

THE IMPERATOR



BY
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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.

Witham dons Courthorne's cap and coat and starts on his long ride. A trooper accosts him, but he refuses to stop. In the meantime Trooper Shannon is trapped by Courthorne, who has a grudge against him, and is shot. Trooper Payne takes up the chase and Courthorne, cornered, disappears through the thin ice of the river. Payne thinks it was Witham who went through the ice, and this mistake is the basis of subsequent events.

Maud Barrington, intended as the sole inheritor of Geoffrey Courthorne's property at Silverdale, arrives at the home of her uncle, Col. Barrington, from whom she learns somewhat concerning the career of Lance Courthorne.

Witham, traveling as Courthorne across the border, is trailed by United States troopers, who suspect him of being Courthorne, and are ready to arrest him as soon as they get necessary instigation from the Canadian police. At the outpost he hears from the officers the story of the supposed Witham's disappearance in the river and his shooting of Trooper Shannon.

CHAPTER VIII.

Witham Comes to Silverdale.

HERE were warmth and brightness in the cedar-boarded general room of Silverdale Grange, and most of the company gathered there basked in it contentedly after their drive through the bitter night. Those who came from the homesteads lying farthest out had risked frost-nipped hands and feet, for when Colonel Barrington held a levee at the Grange nobody felt equal to refusing his invitation. Neither scorching heat nor utter cold might excuse compliance with the wishes of the founder of Silverdale, and it was not until Dane, the big middle-aged bachelor, had spoken very plainly, that he consented to receive his guests in time of biting frost dressed otherwise than as they would have appeared in England.

Dane was the one man in the settlement who dare remonstrate with its ruler, but it was a painful astonishment to the latter when he said, in answer to one invitation, "I have never been frost-bitten, sir, and I stand the cold well, but one or two of the lads are weak in the chest, and this climate was never intended for bare-shouldered women. Hence, if I come, I shall dress myself to suit it."

Colonel Barrington stared at him for almost a minute, and then shook his head. "Have it your own way," he said. "Understand that in itself I care very little for dress, but it is only by holding fast to every traditional nicety we can prevent ourselves sinking into Western barbarism, and I am horribly afraid of the thin end of the wedge."

Dane having gained his point, said nothing further, for he was one of the wise and silent men who know when to stop, and that evening he sat in a corner watching his leader thoughtfully, for there was anxiety in the Colonel's face. Barrington sat silent near the ample hearth whose heart would scarcely have kept water from freezing but for the big stove, and disdaining the dispensation made his guests, he was clad conventionally, though the smooth black fabric clung about him more tightly than it had once been intended to do. His sister stood, with the stamp of a not wholly vanished beauty still clinging to her gentle face, talking to one or two matrons from outlying farms, and his niece by a little table turning over Eastern photographs with a few young girls. She, too, wore black in deference to the Colonel's taste, which

was sombre, and the garment she had laughed at as a compromise, left uncovered a narrow strip of ivory shoulder and enhanced the polished whiteness of her neck. A slender string of pearls gleamed softly on the satiny skin, but Maud Barrington wore no other adornment and did not need it. She had inherited the Courthorne comeliness, and the Barringtons she sprang from on her father's side had always borne the stamp of distinction.

A young girl sat at the piano singing in a thin, reedy voice, while an English lad waited with ill-concealed jealousy of a too officious companion to turn over the music by her side. Other men, mostly young, with weather-bronzed faces, picturesque in embroidered deer-skin or velvet lounge jackets, were scattered about the room, and all were waiting for the eight-o'clock dinner, which replaced the usual prairie supper at Silverdale. They were growers of wheat who combined a good deal of amusement with a little not very profitable farming, and most of them possessed a large share of insular English pride and a somewhat depleted exchequer.

Presently Dane crossed over, and sat down by Colonel Barrington. "You are silent, sir, and not looking very well to-night," he said.

Barrington nodded gravely, for he had a respect for the one man who occasionally spoke plain truth to him. "The fact is, I am growing old," he said, and then added, with what was only an apparent lack of connexion, "Wheat is down three cents, and money tighter than ever."

