

BARKER'S LUCK

by Bret Harte

A bird twittered! The morning sun shining through the open window was apparently more potent than the cool mountain air, which had only caused the sleeper to curl a little more tightly in his blankets. Barker's eyes opened instantly upon the light and the bird on the window ledge. Like all healthy young animals he would have tried to sleep again, but with his momentary consciousness came the recollection that it was his turn to cook the breakfast that morning, and he regretfully rolled out of his bunk to the floor. Without stopping to dress, he opened the door and stepped outside, secure in the knowledge that he was overlooked only by the Sierras, and plunged his head and shoulders in the bucket of cold water that stood by the door. Then he began to clothe himself, partly in the cabin and partly in the open air, with a lapse between the putting on of his trousers and coat which he employed in bringing in wood. Raking together the few embers on the adobe hearth, not without a prudent regard to the rattlesnake which had once been detected in haunting the warm ashes, he began to prepare breakfast. By this time the other sleepers, his partners Stacy and Demorest, young men of about his own age, were awake, alert, and lazily critical of his progress.

"I don't care about my quail on toast being underdone for breakfast," said Stacy, with a yawn; "and you needn't serve with red wine. I'm not feeling very peckish this morning."

"And I reckon you can knock off the fried oysters after the Spanish mackerel for ME," said Demorest gravely. "The fact is, that last bottle of Veuve Clicquot we had for supper wasn't as dry as I am this morning."

Accustomed to these regular Barmecide suggestions, Barker made no direct reply. Presently, looking up from the fire, he said, "There's no

more saleratus, so you mustn't blame me if the biscuit is extra heavy. I told you we had none when you went to the grocery yesterday."

"And I told you we hadn't a red cent to buy any with," said Stacy, who was also treasurer. "Put these two negatives together and you make the affirmative--saleratus. Mix freely and bake in a hot oven."

Nevertheless, after a toilet as primitive as Barker's they sat down to what he had prepared with the keen appetite begotten of the mountain air and the regretful fastidiousness born of the recollection of better things. Jerked beef, frizzled with salt pork in a frying-pan, boiled potatoes, biscuit, and coffee composed the repast. The biscuits, however, proving remarkably heavy after the first mouthful, were used as missiles, thrown through the open door at an empty bottle which had previously served as a mark for revolver practice, and a few moments later pipes were lit to counteract the effects of the meal and take the taste out of their mouths. Suddenly they heard the sound of horses' hoofs, saw the quick passage of a rider in the open space before the cabin, and felt the smart impact upon the table of some small object thrown by him. It was the regular morning delivery of the county newspaper!

"He's getting to be a mighty sure shot," said Demorest approvingly, looking at his upset can of coffee as he picked up the paper, rolled into a cylindrical wad as tightly as a cartridge, and began to straighten it out. This was no easy matter, as the sheet had evidently been rolled while yet damp from the press; but Demorest eventually opened it and ensconced himself behind it.

"Nary news?" asked Stacy.

"No. There never is any," said Demorest scornfully. "We ought to stop the paper."

"You mean the paper man ought to. WE don't pay him," said Barker gently.

"Well, that's the same thing, smarty. No news, no pay. Hallo!" he continued, his eyes suddenly riveted on the paper. Then, after the fashion of ordinary humanity, he stopped short and read the interesting item to himself. When he had finished he brought his fist and the paper, together, violently down upon the table. "Now look at this! Talk of luck, will you? Just think of it. Here are WE--hard-working men with lots of sabe, too--grubbin' away on this hillside like niggers, glad to get enough at the end of the day to pay for our soggy biscuits and horse-bean coffee, and just look what falls into the lap of some lazy sneakin' greenhorn who never did a stoke of work in his life! Here are WE, with no foolishness, no airs nor graces, and yet men who would do credit to twice that amount of luck--and seem born to it, too--and we're set aside for some long, lank, pen-wiping scrub who just knows enough to sit down on his office stool and hold on to a bit of paper."

"What's up now?" asked Stacy, with the carelessness begotten of familiarity with his partner's extravagance.

"Listen," said Demorest, reading. "Another unprecedented rise has taken place in the shares of the 'Yellow Hammer First Extension Mine' since the sinking of the new shaft. It was quoted yesterday at ten thousand dollars a foot. When it is remembered that scarcely two years ago the original shares, issued at fifty dollars per share, had dropped to only fifty cents a share, it will be seen that those who were able to hold on have got a good thing."

"What mine did you say?" asked Barker, looking up meditatively from the dishes he was already washing.

"The Yellow Hammer First Extension," returned Demorest shortly.

"I used to have some shares in that, and I think I have them still," said Barker musingly.

"Yes," said Demorest promptly; "the paper speaks of it here. 'We understand,'" he continued, reading aloud, "'that our eminent fellow citizen, George Barker, otherwise known as 'Get Left Barker' and 'Chucklehead,' is one of these fortunate individuals.'"

