

The Impostor

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but you'll have to give me the chance of making my hotel bill. In my country I've seen folks livelier at a funeral."

The glasses were handed round, but when the gambler reached out towards the silver at his side, a big bronzed-skinned rancher stopped him.

"No," he drawled. "We're not sticking you for a locomotive tank, and this comes out of my treasury. I'll call you three dollars and take my chances on the draw."

"Well," said the dealer, "that's a little more encouraging. Anybody wanting to make it better?"

A young lad in elaborately-embroidered deerskin with a flushed face leaned upon the table. "Show you how we play cards in the old country," he said. "I'll make it thirty—for a beginning."

There was a momentary silence, for the lad had staked heavily and lost of late, but one or two more bets were made. Then the cards were turned up, and the lad smiled fatuously as he took up his winnings.

"Now I'll let you see," he said. "This time we'll make it fifty."

He won twice more in succession, and the men closed in about the table, while, for the dealer knew when to strike, the glasses went round again, and in the growing interest nobody quite noticed who paid for the refreshment. Then, while the dollars began to trickle in, the lad flung a bill for a hundred down.

"Go on," he said a trifle huskily. "Tonight you can't beat me!"

Once more he won, and just then two men came quietly into the room. One of them signed to the hotel-keeper.

"What's going on? The boys seem kind of keen," he said.

The other man laughed a little. "Ferris has struck a streak of luck, but I wouldn't be very sorry if you got him away, Mr. Courthorne. He has had as much as he can carry already, and I don't want anybody broke up in my house. The boys can look out for themselves, but the Silverdale kid has been losing a good deal lately, and he doesn't know when to stop."

Witham glanced at his companion, who nodded. "The young fool," he said.

They crossed towards the table in time to see the lad take up his winnings again, and Witham laid his hand quietly upon his shoulder.

"Come along and have a drink while you give the rest a show," he said. "You seem to have done tolerably well, and it's usually wise to stop while the chances are going with you."

The lad turned and stared at him with languid insolence in his half-closed eyes, and, though he came of a lineage that had been famous in the old country, there was nothing very prepossessing in his appearance. His mouth was loose, his face weak in spite of its inherited pride, and there was little need to tell either of the men, who noticed his nervous fingers and muddiness of skin, that he was one who in the strenuous early days would have worn the woolly crown.

"Were you addressing me?" he asked. "I was," said Witham quietly. "I was, in fact, inviting you to share our refreshment. You see we have just come in."

"Then," said the lad, "it was commendable impertinence. Since you have taken this fellow up, couldn't you teach him that it's bad taste to thrust his company upon people who don't want it, Dane?"

Witham said nothing, but drew Dane, who flushed a trifle, aside, and when they sat down the latter smiled dryly.

"You have taken on a big contract, Courthorne. How are you going to get the young ass out?" he said.

"Well," said Witham, "it would gratify me to take him by the neck, but as I don't know that it would please the Colonel if I made a public spectacle of one of his retainers, I fancy I'll have to tackle the gambler. I don't know him, but as he comes from across the frontier it's more than likely he has heard of me. There are advantages in having a record like mine, you see."

"It would, of course, be a kindness to the lad's people—but the young fool is scarcely worth it, and it's not your affair," said Dane reflectively.

Witham guessed the drift of the speech, but he could respect a confidence, and laughed a little. "It's not often I have done any one a good turn, and the novelty has its attractions."

Dane did not appear contented with this explanation, but he asked nothing further, and the two sat watching the men about the table, who were evidently growing eager.

"That's two hundred the kid has let go," said somebody.

There was a murmur of excited voices, and one rose hoarse and a trifle shaky in the consonants above the rest.

"Show you how a gentleman can stand up, boys. Throw them out again. Two hundred this time on the game!"

There was silence and the rustle of shuffled cards; then once more the voices went up. "Against him! Better let up before he takes your farm. Oh, let him face it and show his grit—the man who slings round his hundreds can afford to lose!"

The lad's face showed a trifle paler through the drifting smoke, though a good many of the cigars had gone out now, and once more there was the stillness of expectancy through which a strained voice rose.

"Going to get it all back. I'll stake you four hundred."

Witham rose and moved forward quietly, with Dane behind him, and then stood still where he could see the table. He had also very observant eyes, and was free from the excitement of those who had a risk on the game. Still, when the cards were dealt, it was the gambler's face he watched. For a brief space nobody moved, and then the lad flung down his cards and stood up with a greyness in his cheeks and his hands shaking.

"You've got all my dollars now," he said. "Still, I'll play you for doubles if you'll take my paper."

The gambler nodded, and flung down a big pile of bills. "I guess I'll trust you. Mine are here."

The bystanders waited motionless, and none of them made a bet, for any stakes they could offer would be trifles now; but they glanced at the lad who stood tensely still, while Witham watched the face of the man at the table in front of him. For a moment he saw a flicker of triumph in his eyes, and that decided him. Again, one by one, the cards went down, and then, when everybody waited in strained expectancy, the lad seemed to grow limp suddenly and groaned.

"You can let up," he said hoarsely. "I've gone down!"

Then a hard brown hand was laid upon the table, and while the rest stared in astonishment, a voice which had a little stern ring in it said, "Turn the whole pack up, and hand over the other one."

In an instant the gambler's hand swept beneath his jacket, but it was a mistaken move, for as swiftly the other hard, brown fingers closed upon the pile of bills, and the men, too astonished to murmur, saw Witham leaning very grim in face across the table. Then it tilted over beneath him, and the cards were on the gambler's knees, while, as the two men rose and faced each other, something glinted in the hands of one of them.

It is more than probable that the man did not intend to use it, and trusted to its moral effect, for the display of pistols is not regarded with much toleration on the Canadian prairie. In any case, he had not the opportunity, for in another moment Witham's right hand closed upon his wrist, and the gambler was struggling fruitlessly to extricate it. He was a muscular man, with doubtless a sufficiency of nerve, but he had not toiled with his arms and led a Spartan life for eight long years. Before another few seconds had passed he was wondering whether he would ever use that wrist again, while Dane picked up the fallen pistol and put it in his pocket with the bundle of bills Witham handed him.

"Now," said the latter, "I want to do the square thing. If you'll let us strip you and turn out your pockets, we'll see you get any winnings you're entitled to when we've straightened up the cards."

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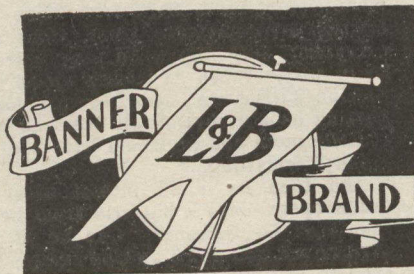
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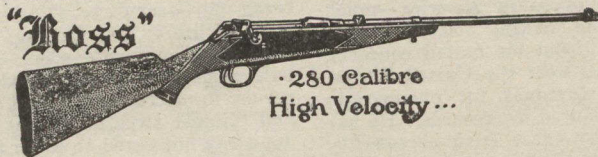
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