



CHAPTER IX. (Continued).

SHE did not hear them, but at last the door swung open, and carrying a load of birch branches Witham staggered in. He dropped them, strove to close the door, and failed, then leaned against it, gasping, with a livid face, for there are few men who can withstand the cold of a snow-laden gale at forty degrees below.

How Maud Barrington closed the door she did not know; but it was with a little imperious gesture she turned to the man.

"Shake those furs at once," she said; and drawing him towards the stove held up the steaming cup. "Now sit there and drink it."

Witham stooped and reached out for the can, but the girl swept it off the stove. "Oh, I know the silver was for me," she said. "Still, is this a time for trifles such as that?"

Worn out by a very grim struggle, Witham did as he was bidden, and looked up with a twinkle in his eyes, when with the faintest trace of colour in her cheeks the girl sat down close to him and drew part of the fur robe about him.

"I really believe you were a little pleased to see me come back just now," he said.

"Was that quite necessary?" asked Maud Barrington. "Still, I was."

Witham made a little deprecatory gesture. "Of course," he said. "Now we can resume our former footing tomorrow, but in the meanwhile I would like to know why you are so hard upon me, Miss Barrington, because I really have not done much harm to any one at Silverdale. Your aunt—and he made a little respectful inclination of his head which pleased the girl—"is at least giving me a fair trial."

"It is difficult to tell you—but it was your own doing," said Maud Barrington. "At the beginning you prejudiced us when you told us you could only play cards indifferently. It was so unnecessary, and we knew a good deal about you!"

"Well," said Witham quietly, "I have only my word to offer, and I wonder if you will believe me now, but I don't think I ever won five dollars at cards in my life."

Maud Barrington watched him closely, but his tone carried conviction, and again she was glad that he attempted no explanation. "I am quite willing to take it," she said. "Still, you can understand—"

"Yes," said Witham. "It puts a strain upon your faith, but some day I may be able to make a good deal that puzzles you quite clear."

Maud Barrington glanced at the flask. "I wonder if that is connected with the explanation, but I will wait. Now, you have not lighted your cigar."

Witham understood that the topic was dismissed, and sat thoughtfully still while the girl nestled against the birch logs close beside him under the same furs; for the wind went through the building and the cold was unbearable a few feet from the stove. The birch rafters shook above their heads, and every now and then it seemed that a roaring gust would lift the roof from them. Still the stove glowed and snapped, and close in about it there was a drowsy heat, while presently the girl's eyes grew heavy. Finally—for there are few who can resist the desire for sleep in the cold of the Northwest—her head sank back, and Witham, rising very slowly, held his breath as he piled the furs about her. That done, he

stooped and looked down upon her while the blood crept to his face. Maud Barrington lay very still, the long, dark lashes resting on her cold-tinted cheeks, and the patrician serenity of her face was even more marked in her sleep. Then he turned away, feeling like one who had committed a desecration, knowing that he had looked too long already upon the sleeping girl who believed he had been an outcast and yet had taken his word; for it was borne in upon him that a time would come when he would try her faith even more severely. Moving softly, he paced up and down the room.

Witham afterwards wondered how many miles he walked that night, for though the loghouse was not longer than thirty feet, the cold bit deep; but at last he heard a sigh as he glanced towards the stove, and immediately swung round again. When he next turned, Miss Barrington stood upright, a little flushed in face, but otherwise very calm; and the man stood still, shivering in spite of his efforts, and blue with cold. The wind had fallen, but the sting of the frost that followed it made itself felt beside the stove.

"You had only your deerskin jacket—and you let me sleep under all the furs," she said.

Witham shook his head, and hoped he did not look as guilty as he felt, when he remembered that it must have been evident to his companion that the furs did not get into the position they had occupied themselves.

"I only fancied you were a trifle drowsy and not inclined to talk," he said, with an absence of concern, for which Miss Barrington, who did not believe him, felt grateful. "You see"—and the inspiration was a trifle too evident—"I was too sleepy to notice anything myself. Still, I am glad you are awake now, because I must make my way to the Grange."

"But the snow will be ever so deep, and I could not come," said Maud Barrington.

Witham shook his head. "I'm afraid you must stay here; but I will be back with Colonel Barrington in a few hours at latest."

The girl deemed it advisable to hide her consternation. "But you might not find the trail," she said. "The ravine would lead you to Graham's homestead."

"Still," said Witham slowly, "I am going to the Grange."

Then Maud Barrington remembered, and glanced aside from him. It was evident this man thought of everything; and she made no answer when Witham, who thrust more billets into the stove, turned to her with a little smile.

"I think we need remember nothing when we meet again, beyond the fact that you will give me a chance of showing that the Lance Courthorne, whose fame you know, has ceased to exist."

Then he went out, and the girl stood with flushed cheeks looking down at the furs he had left behind him.

CHAPTER X.

Maud Barrington's Promise.