Dane looked thoughtful, and noticed the older man's glance in his niece's direction, as he said, "I am afraid there are difficult times before us."

"I have no doubt we shall weather them as we have done before," said the Colonel. "Still, I can't help admitting that just now I feel—a little tired—and am commencing to think we should have been better prepared for the struggle had we worked a trifle harder during the recent era of prosperity. I could wish there were older heads on the shoulders of those who will come after me."

Just then Maud Barrington glanced at them, and Dane, who could not remember having heard his leader talk in that fashion before, and could guess his anxieties, was a little touched as he noticed his attempt at sprightliness. As it happened, one of the lads at the piano commenced a song of dogs and horses that had little to recommend it but the brave young voice.

"They have the right spirit, sir," he said.

"Of course!" said Barrington. "They are English lads, but I think a little more is required. Thank God we have not rated the dollar too high, but it is possible we have undervalued its utility, and I fear I have only taught them to be gentlemen."

"That is a good deal, sir," Dane said quietly.

"It is. Still a gentleman, in the restricted sense, is somewhat of an anachronism on the prairie, and it is too late to begin again. In the usual course of nature I must lay down my charge presently, and that is why I feel the want of a more capable successor, whom they would follow because of his connection with mine and me."

Dane looked thoughtful. "If I am not taking a liberty—you still consider the one apparently born to fill the place quite unsuitable?"

"Yes," said Barrington quietly. "I fear there is not a redeeming feature

in Courthorne's character."

Neither said anything further, until there was a tapping at the door, and, though this was a most unusual spectacle on the prairie, a trim English maid in white-banded dress stood in the opening.

"Mr. Courthorne, Miss Barrington," she said.

Now Silverdale had adopted on Western custom in that no chance guest was ever kept waiting, while the stillness was very suggestive, when a man appeared in the doorway. He wore one of the Scandinavian leather jackets which are not uncommon in that country, and when his eyes had become accustomed to the light, moved forward with a quiet deliberation that was characterized neither by graceful ease nor the restraint of embarrassment. His face was almost the colour of a Blackfoot's, his eyes steady and grey, but those of the men who watched him were next moment turned upon the Colonel's sister, who rose to receive him, slight, silver-haired, and faded, but still stamped with a simple dignity that her ancient silks and lace curiously enhanced. Then there was a silence that could be felt.

Witham, as it happened, felt this too, and something more. It was eight years since he had stood before an English lady, and he surmised that there could not be many to compare with this one, while after his grim, lonely life an intangible something that seemed to emanate from her gracious serenity compelled his homage. Then as she smiled at him and held out her hand, he was for a moment sensible of an almost overwhelming confusion. It passed as suddenly, for this was a man of quick perceptions, and remembering that Courthorne had now and then displayed some of the grace of bygone days he yielded to a curious impulse, and, stooping, kissed the little withered fingers.

"I have," he said, "to thank you for a welcome that does not match my poor deserts, madam."

Then Dane, standing beside his leader, saw the grimness grow a trifle less marked in his eyes. "It is in the blood," he said half aloud, but Dane heard him and afterwards remembered it.

In the meanwhile Miss Barrington had turned from the stranger to her niece. "It is a very long time since you have seen Lance, Maud, and, though I knew his mother well, I am less fortunate, because this is our first meeting," she said. "I wonder if you still remember my niece."

Now, Witham had been gratified by his first success, and was about to venture on the answer that it was impossible to forget; but when he turned towards the very stately young woman in the long black dress, whose eyes had a sardonic gleam, and wondered whether he had ever seen anybody so comely or less inclined to be companionable, it was borne in upon him that any speech of the kind would be distinctly out of place. Accordingly, and because there was no hand held out in this case, he contented himself with a little bend of his head. Then he was presented to the Colonel, who was distantly cordial, and Witham was thankful when the maid appeared in the doorway again, to announce that dinner was ready. Miss Barrington laid her hand upon his arm.

"You will put up with an old woman's company to-night?" she said.

Witham glanced down deprecatingly at his attire. "I must explain that I had no intention of trespassing on your hospitality," he said. "I purposed going on to my own homestead, and only

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