"No," said Barker, with a slight flush of innocent pleasure, "it can't say that. How could it know?"

Stacy laughed, but Demorest coolly continued: "You didn't hear all. Listen! 'We say WAS one of them; but having already sold his apparently useless certificates to our popular druggist, Jones, for corn plasters, at a reduced rate, he is unable to realize.'"

"You may laugh, boys," said Barker, with simple seriousness; "but I really believe I have got 'em yet. Just wait. I'll see!" He rose and began to drag out a well-worn valise from under his bunk. "You see," he continued, "they were given to me by an old chap in return--"

"For saving his life by delaying the Stockton boat that afterward blew up," returned Demorest briefly. "We know it all! His hair was white, and his hand trembled slightly as he laid these shares in yours, saying, and you never forgot the words, 'Take 'em, young man--and'--"

"For lending him two thousand dollars, then," continued Barker with a simple ignoring of the interruption, as he quietly brought out the valise.

"TWO THOUSAND DOLLARS!" repeated Stacy. "When did YOU have two thousand dollars?"

"When I first left Sacramento--three years ago," said Barker, unstrapping the valise.

"How long did you have it?" said Demorest incredulously.

"At least two days, I think," returned Barker quietly. "Then I met that man. He was hard-up, and I lent him my pile and took those shares. He died afterward."

"Of course he did," said Demorest severely. "They always do. Nothing kills a man more quickly than an action of that kind." Nevertheless the two partners regarded Barker rummaging among some loose clothes and papers with a kind of paternal toleration. "If you can't find them, bring out your government bonds," suggested Stacy. But the next moment, flushed and triumphant, Barker rose from his knees, and came toward them carrying some papers in his hands. Demorest seized them from him, opened them, spread them on the table, examined hurriedly the date, signatures, and transfers, glanced again quickly at the newspaper paragraph, looked wildly at Stacy and then at Barker, and gasped:

"By the living hookey! it is SO!"

"B'gosh! he HAS got 'em!" echoed Stacy.

"Twenty shares," continued Demorest breathlessly, "at ten thousand dollars a share--even if it's only a foot--is two hundred thousand dollars! Jerusalem!"

"Tell me, fair sir," said Stacy, with sparkling eyes, "hast still left in yonder casket any rare jewels, rubies, sarcenet, or links of fine gold? Peradventure a pearl or two may have been overlooked!"

"No--that's all," returned Barker simply.

"You hear him! Rothschild says 'that's all.' Prince Esterhazy says he hasn't another red cent--only two hundred thousand dollars."

"What ought I to do, boys?" asked Barker, timidly glancing from one to the other. Yet he remembered with delight all that day, and for many a year afterward, that he saw in their faces only unselfish joy and affection at that supreme moment.

"Do?" said Demorest promptly. "Stand on your head and yell! No! stop! Come here!" He seized both Barker and Stacy by the hand, and ran out into the open air. Here they danced violently with clasped hands around a small buckeye, in perfect silence, and then returned to the cabin, grave but perspiring.

"Of course," said Barker, wiping his forehead, "we'll just get some money on these certificates and buy up that next claim which belongs to old Carter--where you know we thought we saw the indication."

"We'll do nothing of the kind," said Demorest decidedly. "WE ain't in it. That money is yours, old chap--every cent of it--property acquired before marriage, you know; and the only thing we'll do is to be damned before we'll see you drop a dime of it into this Godforsaken hole. No!"

"But we're partners," gasped Barker.

"Not in THIS! The utmost we can do for you, opulent sir--though it ill becomes us horny-handed sons of toil to rub shoulders with Dives--is perchance to dine with you, to take a pasty and a glass of Malvoisie, at some restaurant in Sacramento--when you've got things fixed, in honor of your return to affluence. But more would ill become us!"

"But what are YOU going to do?" said Barker, with a half-hysteric, half-frightened smile.

"We have not yet looked through our luggage," said Demorest with invincible gravity, "and there's a secret recess--a double FOND--to my

portmanteau, known only to a trusty page, which has not been disturbed since I left my ancestral home in Faginia. There may be a few First Debentures of Erie or what not still there."

"I felt some strange, disklike protuberances in my dress suit the other day, but belike they are but poker chips," said Stacy thoughtfully.

An uneasy feeling crept over Barker. The color which had left his fresh cheek returned to it quickly, and he turned his eyes away. Yet he had seen nothing in his companions' eyes but affection--with even a certain kind of tender commiseration that deepened his uneasiness. "I suppose," he said desperately, after a pause, "I ought to go over to Boomville and make some inquiries."

"At the bank, old chap; at the bank!" said Demorest emphatically. "Take my advice and don't go ANYWHERE ELSE. Don't breathe a word of your luck to anybody. And don't, whatever you do, be tempted to sell just now; you don't know how high that stock's going to jump yet."

"I thought," stammered Barker, "that you boys might like to go over with me."