DAYLIGHT had not broken across the prairie, when, floundering through a foot of dusty snow, Witham reached the Grange. He was aching from fatigue and cold, and the deerskin jacket stood out from his numbed body, stiff with frost, when, leaning heavily on a table, he awaited Colonel Barrington. The latter, on entering, stared at him and then flung open a cupboard and poured out a glass of wine.

"Drink that before you talk. You look half dead," he said.

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Witham shook his head. "Perhaps you had better hear me first."

Barrington thrust the glass upon him. "I could make nothing of what you told me while you speak like that. Drink it, and then sit still until you get used to the different temperature."

Witham drained the glass and sank limply into a chair. As yet his face was colourless, though his chilled flesh tingled horribly as the blood once more crept into the surface tissues. Then he fixed his eyes upon his host as he told his story. Barrington stood very straight watching his visitor, but his face was drawn, for the resolution which supported him through the day was less noticeable in the early morning, and it was evident now at least that he was an old man carrying a heavy load of anxiety. Still, as the story proceeded, a little blood crept into his cheeks, while Witham guessed that he found it difficult to retain his grim immobility.

"I am to understand that an attempt to reach the Grange through the snow would have been perilous?" he said.

"Yes," said Witham quietly.

The older man stood very still regarding him intently, until he said, "I don't mind admitting that it was distinctly regrettable!"

Witham stopped him with a gesture. "It was at least unavoidable, sir. The team would not face the snow, and no one could have reached the Grange alive."

"No doubt you did your best—and, as a connexion of the family, I am glad it was you. Still—and there are cases in which it is desirable to speak plainly—the affair, which you will, of course, dismiss from your recollection, is to be considered as closed now."

Witham smiled, and a trace of irony he could not quite repress was just discernible in his voice. "I scarcely think that was necessary, sir. It is, of course, sufficient for me to have rendered a small service to the distinguished family which has given me an opportunity of proving my right to recognition, and neither you, nor Miss Barrington, need have any apprehension that I will presume upon it!"

Barrington wheeled round. "You have the Courthorne temper, at least, and perhaps I deserved this display of it. You acted with commendable discretion in coming straight to me—and the astonishment I got drove the other aspect of the question out of my head. If it hadn't been for you, my niece would have frozen."

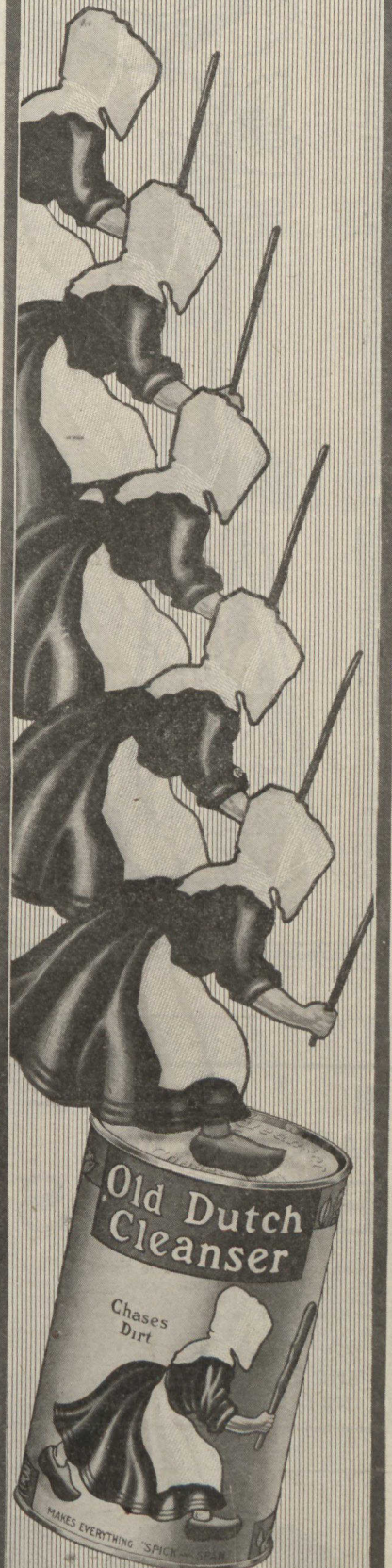
"I'm afraid I spoke unguardedly, sir; but I am very tired. Still, if you will wait a few minutes, I will get the horses out without troubling the hired man."

Barrington made a little gesture of comprehension, and then shook his head. "You are fit for nothing further, and need rest and sleep."

"You will want somebody, sir," said Witham. "The snow is very loose and deep."

He went out, and Barrington, who looked after him with a curious expression in his face, nodded twice as if in approval. Twenty minutes later he took his place in the sleigh that slid away from the Grange, which lay a league behind it when the sunrise flamed across the prairie. The wind had gone, and there was only a pitiless brightness and a devastating cold, while the snow lay blown in wisps, dried dusty and fine as flour by the frost. It had no cohesion, the runners sank in it, and Witham was almost waist deep when he dragged the floundering team through the drifts. A day had passed since he had eaten anything worth mention, but he held on

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