

# **The Big Mogul**

by  
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# **THE BIG MOGUL**

# CHAPTER I

THIS was the library of the Townsend mansion in Harniss. Mrs. Townsend had so christened it when the mansion was built; or, to be more explicit, the Boston architect who drew the plans had lettered the word "Library" inside the rectangle indicating the big room, just as he had lettered "Drawing-Room" in the adjoining, and still larger, rectangle, and Mrs. Townsend had approved both plans and lettering. In the former, and much smaller, home of the Townsends there had been neither library nor drawing-room, the apartments corresponding to them were known respectively as the "sitting-room" and the "parlor." When the little house was partially demolished and the mansion took its place the rechristened sitting-room acquired two black walnut bookcases and a dozen "sets," the latter resplendent in morocco and gilt. Now the gilt letters gleamed dimly behind the glass in the light from the student lamp upon the marble-topped center table beside which Foster Townsend was sitting, reading a Boston morning newspaper. It was six o'clock in the afternoon of a dark day in the fall of a year late in the seventies.

The student lamp was a large one and the light from beneath its green shade fell upon his head and shoulders as he sat there in the huge leather easy-chair. Most of the furniture in the library was stiff and expensive and uncomfortable. The easy-chair was expensive also, but it was comfortable. Foster Townsend had chosen it himself when the mansion was furnished and it was the one item upon which his choice remained fixed and irrevocable.

“But it is so big and—and *homely*, dear,” remonstrated his wife. “It doesn’t look—well, genteel enough for a room in a house like ours. Now, truly, do you think it does?”

Her husband, his hat on the back of his head and his hands in his trousers’ pockets, smiled.

“Maybe not, Bella,” he replied. “It is big, I’ll grant you that, and I shouldn’t wonder if it was homely. But so far as that goes I’m big and homely myself. It fits me and I like it. You can have all the fun you want with the rest of the house; buy all the doodads and pictures and images and story-books and trash that you’ve a mind to, but I want that chair and I’m going to have it. A sitting-room is a place to sit in and I mean to sit in comfort.”

“But it isn’t a sitting-room, Father,” urged Arabella. “It is a library. I do wish you wouldn’t forget that.”

“All right. I don’t care what you call it, so long as you let me sit in it the way I want to. That chair’s sold, young man,” he added, addressing the attentive representative of the furniture house. “Now, Mother, what’s the next item on the bill of lading?”

The leather chair came to the library of the Townsend mansion and its purchaser had occupied it many, many afternoons and evenings since. He was occupying it now, his bulky figure filling it to repletion and his feet, of a size commensurate to the rest of him, resting upon an upholstered foot-stool—a “cricket” he would have called it. A pair of gold-rimmed spectacles were perched upon the big nose before his gray eyes and the stump of a cigar was held tightly in the corner of his wide, thin lipped, grimly humorous mouth. He was dressed in a dark blue suit, wore a stiff-bosomed white shirt, a low “turn down” collar and a black, ready-made bow

tie. Below the tie, a diamond stud glittered in the shirt bosom. His boots—he had them made for him by the village shoe-maker—were of the, even then, old-fashioned, long-legged variety, but their leather was of the softest and best obtainable. Upon the third finger of his left hand—stubby, thick hands they were—another diamond, set in a heavy gold ring, flashed as he turned the pages of the paper. His hair was a dark brown and it and his shaggy brows and clipped chin beard were sprinkled with gray.

There was another chair at the other side of the table, a rocking-chair, upholstered in fashionable black haircloth and with a lace “tidy” upon its back. That chair was empty. It had been empty for nearly a month, since the day when Arabella Townsend was taken ill. It was pathetically, hauntingly empty now, for she who had been accustomed to occupy it was dead. A little more than a week had elapsed since her funeral, an event concerning which Eben Wixon, the undertaker, has been vaingloriously eloquent ever since.

“Yes, sir-ee!” Mr. Wixon was wont to proclaim with the pride of an artist. “That was about the most luxurious funeral ever held in this county, if I do say it. I can’t think of anything to make it more perfect, unless, maybe, to have four horses instead of two haulin’ the hearse. That would have put in what you might call the finishin’ touch. Yes, sir, ’twould! Still, I ain’t findin’ fault. I’m satisfied. The music—and the flowers! And the high-toned set of folks sittin’ around all over the lower floor of that big house! Some of ’em was out in the dinin’ room, they was. If I had half the cash represented at that Townsend funeral I’d never need to bury anybody else in *this* world. I bet you I wouldn’t, I’d have enough.”

Foster Townsend read his paper, became interested in a news item, smiled, raised his head and, turning toward the vacant rocker,

opened his lips to speak. Then he remembered and sank back again into his own chair. The paper lay unheeded upon his knees and he stared absently at a figure in the Brussels carpet on the floor of the library.