"We can't afford to take another holiday on grub wages, and we're only two to work today," said Demorest, with a slight increase of color and the faintest tremor in his voice. "And it won't do, old chap, for us to be seen bumming round with you on the heels of your good fortune. For everybody knows we're poor, and sooner or later everybody'll know you WERE rich even when you first came to us."

"Nonsense!" said Barker indignantly.

"Gospel, my boy!" said Demorest shortly.

"The frozen truth, old man!" said Stacy.

Barker took up his hat with some stiffness and moved toward the door. Here he stopped irresolutely, an irresolution that seemed to communicate itself to his partners. There was a moment's awkward silence. Then Demorest suddenly seized him by the shoulders with a grip that was half a caress, and walked him rapidly to the door. "And now don't stand foolin' with us, Barker boy; but just trot off like a little man, and get your grip on that fortune; and when you've got your hooks in it hang on like grim death. You'll"--he hesitated for an instant only, possibly to find the laugh that should have accompanied his speech--"you're sure to find US here when you get back."

Hurt to the quick, but restraining his feelings, Barker clapped his hat on his head and walked quickly away. The two partners stood watching him in silence until his figure was lost in the underbrush. Then they spoke.

"Like him--wasn't it?" said Demorest.

"Just him all over," said Stacy.

"Think of him having that stock stowed away all these years and never even bothering his dear old head about it!"

"And think of his wanting to put the whole thing into this rotten hillside with us!"

"And he'd have done it, by gosh! and never thought of it again. That's Barker."

"Dear old man!"

"Good old chap!"

"I've been wondering if one of us oughtn't to have gone with him? He's just as likely to pour his money into the first lap that opens for it," said Stacy.

"The more reason why we shouldn't prevent him, or seem to prevent him," said Demorest almost fiercely. "There will be knaves and fools enough who will try and put the idea of our using him into his simple heart without that. No! Let him do as he likes with it--but let him be himself. I'd rather have him come back to us even after he's lost the money--his old self and empty-handed--than try to change the stuff God put into him and make him more like others."

The tone and manner were so different from Demorest's usual levity that Stacy was silent. After a pause he said: "Well! we shall miss him on the hillside--won't we?"

Demorest did not reply. Reaching out his hand abstractedly, he wrenched off a small slip from a sapling near him, and began slowly to pull the leaves off, one by one, until they were all gone. Then he switched it in the air, struck his bootleg smartly with it, said roughly: "Come, let's get to work!" and strode away.

Meantime Barker on his way to Boomville was no less singular in his manner. He kept up his slightly affected attitude until he had lost sight of the cabin. But, being of a simple nature, his emotions were less complex. If he had not seen the undoubted look of affection in the eyes of his partners he would have imagined that they were jealous of his good fortune. Yet why had they refused his offer to share it with him? Why had they so strangely assumed that their partnership with him had closed? Why had they declined to go with him? Why had this money--of which he had thought so little, and for which he had cared so little--changed them toward him? It had not changed HIM--HE was the same! He remembered how they had often talked and laughed over a prospective "strike" in mining and speculated what THEY would do together with the money! And now that "luck" had occurred

to one of them, individually, the effect was only to alienate them! He could not make it out. He was hurt, wounded--yet oddly enough he was conscious now of a certain power within him to hurt and wound in retribution. He was rich: he would let them see HE could do without them. He was quite free now to think only of himself and Kitty.

For it must be recorded that with all this young gentleman's simplicity and unselfishness, with all his loyal attitude to his partners, his FIRST thought at the moment he grasped the fact of his wealth was of a young lady. It was Kitty Carter, the daughter of the hotelkeeper at Boomville, who owned the claim that the partners had mutually coveted. That a pretty girl's face should flash upon him with his conviction that he was now a rich man meant perhaps no disloyalty to his partners, whom he would still have helped. But it occurred to him now, in his half-hurt, half-vengeful state, that they had often joked him about Kitty, and perhaps further confidence with them was debarred. And it was only due to his dignity that he should now see Kitty at once.

This was easy enough, for in the naive simplicity of Boomville and the economic arrangements of her father, she occasionally waited upon the hotel table. Half the town was always actively in love with her; the other half HAD BEEN, and was silent, cynical, but hopeless in defeat. For Kitty was one of those singularly pretty girls occasionally met with in Southwestern frontier civilization whose distinct and original refinement of face and figure were so remarkable and original as to cast a doubt on the sagacity and prescience of one parent and the morality of the other, yet no doubt with equal injustice. But the fact remained that she was slight, graceful, and self-contained, and moved beside her stumpy, commonplace father, and her faded, commonplace mother in the dining-room of the Boomville Hotel like some distinguished alien. The three partners, by virtue, perhaps, of their college education and refined manners, had been exceptionally noticed by Kitty. And for some occult reason--the more serious,

perhaps, because it had no obvious or logical presumption to the world generally--Barker was particularly favored.

