

The gambler was apparently not willing, for, though it is possible he would have found it advisable to play an honest game across the frontier, he had evidently surmised that there was less risk of detection among the Canadian farmers. He probably knew they would not wait long for his consent, but in the first stages of the altercation it is not as a rule insuperably difficult for a fearless man to hold his own against an indignant company who have no definite notion of what they mean to do, and it was to cover his retreat he turned to Witham.

"And who the — are you?" he asked.

Witham smiled grimly. "I guess you have heard of me. Anyway, there are a good many places in Montana where they know Lance Courthorne. Quite sure I know a straight game when I see it!"

The man's resistance vanished, but he had evidently been taught the necessity of making the best of defeat in his profession, and he laughed as he swept his glance round at the angry faces turned upon him.

"If you don't there's nobody does," he said. "Still, as you've got my pistol and 'most dislocated my wrist, the least you can do is to get a partner out of this."

There was an ominous murmur, and the lad's face showed livid with fury and humiliation, but Witham turned quietly to the hotel-keeper.

"You will take this man with you into your side room and stop with him there," he said. "Dane, give him the bills. The rest of you had better sit down here and make a list of your losses, and you'll get whatever the fellow has upon him divided amongst you. Then, because I ask you, and you'd have had nothing but for me, you'll put him in his waggon and turn him out quietly upon the prairie."

"That's sense, and we don't want no circus here," said somebody.

A few voices were raised in protest, but when it became evident that one or two of the company were inclined to adopt more draconic measures, Dane spoke quietly and forcibly, and was listened to. Then Witham reached out and grasped the shoulder of the English lad, who made the last attempt to rouse his companions.

"Let them alone, Ferris, and come along. You'll get most of what you lost back to-morrow, and we're going to take you home," he said.

Ferris turned upon him, hoarse with passion, flushed in face, and swaying a trifle on his feet, while Witham noticed that he drew one arm back.

"Who are you to lay hands on a gentleman?" he asked. "Keep your distance. I'm going to stay here, and, if I'd have had my way, we'd have kicked you out of Silverdale."

Witham dropped his hand, but next moment the ornament of a distinguished family was seized by the neck, and the farmer glanced at Dane.

"We've had enough of this fooling, and he'll be grateful to me to-morrow," he said.

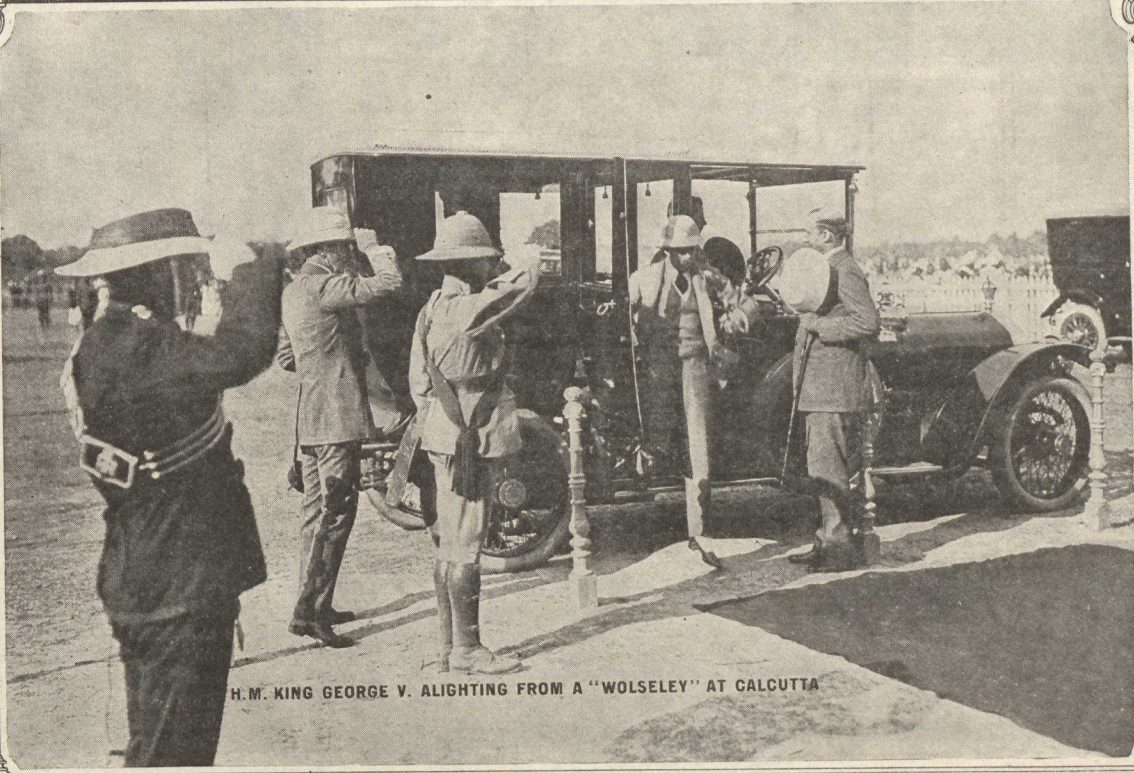
Then his captive was thrust, resisting strenuously, out of the room, and with Dane's assistance conveyed to the waiting waggon, into which he was flung, almost speechless with indignation.

"Now," said Dane quietly, "you've given us a good deal more trouble than you're worth, Ferris, and if you attempt to get out again, I'll break your head for you. Tell Courthorne how much that fellow got from you."

In another ten minutes they had jolted across the railroad track, and were speeding through the silence of the lonely prairie. Above them the clear stars flung their cold radiance down through vast distances of liquid indigo, and the soft beat of hoofs was the only sound that disturbed the solemn stillness of the wilderness. Dane drew in a great breath of the cool night air and laughed quietly.

"It's a good deal more wholesome here in several ways," said he. "If you're wise, you'll let up on card-playing and hanging round the settlement. Ferris, and stick to farming. Even if you lose almost as many dollars over it, it will pay you considerably better. Now that's all I'm going to tell you, but I know what I'm speaking of, because I've had my fling—and it's costing me more than I care to figure out still. You, how-

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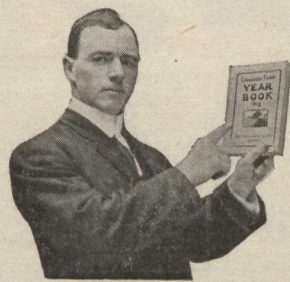
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