

THE IMPOSTOR



BY
**HAROLD
BINDLOSS**

CHAPTER XI. (Continued.)

THE girl glanced at him sharply, and it was because the news caused her an unreasonable concern that there was a trace of irony in her voice.

"Your last venture! Have we been unkind to you or does it imply that, as you once insinuated, an exemplary life becomes monotonous?"

Witham laughed. "No. I should like to stay here—a very long while," he said; and the girl saw he spoke the truth as she watched him glance wistfully at the splendid teams, great ploughs, and rich, black soil. "In fact, strange as it may appear, it will be virtue, given the rein for once, that drives me out when I go away."

"But where are you going to?"

Witham glanced vaguely across the prairie, and the girl was puzzled by the look in his eyes. "Back to my own station," he said softly, as though to himself, and then turned with a little shrug of his shoulders. "In the meanwhile there is a good deal to do, and once more I am sorry I cannot release you."

"Then, there is an end of it. You could not expect me to beg you to, so we will discuss the practical difficulty. I cannot under the circumstances borrow my uncle's teams, and I am told I have not sufficient men or horses to put a large crop in."

"Of course!" said Witham quietly. "Well, I have now the best teams and machines on this part of the prairie, and am bringing Ontario men in. I will do the ploughing—and, if it will make it easier for you, you can pay me for the services."

There was a little flush on the girl's face. "It is all distasteful, but as you will not give me back my word, I will keep it to the letter. Still, it almost makes me reluctant to ask you a further favour."

"This one is promised before you ask it," said Witham quietly.

It cost Maud Barrington some trouble to make her wishes clear, and Witham's smile was not wholly one of pleasure as he listened. One of the young English lads, who was, it appeared, a distant connexion of the girl's, had been losing large sums of money at a gaming table, and seeking other equally undesirable relaxations at the railroad settlement. For the sake of his mother in England, Miss Barrington desired him brought to his senses, but was afraid to appeal to the Colonel, whose measures were occasionally more draconic than wise.

"I will do what I can," said Witham. "Still, I am not sure that a lad of the kind is worth your worrying over, and I am a trifle curious as to what induced you to entrust the mission to me?"

The girl felt embarrassed, but she saw that an answer was expected. "Since you ask, it occurred to me that you could do it better than anybody else," she said. "Please don't misunderstand me; but I fancy it is the other man who is leading him away."

Witham smiled somewhat grimly. "Your meaning is quite plain, and I am already looking forward to the encounter with my fellow-gambler. You believe that I will prove a match for him?"

Maud Barrington, to her annoyance, felt the blood creep to her forehead, but she looked at the man steadily, noticing the quiet forcefulness beneath his somewhat caustic amusement.

"Yes," she said simply; "and I shall be grateful."

In another few minutes she was galloping across the prairie, and when she rejoined her aunt and Barrington, endeavoured to draw out the latter's opin-

ion respecting Courthorne's venture by a few discreet questions.

"Heaven knows where he was taught it, but there is no doubt that the man is an excellent farmer," he said. "It is a pity that he is also, to all intents and purposes, mad."

Miss Barrington glanced at her niece, and both of them smiled, for the Colonel usually took for granted the insanity of any one who questioned his opinions.

In the meanwhile, Witham sat swaying on the driving-seat, mechanically guiding the horses and noticing how the prairie sod rolled away in black waves beneath the great plough. He heard the crackle of fibres beneath the triple shares, and the swish of greasy loam along the mouldboard's side; but his thoughts were far away, and when he raised his head, he looked into the dim future beyond the long furrow that cut the skyline on the rise.

It was shadowy and uncertain, and one thing was clear to him, and that was that he could not stay in Silverdale. At first he had almost hoped he might do this, for the good land, and the means of efficiently working it, had been a horrible temptation. That was before he reckoned on Maud Barrington's attractions; but of late he had seen what these were leading him to, and all that was good in him recoiled from an attempt to win her. Once he had dared to wonder whether it could be done, for his grim life had left him self-centred and bitter, but that mood had passed, and it was with disgust he looked back upon it. Now he knew that the sooner he left Silverdale, the less difficult it would be to forget her; but he was still determined to vindicate himself by the work he did, and make her affairs secure. Then, with or without a confession, he would slip back into the obscurity he came from.