He quickened his pace, and as the flagstaff of the Boomville Hotel rose before him in the little hollow, he seriously debated whether he had not better go to the bank first, deposit his shares, and get a small advance on them to buy a new necktie or a "boiled shirt" in which to present himself to Miss Kitty; but, remembering that he had partly given his word to Demorest that he would keep his shares intact for the present, he abandoned this project, probably from the fact that his projected confidence with Kitty was already a violation of Demorest's injunctions of secrecy, and his conscience was sufficiently burdened with that breach of faith.

But when he reached the hotel, a strange trepidation overcame him. The dining-room was at its slack water, between the ebb of breakfast and before the flow of the preparation for the midday meal. He could not have his interview with Kitty in that dreary waste of reversed chairs and bare trestlelike tables, and she was possibly engaged in her household duties. But Miss Kitty had already seen him cross the road, and had lounged into the dining-room with an artfully simulated air of casually examining it. At the unexpected vision of his hopes, arrayed in the sweetest and freshest of rosebud-sprigged print, his heart faltered. Then, partly with the desperation of a timid man, and partly through the working of a half-formed resolution, he met her bright smile with a simple inquiry for her father. Miss Kitty bit her pretty lip, smiled slightly, and preceded him with great formality to the office. Opening the door, without raising her lashes to either her father or the visitor, she said, with a mischievous accenting of the professional manner, "Mr. Barker to see you on business," and tripped sweetly away.

And this slight incident precipitated the crisis. For Barker instantly made up his mind that he must purchase the next claim for his partners of this man Carter, and that he would be obliged to confide to

him the details of his good fortune, and as a proof of his sincerity and his ability to pay for it, he did so bluntly. Carter was a shrewd business man, and the well-known simplicity of Barker was a proof of his truthfulness, to say nothing of the shares that were shown to him. His selling price for his claim had been two hundred dollars, but here was a rich customer who, from a mere foolish sentiment, would be no doubt willing to pay more. He hesitated with a bland but superior smile. "Ah, that was my price at my last offer, Mr. Barker," he said suavely; "but, you see, things are going up since then."

The keenest duplicity is apt to fail before absolute simplicity. Barker, thoroughly believing him, and already a little frightened at his own presumption--not for the amount of the money involved, but from the possibility of his partners refusing his gift utterly--quickly took advantage of this LOCUS PENITENTIAE. "No matter, then," he said hurriedly; "perhaps I had better consult my partners first; in fact," he added, with a gratuitous truthfulness all his own, "I hardly know whether they will take it of me, so I think I'll wait."

Carter was staggered; this would clearly not do! He recovered himself with an insinuating smile. "You pulled me up too short, Mr. Barker; I'm a business man, but hang it all! what's that among friends? If you reckoned I GAVE MY WORD at two hundred--why, I'm there! Say no more about it--the claim's yours. I'll make you out a bill of sale at once."

"But," hesitated Barker, "you see I haven't got the money yet, and--"

"Money!" echoed Carter bluntly, "what's that among friends? Gimme your note at thirty days--that's good enough for ME. An' we'll settle the whole thing now--nothing like finishing a job while you're about it." And before the bewildered and doubtful visitor could protest, he had filled up a promissory note for Barker's signature and himself signed a bill of sale for the property. "And I reckon, Mr. Barker, you'd like to take your partners by surprise about this little gift of yours," he

added smilingly. "Well, my messenger is starting for the Gulch in five minutes; he's going by your cabin, and he can just drop this bill o' sale, as a kind o' settled fact, on 'em afore they can say anything, see! There's nothing like actin' on the spot in these sort of things. And don't you hurry 'bout them either! You see, you sorter owe us a friendly call--havin' always dropped inter the hotel only as a customer--so ye'll stop here over luncheon, and I reckon, as the old woman is busy, why Kitty will try to make the time pass till then by playin' for you on her new pianner."

Delighted, yet bewildered by the unexpected invitation and opportunity, Barker mechanically signed the promissory note, and as mechanically addressed the envelope of the bill of sale to Demorest, which Carter gave to the messenger. Then he followed his host across the hall to the apartment known as "Miss Kitty's parlor." He had often heard of it as a sanctum impervious to the ordinary guest. Whatever functions the young girl assumed at the hotel and among her father's boarders, it was vaguely understood that she dropped them on crossing that sacred threshold, and became "MISS Carter." The county judge had been entertained there, and the wife of the bank manager. Barker's admission there was consequently an unprecedented honor.