A door in the adjoining room—the dining room—opened and Nabby Gifford, the Townsend housekeeper, entered from the kitchen. She lit the hanging lamp above the dining room table and came forward to draw the portières between that room and the library. Standing with the edge of a curtain in each hand, she addressed her employer.

“Kind of a hard old evenin’, ain’t it, Cap’n Townsend,” she observed. “It’s rainin’ now but I declare if it don’t feel as if it might snow afore it gets through.”

Foster Townsend did not answer, nor did he look up. Mrs. Gifford tried again.

“Anything ’special in the paper?” she inquired. “Ain’t found out who murdered that woman up to Watertown yet, I presume likely?”

He heard her this time.

“Eh?” he grunted, raising his eyes. “No, I guess not. I don’t know. I didn’t notice. What are you doing in the dining room, Nabby? Where’s Ellen?”

“She’s out. It’s her night off. She was all dressed up in her best bib and tucker and so I judged she was goin’ somewheres. I asked her where, but she never said nothin’, made believe she didn’t hear me. Don’t make much odds; I can ’most generally guess a riddle when I’ve got the answer aforehand. There’s an Odd Fellers’ ball over to



Bayport to-night and that Georgie D.'s home from fishin', so I cal'late—”

Townsend interrupted. “All right, all right,” he put in, gruffly. “I don't care where she's gone. Pull those curtains, will you, Nabby.”

“I was just a-goin' to.... Say, Cap'n Townsend, don't you think it's kind of funny the way that woman's husband is actin'—that Watertown woman's, I mean? He *says* he wan't to home the night she was murdered but he don't say where he was. Now, 'cordin' to what I read in yesterday's *Advertiser*—”

“All right, all right! Pull those curtains.... Here! Wait a minute. Where's Varunas?”

“He's out to the barn, same as he usually is, I guess likely. He spends more time with them horses than he does with me, I know that. I say to him sometimes, I say: ‘Anybody'd think a horse could talk the way you keep company with 'em. Seems as if you *liked* to be with critters that can't talk.’”

“Perhaps he does—for a change. Well, if he comes in tell him I want to see him. You can call me when supper's ready. Now, if you'll pull those curtains—”

The curtains were snatched together with a jerk and a rattle of rings on the pole. From behind them sounded the click of dishes and the jingle of silver. Foster Townsend sank back into the leather chair. His cigar had gone out, but he did not relight it. He sat there, gazing at nothing in particular, a gloomy frown upon his face.

The door leading from the rear of the front hall opened just a crack. Through the crack came a whisper in a hoarse masculine voice.

“Cap’n Foster!” whispered the voice. “Cap’n Foster!... Ssst! Look here!”

Townsend turned, looked and saw a hand with a beckoning forefinger thrust from behind the door. He recognized the hand and lifting his big body from the chair, walked slowly across the room.

“Well, Varunas,” he asked, “what’s the matter now? What are you sneaking in through the skipper’s companion for?”

A head followed the hand around the edge of the door, the head of Varunas Gifford. Varunas was Nabby Gifford’s husband. He was stableman on the Townsend estate, took care of the Townsend horses, and drove his employer’s trotters and pacers in the races at the county fairs and elsewhere. He was a little, wizened man, with stooped shoulders and legs bowed like barrel hoops. His thin, puckered face puckered still more as he whispered a cautious reply.

“Cap’n Foster,” he whispered, “can you just step out in the hall here a minute? I’ve got somethin’ to tell ye and if I come in there Nabby’s liable to hear us talkin’ and want to know what it’s all about. Come out just a minute, can ye?”

Townsend motioned him back, followed him into the dimly lighted hall and closed the door behind them.

“Well, here I am,” he said. “What’s the matter?”

Varunas rubbed his unshaven chin. His fingers among the bristles sounded like the rasp of sandpaper.

“You know Claribel?” he began anxiously.

Claribel was the fastest mare in the Townsend stable. The question, therefore, was rather superfluous. Claribel's owner seemed to consider it so.

"Don't waste your breath," he ordered. "What's the matter with her?"

Varunas shook his head violently. "Ain't nothin' the matter with her," he declared. "She's fine. Only—well, you see—"

"Come, come! Throw it overboard!"

"Well, I was cal'latin' to take her down to the Circle to-morrow mornin' early—about six or so; afore anybody was up, you know—and try her out. Them was your orders, Cap'n, you remember."

"Of course I remember. I was going to remind you of it. You're going to do it, aren't you?"

"I was cal'latin' to, but—well, I heard somethin' a spell ago that made me think maybe I hadn't better. I've been give to understand that—" he leaned forward to whisper once more—"that there'd be somebody else there at the same time me and Claribel was. Um-hum. Somebody that's cal'latin' to find out somethin'."

