

Back From The Brink

The Story of a Man's Awakening in Time to Save His Honour

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Illustrated by Arthur Heming

EIGHT o'clock of a raw December night. It was cold, not with the bracing bitterness one associates with the Christmas month, but with the disagreeable, clammy, semi-congealed dampness belonging, according to all the traditions of the northern temperate zone, to the beginning of November and the end of March.

In the snug bachelor's sitting room of Suite No. 8 of the fashionable Belvidere Apartments, a glowing grate fire sent its cheery rays abroad. One would have been justified in surmising that, to be seated on such a night, in such a room, before such a fire, would have been sufficient reason to breed a sweet content in the bosom of the man who half sat, and half lay, in a huge armchair drawn up before the fire.

Yet such was not the case, for it is a well-known fact that content is a matter largely of the mind; and the mind of Mr. Henry Arthur Johnston was disturbed by vague misgivings.

A long time he lounged there, motionless. His face, though beginning to show the marks of constant dissipation, still retained a youthful cast, and no one would have credited him with more than the twenty-six years which he admitted his age to be.

Just now his face is very thoughtful. It is an expression that sits well upon his clear-cut features and his square forehead, the white temples of which gleam through a thinning crop of closely-cut dark hair.

At length he shifted his position slightly, and taking an unlighted cigar from between his lips, mused, half aloud, "It's a rotten life, after all, empty of anything worth while."

He drew himself into a sitting posture and glanced around the room.

"Lots of luxury," he muttered, "plenty of style, friends, wine, women and song to no end, everything to make life pass quickly and pleasantly—everything—except real manhood as one used to think of it."

He relapsed again into his lounging attitude, and, with his cigar clasped still unlighted between his fingers, gave himself up to a reverie.

He saw himself as he was eight years ago, when he entered college, an ardent youth, his mind filled with the hope of achievement; his faith in religion unquestioned and unimpaired; his heart brimming over with an enthusiastic interest in everybody and everything under the sun.

Then came the gayety of undergraduate life at a great university; the hilarious round of student frolics; the dances; the sports; the glee clubs and the what not that have been invented to prevent the budding scholar coming to a head too soon.

How they had grown on him, those frolics!

He had entered college with the scholastic idea predominant; in the course of a few weeks the importance of scholarship had shrunk until it had come to seem a mere bagatelle in comparison with the fancy frills of college life. He discovered that, to strive after gold medals, first places and the like, was considered unfashionable among the gay spirits with whom he had soon become identified.

AND he broke into a half smile as he remembered how near the bottom of the list he had figured in the exam. results that passed him from first to second year—he, the man for whom had been predicted second place at the least!

Then, in the middle of his second year, came the summons to the death-bed of his widowed mother.

Tears involuntarily filled his fine, grey eyes, and obscured his vision for a fleeting moment. He had been too late to see her before she had crossed the bar, borne out on the sea of eternity, strong in the faith of immortality, and in the confidence that her son would be a worthy bearer of the name of his father whom she was going to meet.

Poor fond soul, she had fancied a fatal illness to be a passing indisposition, not of sufficient importance to interrupt her son's studies.

If she had lived?—but then, would it have made any difference?

Yes. It must have made a difference—the vast difference between having money to spend and of having work to do.

For, by his mother's death he had come into the comfortable little fortune accumulated by his father.

What a huge sum it had seemed at first. Forty thousand dollars!

No need, he had argued, after the keen edge of his grief had been dulled by the lapse of a few months, no need to go back to college.

Forty thousand dollars was a lot of money—an almost unspendable sum. Why not enjoy life while young?

And he had enjoyed life. Six solid years of gay life at home and abroad. But it had cost a lot of money.

This brought him, and with a jerk, up to the present time with its difficulties and comparative poverty. Of his forty thousand dollars, less than four thousand were all that remained.

He looked at his watch. "Half past eight," he muttered. "Lots of time. Hanley won't be here with the stuff till after nine."

He dropped into his chair again, and, lighting his cigar, proceeded to consider his affairs with earnestness.

"Good heavens!" he thought. "Has it come to this that I must become a fakir—or get a job?"

Several weeks before this December evening, when we find him musing retrospectively at his fireside, Johnston had become acquainted with Mr. Edward D'Courcy Hanley, a gentleman of uncertain age, unknown antecedents and a turn for company-promoting.

In the course of a few days Johnston had become identified with this impressively-labelled gentleman as the moneyed partner in the flotation of a mining company whose chief assets were Mr.

Hanley's experience as a stock salesman and a worthless mining claim in Cobalt.

"Leave the details to me, my boy," Hanley had said, when Johnston had become thoroughly warmed up to the immense possibilities of the scheme. "I'm used to the business. You put up the cash as I need it. It won't be more than three or four thousand all told and the bulk of it will be expended in advertising and postage."

"But look here, Hanley," replied Johnston, who was not devoid of a native shrewdness, "I don't want to offend you, but on your own showing you're a—well, you are inclined to be a trifle crooked."

"NO offence taken, old man," returned Hanley, with a broad grin, "I'm not the only fakir outside the penitentiary. I've lots of good company living on the fat of the land in the swellest part of the town. But this deal you're coming in is no fake—it's perfectly legal, and, what is all-important, it's an absolutely sure money-maker."

"Well," said Johnston, with an innate distaste which he covered up by a cynical smile, "it's money we're after. At the same time, I do not intend to let go of what I've got until I see some coming in."