He cast his eyes timidly round the room, redolent and suggestive in various charming little ways of the young girl's presence. There was the cottage piano which had been brought up in sections on the backs of mules from the foot of the mountain; there was a crayon head of Minerva done by the fair occupant at the age of twelve; there was a profile of herself done by a traveling artist; there were pretty little china ornaments and many flowers, notably a faded but still scented woodland shrub which Barker had presented to her two weeks ago, and over which Miss Kitty had discreetly thrown her white handkerchief as he entered. A wave of hope passed over him at the act, but it was quickly spent as Mr. Carter's roughly playful voice introduced him:

"Ye kin give Mr. Barker a tune or two to pass time afore lunch, Kitty. You kin let him see what you're doing in that line. But you'll have to sit up now, for this young man's come inter some property, and will be sasheying round in 'Frisco afore long with a biled shirt and a stovepipe, and be givin' the go-by to Boomville. Well! you young folks will excuse me for a while, as I reckon I'll just toddle over and get the recorder to put that bill o' sale on record. Nothin' like squaring things to onct, Mr. Barker."

As he slipped away, Barker felt his heart sink. Carter had not only bluntly forestalled him with the news and taken away his excuse for a confidential interview, but had put an ostentatious construction on his visit. What could she think of him now? He stood ashamed and embarrassed before her.

But Miss Kitty, far from noticing his embarrassment in a sudden concern regarding the "horrid" untidiness of the room, which made her cheeks quite pink in one spot and obliged her to take up and set down in exactly the same place several articles, was exceedingly delighted. In fact, she did not remember ever having been so pleased before in her life! These things were always so unexpected! Just like the weather, for instance. It was quite cool last night--and now it was just stifling. And so dusty! Had Mr. Barker noticed the heat coming from the Gulch? Or perhaps, being a rich man, he--with a dazzling smile--was above walking now. It was so kind of him to come here first and tell her father.

"I really wanted to tell only--YOU, Miss Carter," stammered Barker. "You see--" he hesitated. But Miss Kitty saw perfectly. He wanted to tell HER, and, seeing her, he asked for HER FATHER! Not that it made the slightest difference to her, for her father would have been sure to have told her. It was also kind of her father to invite him to luncheon. Otherwise she might not have seen him before he left Boomville.

But this was more than Barker could stand. With the same desperate directness and simplicity with which he had approached her father, he now blurted out his whole heart to her. He told her how he had loved her hopelessly from the first time that they had spoken together at the church picnic. Did she remember it? How he had sat and worshiped her, and nothing else, at church! How her voice in the church choir had sounded like an angel's; how his poverty and his uncertain future had kept him from seeing her often, lest he should be tempted to betray his hopeless passion. How as soon as he realized that he had a position, that his love for her need not make her ridiculous to the world's eyes, he came to tell her ALL. He did not even dare to hope! But she would HEAR him at least, would she not?

Indeed, there was no getting away from his boyish, simple, outspoken declaration. In vain Kitty smiled, frowned, glanced at her pink cheeks in the glass, and stopped to look out of the window. The room was filled with his love--it was encompassing her--and, despite his shy attitude, seemed to be almost embracing her. But she managed at last to turn upon him a face that was now as white and grave as his own was eager and glowing.

"Sit down," she said gently.

He did so obediently, but wonderingly. She then opened the piano and took a seat upon the music stool before it, placed some loose sheets of music in the rack, and ran her fingers lightly over the keys. Thus intrenched, she let her hands fall idly in her lap, and for the first time raised her eyes to his.

"Now listen to me--be good and don't interrupt! There!--not so near; you can hear what I have to say well enough where you are. That will do."

Barker had halted with the chair he was dragging toward her and sat down.

"Now," said Miss Kitty, withdrawing her eyes and looking straight before her, "I believe everything you say; perhaps I oughtn't to--or at least SAY it--but I do. There! But because I do believe you--it seems to me all wrong! For the very reasons that you give for not having spoken to me BEFORE, if you really felt as you say you did, are the same reasons why you should not speak to me now. You see, all this time you have let nobody but yourself know how you felt toward me. In everybody's eyes YOU and your partners have been only the three stuck-up, exclusive, college-bred men who mined a poor claim in the Gulch, and occasionally came here to this hotel as customers. In everybody's eyes I have been only the rich hotel-keeper's popular daughter who sometimes waited upon you--but nothing more. But at least we were then pretty much alike, and as good as each other. And now, as soon as you have become suddenly rich, and, of course, the SUPERIOR, you rush down here to ask me to acknowledge it by accepting you!"

"You know I never meant that, Miss Kitty," burst out Barker vehemently, but his protest was drowned in a rapid roulade from the young lady's fingers on the keys. He sank back in his chair.

"Of course you never MEANT it," she said with an odd laugh; "but everybody will take it in that way, and you cannot go round to everybody in Boomville and make the pretty declaration you have just made to me. Everybody will say I accepted you for your money; everybody will say it was a put-up job of my father's. Everybody will say that you threw yourself away on me. And I don't know but that they would be right. Sit down, please! or I shall play again.