While he worked the soft wind rioted about him, and the harbingers of summer passed north in battalions overhead—crane, brent goose, and mallard—in crescents, skeins, and wedges, after the fashion of their kind. Little long-tailed gophers whisked across the whitened sod, and when the great plough rolled through the shadows of a bluff, jack rabbits, pied white and grey, scurried amidst the rustling leaves. Even the birches were fragrant in that vivifying air, and seemed to rejoice as all animate creatures did; but the man's face grew more sombre as the day of toil wore on. Still, he did his work with the grim, unwavering diligence that had already carried him, dismayed but unyielding, through years of drought and harvest hail, and the stars shone down on the prairie when at last he loosed his second team.

Then, standing in the door of his lonely homestead, he glanced at the great shadowy granaries and barns, and clenched his hand as he saw what he could do if things that had been forced upon him were rightfully his. He knew his own mettle, and that he could hold them if he would; but the pale, cold face of a woman rose up in judgment against him, and he also knew that because of the love of her, that was casting its toils about him, he must give them up.

Far back on the prairie a lonely coyote howled, and a faint wind, that was now like snow-cooled wine, brought the sighing of limitless grasses out of the silence. There was no cloud in the crystalline ether, and something in the vastness and stillness that spoke of infinity brought a curious sense of peace to him. Impostor though he was, he would leave Silverdale better than he found it, and afterwards it would be of

no great moment what became of him. Countless generations of toiling men had borne their petty sorrows before him, and gone back to the dust they sprang from; but still, in due succession, harvest followed seed-time, and the world whirled on. Then, remembering that, in the meanwhile, he had much to do which would commence with the sun on the morrow, he went back into the house and shook the fancies from him.

CHAPTER XII.

Mastery Recognized.

THERE was, considering the latest price of wheat, a somewhat astonishing attendance in the long room of the hotel at the railroad settlement one Saturday evening. A big stove in the midst of it diffused a stuffy and almost unnecessary heat, gaudy nickelled lamps an uncertain brilliancy, and the place was filled with the drifting smoke of indifferent tobacco. Oleographs, barbaric in colour and drawing, hung about the roughly-boarded walls, and any critical stranger would have found the saloon comfortless and tawdry.

It was, however, filled that night with bronzed-faced men who expected nothing better. Most of them wore jackets of soft black leather or embroidered deer-skin, and the jean trousers and long boots of not a few apparently stood in need of repairing, though the sprinkling of more conventional apparel and paler faces showed that the storekeepers of the settlement had been drawn together, as well as the prairie farmers who had driven in to buy provisions or take up their mail. There was, however, but little laughter, and their voices were low, for boisterousness and assertion are not generally met with on the silent prairie. Indeed, the attitude of some of the men was mildly deprecatory, as though they felt that in assisting in what was going forward they were doing an unusual thing. Still, the eyes of all were turned toward the table where a man, who differed widely in appearance from most of them, dealt out the cards.

He wore city clothes, and a white shirt with a fine diamond in the front of it, while there was a keen intentness behind the half-ironical smile in his somewhat colourless face. The whiteness of his long, nervous fingers and the quickness of his gestures would also have stamped him as a being of different order from the slowly-spoken prairie farmers, while the slenderness of the little pile of coins in front of him testified that his endeavours to tempt them to speculation on games of chance had met with no very marked success as yet. Gambling for stakes of moment is not a popular amusement in that country, where the soil demands his best from every man in return for the scanty dollars it yields him, but the gamester had chosen his time well, and the men who had borne the dreary solitude of winter in outlying farms, and now only saw another adverse season opening before them, were for once in the mood to clutch at any excitement that would relieve the monotony of their toilsome lives.

A few were betting small sums with an apparent lack of interest which did not in the least deceive the dealer, and when he handed a few dollars out he laughed a little as he turned to the bar-keeper.

"Set them up again. I want a drink to pass the time," he said. "I'll play you at anything you like to put a name to, boys, if this game don't suit you."

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