. In places the slope was almost precipitous, and it behoved him to be careful of the horses, which could not be replaced. Without them he could not plough in spring, and his life did not appear of any especial value in comparison with theirs just then.

The team, however, were evidently bent on getting home as soon as possible, and Witham's fingers were too stiff to effectively grasp the reins. A swinging bough also struck one of the horses, and when it plunged and flung up its head the man reeled a little in his seat. Before he recovered the team were going downhill at a gallop. Witham flung himself bodily backwards with tense muscles, and the reins slipping a trifle in his hands, knowing that though he bore against them with all his strength the team were leaving the trail. Then the waggon jolted against a tree, one horse stumbled, picked up its stride, and went on at a headlong gallop. The man felt the wind rush past him and saw the dim trees whirl by, but he could only hold on and wonder what would take place when they came to the bottom. The bridge the trail went round by was some distance to the right, and because the frost had just set in he knew the ice on the river would not bear the load, even if the horses could keep their footing.

He had not, however, long to wonder. Once more a horse stumbled, there was a crash, and a branch hurled Witham backwards into the waggon, which came to a standstill suddenly. When he rose something warm was running down his face, and there was a red smear on the hand he lighted the lantern with. When that was done he flung himself down

from the waggon, dreading what he would find. The flickering radiance showed him that the pole had snapped, and while one broncho still stood trembling on its feet the other lay inert amidst a tangle of harness. The man's face grew a trifle grimmer as he threw the light upon it, and then, stooping, glanced at one doubled leg. It was evident that fate, which did nothing by halves, had dealt him a crushing blow. The last faint hope he clung to had vanished now.

He was, however, a humane man, and considerate of the beasts that worked for him, and accordingly thrust his hand inside the old fur coat, when he had loosed the uninjured horse, and drew out a long-bladed knife. Then he knelt and, setting down the lantern, felt for the place to strike. When he found it his courage almost deserted him, and meeting the eyes that seemed to look up at him with dumb appeal, turned his head away. Still, he was a man who would not shirk a painful duty, and shaking off the sense of revulsion turned again and stroked the beast's head.

"It's all I can do for you," he said.

Then his arm came down, and a tremor ran through the quivering frame, while Witham set his lips tightly as his hand grew warm. The thing was horrible to him, but the life he led had taught him the folly of weakness, and he was too pitiful to let his squeamishness overcome him.

Still, he shivered when it was done, and rubbing the knife in the withered leaves, rose and made shift to gird a rug about the uninjured horse. Then he cut the reins and tied them, and mounting without stirrups rode towards the bridge. The horse went quietly enough now, and the man allowed it to choose its way. He was going home to find shelter from the cold, because his animal instincts prompted him, but otherwise, almost without volition, in a state of dispassionate indifference. Nothing more, he fancied, could well befall him.

CHAPTER II.

Lance Courthorne.

IT was late when Witham reached his log-built house, but he set out once more with his remaining horse before the lingering daylight crept out of the east, to haul the waggon home. He also spent most of the day in repairing it, because occupation of any kind that would keep him from unpleasant reflections appeared advisable, and to allow anything to fall out of use was distasteful to him, although as the waggon had been built for two horses he had little hope of driving it again. It was a bitter, grey day, with a low, smoky sky, and seemed very long to Witham; but evening came at last, and he was left with nothing between him and his thoughts.

He lay in a dilapidated chair beside the stove, and the little bare room through which its pipe ran was permeated with the smell of fresh shavings, hot iron, and the fumes of indifferent tobacco. A carpenter's bench ran along one end of it, and was now occupied by a new waggon pole the man had fashioned out of a slender birch. A Marlin rifle, an axe, and a big saw hung beneath the head of an antelope on the wall above the bench, and all of them showed signs of use and glistened with oil. Opposite to them a few shelves were filled with simple crockery and cooking utensils, and these also shone spotlessly. There was a pair of knee boots in one corner with a patch partly sewn on to one of them, and the harness in another showed traces of careful repair. A book-case hung above them, and its somewhat tattered contents indicated that the man who had chosen and evidently handled them frequently possessed tastes any one who did not know that country would scarcely have expected to find in a prairie farmer. A table and one or two rude chairs made by their owner's hands completed the furniture; but while all hinted at poverty, it also suggested neatness, industry, and care, for the room bore the impress of its occupier's individuality, as rooms not infrequently do.

It was not difficult to see that he was frugal, though possibly from necessity rather than taste, not sparing of effort, and had a keen eye for utility, and if that suggested the question why, with

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