

# **The Big Idea**

By Ray Cummings

## **Table of Contents**

- I—Jimmy's Big Idea
- II—The First Setback
- III-The Interview
- IV—Mr. Hope's Idea
- V—Jimmy Finds a Friend
- VI—Two Discoveries
- VII—Jimmy Plays Trumps
- VIII—Nemesis
- IX—The Mainspring of Endeavor

## **CHAPTER I.**

### **JIMMY'S BIG IDEA.**

Jimmy Rand came out of the wash-house that early April morning and took his place in the line of men dressed in their black, greasy mine-clothes. It was a long line—stretching past the power-house, past the big tower where the coal came tumbling down with a great clatter upon the sorting screens and into the waiting railroad flat cars beneath, until finally it wound itself to the little iron gate and gate-house near the mine-mouth where, through a tiny window, the men gave their numbers to be checked down in a great book.

It took Jimmy many minutes to reach the window that morning—minutes that dragged slowly by as he impatiently shuffled forward with the moving line. For this was the day he was to stop work at noon, and he and Anne were to take that long walk together they had planned. Jimmy looked up at the sky; it was a perfect day, almost cloudless, and with just a hint of chill in the air.

By birth and breeding Jimmy Rand was a coal miner. His father and grandfather before him had been miners—his father, now dead some three years, had worked in this same Fallon Brothers Mine. It was located near the little town of Menchon, Pennsylvania, in the valley of the Susquehanna.

When he was fifteen Jimmy had left school and entered the mine as a mule-boy. Now, at twenty-two, he was a full-fledged

miner, and by his record was one of the best “loaders” on the books; for he was a stalwart young chap, deep of chest, and with long, powerful muscles.

His work was to clean up the coal that had been undercut and then blasted out in the little galleries down in the mine, loading it onto the waiting mule-pulled cars that took it to the bottom of the shaft, where it was hoisted to the surface and on up into the tipple-tower to be dumped upon the screens.

Jimmy did his work well; there were few other loaders who could surpass him in tonnage. This the records showed, for each car bore a little metal tag with the loader’s number, of which account was kept.

But although Jimmy was a good coal miner by heredity and training, he was by nature not a miner at all. He had known this now for many years; but only to Anne, and to his mother, had he ever said so.

Way back in the days when he was mule-boy Jimmy could remember sitting alone in the great dark silences of the mine, listening to its vague, distant, muffled sounds, and thinking of the great world outside—the world of light and air and color, the world he knew so little about, was in so seldom, and dreamed of so constantly.

Jimmy Rand was by nature a dreamer. He had imagination, which, to one who mines coal, is neither necessary nor desirable. It was not the hours of active work in the mine that proved irksome to him. Stripped to the waist, his lean torso covered with sweat and the grime of coal-dust, he would load

steadily. But when the little car was filled, properly trimmed, and the last great, glistening chunk of coal heaved to its top, there was nothing more to do but sit quiet while the mule-boy took it away and brought him another “empty.”

Then Jimmy would slip on his coat and sit down in the cool, damp air to wait. He could hear his heart beat then in the sudden silence, and curious noises filled his ears. The comforting noises of his own work were gone; the distant, dull sounds of the mine seemed unreal, and always a little sinister.

He could hear trickling sounds near at hand—the gas seeping out of the newly opened coal crevices. And far off would come faintly to him the muffled thuds of the picks of the other miners.

These were the minutes that Jimmy Rand hated—minutes that seemed to drag sometimes into hours, as he waited for the dancing yellow light on the mule-boy’s cap, the welcome grind of his car-wheels, and the mule’s slow, tramping step.

This particular April morning Jimmy’s work in the mine loomed ahead of him more irksome, more confining, than ever before. But since it must be done, he was anxious to get at it. He thought his turn at the gate-house window would never come; but finally it did, and he slipped past into the yard and took his place on the waiting cage that would shortly lower him and his fellows out of the sunshine into the world of unreality of the mine several hundred feet below.

Jimmy worked hard that morning. His bunky, who worked at his side in the little gallery, wondered at his unusual silence, although Jimmy was always inclined to be silent. When the first

car was loaded, Jimmy fastened to it his metal tag—they took turns in labeling the cars they jointly filled—and then sat down on a lump of coal with his cap in his hands, trimming the wick of his little pit-lamp with a nail from his pocket.

His mind was far away. He read a good deal now—books from the public library of Menchon, which he took home to read during the evenings. Books of travel and adventure interested him; but more recently he had been reading of industry, and the wonderful, gigantic projects that other men—no smarter than himself, perhaps—had planned and executed, stirred him profoundly. Some day he, too, would accomplish big things—things of which Anne and his mother and sister would be proud, things that would bring him great fame and wealth.

That morning seemed interminable to Jimmy, but finally it came to an end. His last car was loaded, and in a moment the cage had raised him back into the warmth of the noonday sunshine. He checked out, passed through the wash-house, and hurried home to lunch. Immediately after lunch he went to meet Anne, as they had agreed.