Foster Townsend's big hands, pushed into his trousers pockets, jingled the loose change there. He nodded.

"I see," he said, slowly. "Yes, yes, I see. Somebody named Baker, I shouldn't wonder. Eh?"

Varunas nodded. "Somebody that works for somebody named somethin' like that," he admitted. "You see, Cap'n, I was down to the blacksmith shop a couple of hours ago—got to have Flyaway

shod pretty soon—and me and Joe Ellis was talkin’ about one thing or ’nother, and says he: ‘Varunas,’ he says, ‘when is the old man and Sam Baker goin’ to pull off that private horse trot of theirs?’ he says. Course everybody knows that us and Sam have fixed up that match and it’s the general notion that there’s consider’ble money up on it. Some folks say it’s a hundred dollars and some says it’s five hundred. *I* never tell ’em how much ’tis, because—”

“Because you don’t know. Well, never mind that. Go on.”

“Yup.... Um-hum.... Well, anyhow, all hands knows that our Claribel and his Rattler is goin’ to have it out and Joe he wanted to know when ’twas goin’ to be. I told him next week some day and then he says: ‘I understand you’ve been takin’ the mare down to the Circle and givin’ her time trials in the mornin’s afore anybody else is up.’ Well, that kind of knocked me. I never suspicioned anybody did know, did you, Cap’n?”

“I told you to take pains that they didn’t. You haven’t done it but once. Who saw you then?”

“Why, nobody, so I’d have been willin’ to bet. I never see anybody around. Lonesome’s all git out ’tis down there that time in the mornin’. And dark, too. How Joe or anybody else knew I had Claribel down there yesterday was more’n I could make out.”

“Well, never mind. It looks as if they did know. Did Ellis tell you what time the mare made?”

“No. But he give me to understand that Seth Emmons, Baker’s man, was figgerin’ to come over from Bayport and be somewheres in that neighborhood to-morrer mornin’, and every mornin’, till he

found out. Joe wouldn't tell me who told him, but he said 'twas a fact. Now what had I better do? It's the story 'round town that Rattler has made 2:20 or better and that the best Claribel can do is in the neighborhood of 2:35. If folks knew she'd made 2:18½ around that Circle Baker might have Rattler took sick or somethin' and the whole business would be called off. I've known his horses to be took down in a hurry afore, when he was toler'ble sure to lose. When you're dealin' with Sam Baker you're up against a slick article, and that man of his, Seth Emmons, is just as up and comin'. I better not show up at that Circle to-morrow mornin', had I, Cap'n Foster?"

Townsend, hands in pockets, took a turn up and down the hall. His horses were his pet hobbies. Besides the span of blacks which he was accustomed to drive about town and which, with the nobby brougham or carryall or dog-cart which they drew, were the admiration and boastful pride of Harniss, he owned a half dozen racers. At the Ostable County Fair and Cattle Show in October the Townsend entries usually carried off the majority of first prizes. They were entered, also, at the fair in New Bedford and sometimes as far away as Taunton. Between fairs there were numbers of by-races with other horse owners in neighboring towns. A good trotter was a joy to Foster Townsend and a sharply contested trotting match his keenest enjoyment. The Townsend trotters were as much talked about as the famous and long-drawn-out Townsend-Cook lawsuit. The suit was won, or seemed to be. The highest court in Massachusetts had recently decided it in Foster Townsend's favor. Bangs Cook's lawyers were reported to have entered motion of appeal and it was said that they intended carrying it to the Supreme Court at Washington, but few believed their appeal would be granted.

Sam Baker was an old rival of his on the tracks. Baker was the hotel keeper and livery man at Bayport, ten miles away. He was not accounted rich, like Townsend, but he was well to do, a shrewd Yankee and a "sport." The trotter Rattler was a recent acquisition of his and a fast one, so it was said. He had challenged Townsend's mare Claribel to a mile trot on the "Circle," the track which Townsend had built and presented to the town. It was a quarter mile round of hard clay road constructed on the salt meadows near the beach at South Harniss. A lonely spot with no houses near it, it was then. Now a summer hotel and an array of cottages stand on or near it. Foster Townsend used it as an exercise ground for his trotters, but any one else was accorded the same privilege. In the winter, when the snow was packed hard, it was the spot where the dashing young fellow in a smart cutter behind a smart horse took his best girl for a ride and the hope of an impromptu race with some other dashing young fellow similarly equipped.

Varunas Gifford watched his employer pace up and down the hall, watched him adoringly but anxiously. After a moment he returned to repeat his question.

"Better not be down to the Circle to-morrow mornin', had I, Cap'n?" he suggested.

Townsend stopped in his stride. "Yes," he said, with decision. "I want you to be there."