"You see," she went on, without looking at him, "just now you like to remember that you fell in love with me first as a pretty waiter girl, but if I became your wife it's just what you would like to FORGET. And I shouldn't, for I should always like to think of the time when you came here, whenever you could afford it and sometimes when you couldn't,

just to see me; and how we used to make excuses to speak with each other over the dishes. You don't know what these things mean to a woman who"--she hesitated a moment, and then added abruptly, "but what does that matter? You would not care to be reminded of it. So," she said, rising up with a grave smile and grasping her hands tightly behind her, "it's a good deal better that you should begin to forget it now. Be a good boy and take my advice. Go to San Francisco. You will meet some girl there in a way you will not afterward regret. You are young, and your riches, to say nothing," she added in a faltering voice that was somewhat inconsistent with the mischievous smile that played upon her lips, "of your kind and simple heart, will secure that which the world would call unselfish affection from one more equal to you, but would always believe was only BOUGHT if it came from me."

"I suppose you are right," he said simply.

She glanced quickly at him, and her eyebrows straightened. He had risen, his face white and his gray eyes widely opened. "I suppose you are right," he went on, "because you are saying to me what my partners said to me this morning, when I offered to share my wealth with them, God knows as honestly as I offered to share my heart with you. I suppose that you are both right; that there must be some curse of pride or selfishness upon the money that I have got; but I have not felt it yet, and the fault does not lie with me."

She gave her shoulders a slight shrug, and turned impatiently toward the window. When she turned back again he was gone. The room around her was empty; this room, which a moment before had seemed to be pulsating with his boyish passion, was now empty, and empty of HIM. She bit her lips, rose, and ran eagerly to the window. She saw his straw hat and brown curls as he crossed the road. She drew her handkerchief sharply away from the withered shrub over which she had thrown it, and cast the once treasured remains in the hearth. Then, possibly because she had it ready in her hand, she clapped the

handkerchief to her eyes, and sinking sideways upon the chair he had risen from, put her elbows on its back, and buried her face in her hands.

It is the characteristic and perhaps cruelty of a simple nature to make no allowance for complex motives, or to even understand them! So it seemed to Barker that his simplicity had been met with equal directness. It was the possession of this wealth that had in some way hopelessly changed his relations with the world. He did not love Kitty any the less; he did not even think she had wronged him; they, his partners and his sweetheart, were cleverer than he; there must be some occult quality in this wealth that he would understand when he possessed it, and perhaps it might even make him ashamed of his generosity; not in the way they had said, but in his tempting them so audaciously to assume a wrong position. It behoved him to take possession of it at once, and to take also upon himself alone the knowledge, the trials, and responsibilities it would incur. His cheeks flushed again as he thought he had tried to tempt an innocent girl with it, and he was keenly hurt that he had not seen in Kitty's eyes the tenderness that had softened his partners' refusal. He resolved to wait no longer, but sell his dreadful stock at once. He walked directly to the bank.

The manager, a shrewd but kindly man, to whom Barker was known already, received him graciously in recognition of his well-known simple honesty, and respectfully as a representative of the equally well-known poor but "superior" partnership of the Gulch. He listened with marked attention to Barker's hesitating but brief story, only remarking at its close:

"You mean, of course, the 'SECOND Extension' when you say 'First'?"

"No," said Barker; "I mean the 'First'--and it said First in the Boomville paper."

"Yes, yes!--I saw it--it was a printer's error. The stock of the 'First' was called in two years ago. No! You mean the 'Second,' for, of course, you've followed the quotations, and are likely to know what stock you're holding shares of. When you go back, take a look at them, and you'll see I am right."

"But I brought them with me," said Barker, with a slight flushing as he felt in his pocket, "and I am quite sure they are the 'First'." He brought them out and laid them on the desk before the manager.

The words "First Extension" were plainly visible. The manager glanced curiously at Barker, and his brow darkened.

"Did anybody put this up on you?" he said sternly. "Did your partners send you here with this stuff?"

"No! no!" said Barker eagerly. "No one! It's all MY mistake. I see it now. I trusted to the newspaper."

"And you mean to say you never examined the stock or the quotations, nor followed it in any way, since you had it?"

"Never!" said Barker. "Never thought about IT AT ALL till I saw the newspaper. So it's not worth anything?" And, to the infinite surprise of the manager, there was a slight smile on his boyish face.

"I am afraid it is not worth the paper it's written on," said the manager gently.

The smile on Barker's face increased to a little laugh, in which his wondering companion could not help joining. "Thank you," said Barker suddenly, and rushed away.

"He beats everything!" said the manager, gazing after him. "Damned if he didn't seem even PLEASED."