"You'll have to let go of some of it," replied Hanley, with the suspicion of a snarl in his voice, "or the game's up as far as you're concerned and I'll have to get a partner who's open to rea—"

"Now don't get huffy," Johnston interrupted. "You show me where the money's going and why it ought to go there and I'll put it up."

"That's all I ask."

"What's the first expenditure?"

"Buy the claim, put up a shack or two and make a noise like sinking a shaft—stage properties, so to speak."

"There will be a real mine, then, on the ground that is? The scheme looks less airy already," said Johnston, with a sort of a vague, illogical hope in his heart that perhaps, after all, the claim might have some ore in it.

"Call it near-real between ourselves," Hanley replied. "It will be a hole in the ground within gunshot of a producing mine. Of course if the blessed claim was really worth anything we couldn't buy it. But being so near a producing mine it possesses great value for our scheme, even though there's not an ounce of ore in it."

"Respectable company, like!"

"That's it. Everybody expects mining stocks to be more or less of a gamble. The great thing is to know when the dice is loaded."

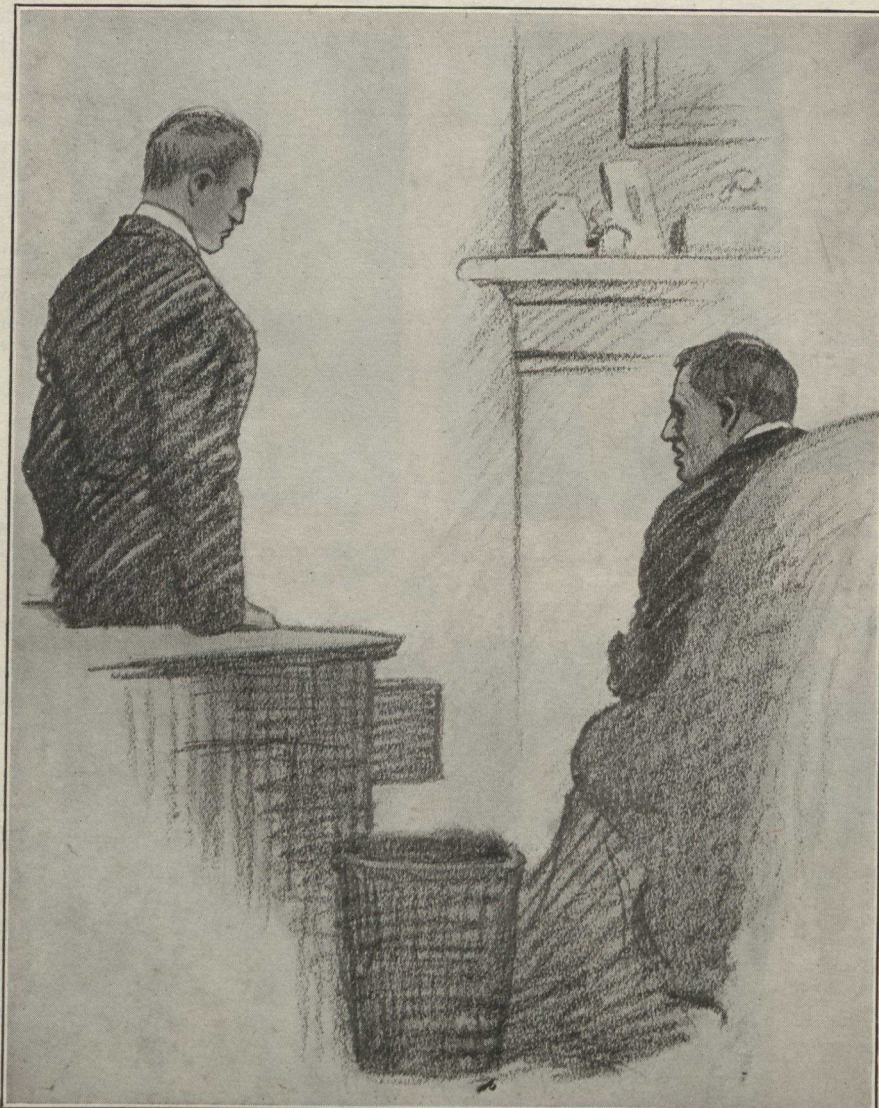
"You've an option, you say?"

"Yes. Price six hundred dollars for the claim if taken up inside of thirty-five days. Cheap at the price, my son. There's a shed on it that, with a few bits of machinery and so on faked in will make a dandy photo for the illustrated prospectus. And to prove I'm on the square with you, I'll let you take up the option in your own name. Send the cheque yourself to Samuel Horowitz, Montreal. He's the present owner. Then we'll get the charter and you can resell the claim to the company. After that we can begin our real business, which is to sell stock to the get-rich-quick-crazy public."

IT occurred to Johnston that Mr. Horowitz may have been a confederate of Hanley and that Hanley's real scheme was to get him to part with cash for something wholly fictitious. He was mistaken in this, however. Hanley was after larger returns. In due course Johnston received a transfer of the claim and the organization of the Gleaming Star Silver Mining Company, Limited, was commenced.

The partners held many meetings in Johnston's luxurious apartment, at which the telling advertisements drawn up by Hanley were discussed and at which a liberal supply of bottled goods helped to encourage optimism. Each man grew more and more enthusiastic as the scheme progressed.

Presently the charter was received



"Don't get abusive," said Johnston, "I'm about fifty pounds heavier than you, and I might resent it."