"Eh? Why, good land! If that Seth Emmons is there spyin' and keepin' time on Claribel, why—"

"Sshh! Wait! I want you to be there, but I don't want the mare to be there. Is Hornet all right for a workout?"

“Sartin sure he’s all right. But Hornet can’t do better’n 2:40 if he spreads himself, not on that Circle track anyhow. You ain’t cal’latin’ to haul out Claribel and put in Hornet, be you? There wouldn’t be no sense in that, Cap’n, not a mite. Why—”

“Oh, be quiet! If he does 2:45 it will suit me just as well, provided that is the best you can make him do. You say it’s dark down there at six o’clock?”

“Dark enough, even if it’s a fine mornin’, this time of year. A mornin’ like to-day’s—yes, and the way it looks as if to-morrow’s would be—it’s so dark you can’t much more’n see to keep in the road.”

“All right. The darker the better. If it’s dark to-morrow morning you hitch Hornet in the gig and go down there and send him a mile as fast as he can travel. He is the same build and size as Claribel, about, and the same color.”

“Eh?... Gosh!” Varunas’ leathery face split with a broad grin. “Yus—yus,” he observed, “I see what you’re up to, Cap’n Foster. You figger that Sam Emmons’ll see me sendin’ Hornet around the Circle and he’ll take it for granted—Eh! But no, I’m afraid ’twon’t be dark enough for that. Hornet *is* the same size and color as Claribel but he ain’t marked the same. Claribel’s got that white splash between her eyes and that white stockin’ on her left hind laig. Hornet he ain’t got no white on him nowheres. If ’twas the middle of the night might be fooled, but—”

“Sshh! You’ve been whitewashing the henhouses this week, haven’t you? And as the job isn’t finished, I imagine you’ve got some of the whitewash left. If you have, and *if* you’ve got any gumption at all, I should think you could splash a horse white

wherever he needed to be white and do it well enough to fool anybody on a dark morning, particularly if he wasn't on the lookout for a trick. You could do that on a pinch, couldn't you?"

Mr. Gifford's grin, which had disappeared, came back again, broader than ever.

"I shouldn't be surprised to death if I could," he chuckled. "I see—yus, yus, I see! Sam he'll see Hornet all whitewashed up like a cellar door and he won't be suspicionin' nothin' but Claribel, and so when Hornet can't do no better than 2:40 or 2:45 he'll naturally—Hi! that's cute, that is! Yes, yes, I see now."

"Well, I'm glad you do. Go ahead and do your whitewashing. Whitewash isn't like paint, it comes off easy."

From behind the closed door of the library a sharp voice called: "Cap'n Townsend! Cap'n Townsend! Supper's ready!"

Varunas started. "I must be goin'," he whispered. "Don't tell her about it, Cap'n Foster, will ye. She'll pester me to death to find out what's up and if I don't tell her, she— But say!" he added admiringly, "that is about as slick a trick as ever I heard of, that whitewashin' is. How did you ever come to think that up all by yourself?"

Foster Townsend, his hand on the knob of the dining room door, grunted.

"I didn't think it up all by myself," he said, curtly. "There's nothing new about it. It's an old trick, as old as horse racing. I remembered it, that's all, and I guess it is good enough to fool any of Sam Baker's gang. You can tell me to-morrow how it worked."



He opened the door, crossed the library and sat down in his chair at the lonely supper table. Nabby Gifford brought in the eatables and set them before him.

“I made you a fish chowder to-night, Cap’n Foster,” she said. “I know you always liked it and we ain’t had one for a long time. Ezra Nickerson had some real nice tautog that his boy had just caught out by the spar buoy and there’s no kind of fish makes as good chowder as a tautog. Now I do hope you’ll eat some of it. You ain’t ate enough the last week to keep a canary bird goin’. You’ll be sick fust thing you know.”

Townsend dipped his spoon in the chowder and tasted approvingly.

“Good enough!” he declared. “Tastes like old times. Seems like old times to have you waiting on table, too, Nabby. Mother always liked your fish chowders.”

Mrs. Gifford nodded. “I know she did,” she agreed. “Time and time again I’ve heard her say there was nobody could make a chowder like me. Um-hum. Oh, well! We’re here to-day and to-morrow the place thereof don’t know us, as it says in the Bible. Ah, hum-a-day!... Speakin’ of waitin’ on table,” she added, noting the expression on his face, “I wanted to talk to you about that, Cap’n Townsend. There ain’t any reasons why I shouldn’t do it all the time. You don’t need two hired help in that kitchen now any more than a codfish needs wings. Ellen, she and that Georgie D. of hers will be gettin’ married pretty soon—leastways all hands says they will—and when she quits you mustn’t hire anybody in her place. If I can’t get meals for one lone man then I’d better be sent to the old woman’s home. You might just as well let me do it, and save your money—not that you need to save any more, land knows!”

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