He WAS pleased. The burden of wealth had fallen from his shoulders; the dreadful incubus that had weighed him down and parted his friends from him was gone! And he had not got rid of it by spending it foolishly. It had not ruined anybody yet; it had not altered anybody in HIS eyes. It was gone; and he was a free and happy man once more. He would go directly back to his partners; they would laugh at him, of course, but they could not look at him now with the same sad, commiserating eyes. Perhaps even Kitty--but here a sudden chill struck him. He had forgotten the bill of sale! He had forgotten the dreadful promissory note given to her father in the rash presumption of his wealth! How could it ever be paid? And more than that, it had been given in a fraud. He had no money when he gave it, and no prospect of any but what he was to get from those worthless shares. Would anybody believe him that it was only a stupid blunder of his own? Yes, his partners might believe him; but, horrible thought, he had already implicated THEM in his fraud! Even now, while he was standing there hesitatingly in the road, they were entering upon the new claim he had NOT PAID FOR--COULD NOT PAY FOR--and in the guise of a benefactor he was dishonoring them. Yet it was Carter he must meet first; he must confess all to him. He must go back to the hotel--that hotel where he had indignantly left her, and tell the father he was a fraud. It was terrible to think of; perhaps it was part of that money curse that he could not get rid of, and was now realizing; but it MUST be done. He was simple, but his very simplicity had that unhesitating directness of conclusion which is the main factor of what men call "pluck."

He turned back to the hotel and entered the office. But Mr. Carter had not yet returned. What was to be done? He could not wait there; there was no time to be lost; there was only one other person who knew his expectations, and to whom he could confide his failure--it was Kitty. It was to taste the dregs of his humiliation, but it must be done. He ran

up the staircase and knocked timidly at the sitting-room door. There was a momentary pause, and a weak voice said "Come in." Barker opened the door; saw the vision of a handkerchief thrown away, of a pair of tearful eyes that suddenly changed to stony indifference, and a graceful but stiffening figure. But he was past all insult now.

"I would not intrude," he said simply, "but I came only to see your father. I have made an awful blunder--more than a blunder, I think--a FRAUD. Believing that I was rich, I purchased your father's claim for my partners, and gave him my promissory note. I came here to give him back his claim--for that note can NEVER be paid! I have just been to the bank; I find I have made a stupid mistake in the name of the shares upon which I based my belief in my wealth. The ones I own are worthless--am as poor as ever--I am even poorer, for I owe your father money I can never pay!"

To his amazement he saw a look of pain and scorn come into her troubled eyes which he had never seen before. "This is a feeble trick," she said bitterly; "it is unlike you--it is unworthy of you!"

"Good God! You must believe me. Listen! it was all a mistake--a printer's error. I read in the paper that the stock for the First Extension mine had gone up, when it should have been the Second. I had some old stock of the First, which I had kept for years, and only thought of when I read the announcement in the paper this morning. I swear to you--"

But it was unnecessary. There was no doubting the truth of that voice--that manner. The scorn fled from Miss Kitty's eyes to give place to a stare, and then suddenly changed to two bubbling blue wells of laughter. She went to the window and laughed. She sat down to the piano and laughed. She caught up the handkerchief, and hiding half her rosy face in it, laughed. She finally collapsed into an easy chair, and, burying her brown head in its cushions, laughed long and

confidentially until she brought up suddenly against a sob. And then was still.

Barker was dreadfully alarmed. He had heard of hysterics before. He felt he ought to do something. He moved toward her timidly, and gently drew away her handkerchief. Alas! the blue wells were running over now. He took her cold hands in his; he knelt beside her and passed his arm around her waist. He drew her head upon his shoulder. He was not sure that any of these things were effective until she suddenly lifted her eyes to his with the last ray of mirth in them vanishing in a big teardrop, put her arms round his neck, and sobbed:

"Oh, George! You blessed innocent!"

An eloquent silence was broken by a remorseful start from Barker.

"But I must go and warn my poor partners, dearest; there yet may be time; perhaps they have not yet taken possession of your father's claim."

"Yes, George dear," said the young girl, with sparkling eyes; "and tell them to do so AT ONCE!"

"What?" gasped Barker.

"At once--do you hear?--or it may be too late! Go quick."

"But your father--Oh, I see, dearest, you will tell him all yourself, and spare me."

"I shall do nothing so foolish, Georgey. Nor shall you! Don't you see the note isn't due for a month? Stop! Have you told anybody but Paw and me?"

"Only the bank manager."

She ran out of the room and returned in a minute tying the most enchanting of hats by a ribbon under her oval chin. "I'll run over and fix him," she said.

"Fix him?" returned Barker, aghast.

"Yes, I'll say your wicked partners have been playing a practical joke on you, and he mustn't give you away. He'll do anything for me."

"But my partners didn't! On the contrary--"

"Don't tell me, George," said Miss Kitty severely. "THEY ought never to have let you come here with that stuff. But come! You must go at once. You must not meet Paw; you'll blurt out everything to him; I know you! I'll tell him you could not stay to luncheon. Quick, now; go. What? Well--there!"

Whatever it represented, the exclamation was apparently so protracted that Miss Kitty was obliged to push her lover to the front landing before she could disappear by the back stairs. But once in the street, Barker no longer lingered. It was a good three miles back to the Gulch; he might still reach it by the time his partners were taking their noonday rest, and he resolved that although the messenger had preceded him, they would not enter upon the new claim until the afternoon. For Barker, in spite of his mistress's injunction, had no idea of taking what he couldn't pay for; he would keep the claim intact until something could be settled. For the rest, he walked on air! Kitty loved him! The accursed wealth no longer stood between them. They were both poor now--everything was possible.

The sun was beginning to send dwarf shadows toward the east when he reached the Gulch. Here a new trepidation seized him. How would his partners receive the news of his utter failure? HE was happy, for he had gained Kitty through it. But they? For a moment it seemed to

him that he had purchased his happiness through their loss. He stopped, took off his hat, and ran his fingers remorsefully through his damp curls.

Another thing troubled him. He had reached the crest of the Gulch, where their old working ground was spread before him like a map. They were not there; neither were they lying under the four pines on the ridge where they were wont to rest at midday. He turned with some alarm to the new claim adjoining theirs, but there was no sign of them there either. A sudden fear that they had, after parting from him, given up the claim in a fit of disgust and depression, and departed, now overcame him. He clapped his hand on his head and ran in the direction of the cabin.

He had nearly reached it when the rough challenge of "Who's there?" from the bushes halted him, and Demorest suddenly swung into the trail. But the singular look of sternness and impatience which he was wearing vanished as he saw Barker, and with a loud shout of "All right, it's only Barker! Hooray!" he ran toward him. In an instant he was joined by Stacy from the cabin, and the two men, catching hold of their returning partner, waltzed him joyfully and breathlessly into the cabin. But the quick-eyed Demorest suddenly let go his hold and stared at Barker's face. "Why, Barker, old boy, what's up?"

"Everything's up," gasped the breathless Barker. "It's all up about these stocks. It's all a mistake; all an infernal lie of that newspaper. I never had the right kind of shares. The ones I have are worthless rags"; and the next instant he had blurted out his whole interview with the bank manager.

The two partners looked at each other, and then, to Barker's infinite perplexity, the same extraordinary convulsion that had seized Miss Kitty fell upon them. They laughed, holding on each other's shoulders; they laughed, clinging to Barker's struggling figure; they went out and laughed with their backs against a tree. They laughed separately and

in different corners. And then they came up to Barker with tears in their eyes, dropped their heads on his shoulder, and murmured exhaustedly:

"You blessed ass!"

"But," said Stacy suddenly, "how did you manage to buy the claim?"

"Ah! that's the most awful thing, boys. I've NEVER PAID FOR IT," groaned Barker.

"But Carter sent us the bill of sale," persisted Demorest, "or we shouldn't have taken it."

"I gave my promissory note at thirty days," said Barker desperately, "and where's the money to come from now? But," he added wildly, as the men glanced at each other--"you said 'taken it.' Good heavens! you don't mean to say that I'm TOO late--that you've--you've touched it?"

"I reckon that's pretty much what we HAVE been doing," drawled Demorest.

"It looks uncommonly like it," drawled Stacy.

Barker glanced blankly from the one to the other. "Shall we pass our young friend in to see the show?" said Demorest to Stacy.

"Yes, if he'll be perfectly quiet and not breathe on the glasses," returned Stacy.

They each gravely took one of Barker's hands and led him to the corner of the cabin. There, on an old flour barrel, stood a large tin prospecting pan, in which the partners also occasionally used to knead their bread. A dirty towel covered it. Demorest whisked it dexterously

aside, and disclosed three large fragments of decomposed gold and quartz. Barker started back.

"Heft it!" said Demorest grimly.

Barker could scarcely lift the pan!

"Four thousand dollars' weight if a penny!" said Stacy, in short staccato sentences. "In a pocket! Brought it out the second stroke of the pick! We'd been awfully blue after you left. Awfully blue, too, when that bill of sale came, for we thought you'd been wasting your money on US. Reckoned we oughtn't to take it, but send it straight back to you. Messenger gone! Then Demorest reckoned as it was done it couldn't be undone, and we ought to make just one 'prospect' on the claim, and strike a single stroke for you. And there it is. And there's more on the hillside."

"But it isn't MINE! It isn't YOURS! It's Carter's. I never had the money to pay for it--and I haven't got it now."

"But you gave the note--and it is not due for thirty days."

A recollection flashed upon Barker. "Yes," he said with thoughtful simplicity, "that's what Kitty said."

"Oh, Kitty said so," said both partners, gravely.

"Yes," stammered Barker, turning away with a heightened color, "and, as I didn't stay there to luncheon, I think I'd better be getting it ready." He picked up the coffeepot and turned to the hearth as his two partners stepped beyond the door.

"Wasn't it exactly like him?" said Demorest.

"Him all over," said Stacy.

"And his worry over that note?" said Demorest.

"And 'what Kitty said,'" said Stacy.

"Look here! I reckon that wasn't ALL that Kitty said."

"Of course not."

"What luck!"