Anne Wolff was the sixteen-year-old daughter of one of the other miners in the Fallon Brothers Mine. She was still going to school in the little Menchon schoolhouse—a slender, dark-haired, shy little girl, with a curious, wild sort of beauty and unnaturally big black eyes.

Anne was “Jimmy’s girl”—accepted as such by their fellows. It was the only love that Anne had ever known, and to her it meant everything, even though she had never given it voice.

Jimmy had long since told Anne of his dreams, and in the girl's love he had found a ready response, even though at times she could hardly understand these vague longings that he found so difficult to put into words. She believed in him and she encouraged him; and so he made her his confidant, telling her things he never told his sister or even his mother.

Anne was waiting for Jimmy this afternoon at the gate of her little frame house, dressed in her newest print frock, her long black hair in braids over her shoulders, and a gray woolen scarf wound about her throat. Her cheeks were red with the color of youth and health, and her eyes sparkled with pleasure at sight of him. Jimmy kissed her in greeting, thinking as he did so that she was the most beautiful and wonderful little girl in all the world.

"Where we going?" asked Anne when he had released her.

"I don't know. Where?"

"It's a beautiful day," said the girl, looking up into the blue of the sky. Then she put her hand in his. "Let's go—anywhere."

Walking hand in hand, they slipped past the little village—Jimmy instinctively turned away from the mines—down the road, and out into the open country. Distant blue hills lay ahead; on both sides of the road lay rolling country, and sometimes they passed fields of wild flowers.

"It ain't that I mind the work," said Jimmy suddenly, when they had been walking for some time. "The work's all right. But up here—like today, Anne—under the sky—it's different up here.

Seems like a fellow had a chance to do something big up here. But down there, Anne—in the dark and damp—all shut in—”

He stopped as the girl tightened the pressure of her fingers upon his. He had often spoken this way to her before—used the very same words, perhaps—and he knew that she understood, and felt that way about it, too. But today it seemed different, more important, more pressing a problem—as though today, somehow, he must find some way out, some goal ahead toward which he could strive.

He did not care how long it might take to reach it, or what difficulties might be in the way. He knew he would overcome them some way, somehow, if only he could find some goal to head for—something definite instead of just dreams.

“Dad was a mule-boy, Anne,” he went on after a moment. “And he died still working in the same mine where he started. Your dad’s there, too. It ain’t that I’m any better than them, Anne. Only I’m—I’m different. You know that. I want to do something—something big. And all day I sit down there thinking and planning and scheming. And it’s no good, Anne. It don’t get me anything—and sometimes I wonder if it ever will.”

The little girl pressed his hand again and looked shyly up into his face.

“It will, Jimmy,” she said softly. “You’re going to be a wonderful man some day—I just know you will. And we’ll—we’ll all be so proud of you.”



Again they fell silent. The road they were following—they were now some two miles from Menchon—was taking them directly toward the burning mines that were famous throughout all that part of Pennsylvania. These were a system of coalmines that years before had been in active operation. They had caught fire, and eventually had to be abandoned.

And all these years since, far down in the great coal measures underground, the fires had been raging. From one mine to another the fire had spread, until now the whole region, several square miles in extent, was honeycombed with uncontrollable subterranean fires.

Through fissures in the ground in many places smoke and steam continually issued; in other parts the fire had broken out to the surface; it was burned out now, leaving a great, jagged, pitted hole. But mostly the coal seams lay so far beneath the surface that only the steam and the thick smoke of the partly consumed coal gases coming through holes in the ground gave evidence of their presence.

The fame of the burning mines of Menchon brought many tourists to visit them. In the summer-time especially, on Sundays, crowds of them came up from the cities of New York and Philadelphia to wander about the region, testing the heat of the ground with amazement, and picnicking beside the little holes that vomited their smoke into the air above.

To them the sight was interesting and wonderful; but to Jimmy and Anne it was an old story—something they had known all their lives and accepted without wonderment.

This afternoon, as the smoke, rising near by, reminded them where they were, they left the road, and with Anne still carrying a bunch of daisies under her arm, approached the scarred region that, as Jimmy had often said, looked for all the world like the volcano pictures in the books. He made that remark again today as they sat down on a rock to rest beside a little smoking crevice.

“You ever seen a picture of the volcano in Hawaii, Anne?” he asked. And when she told him no, he added almost eagerly: “It looks just like this, only very much more wonderful.” And then to the admiring and thrilled little girl he described the crater of the great volcano of Mauna Loa as he had read of it.

“It’s—it’s wonderful to know all those things,” said Anne when he paused a moment.

“Some day I’m going to see them all, too,” he answered. “Some day I’m going everywhere in the world and see myself all the things in the books—some day when I’m rich—when I’ve done something.”

Then, as his problem came back to him with the words, he relapsed into silence, sitting with his arm about the girl’s shoulders and staring idly at the little stream of smoke coming up from the ground before him.

For a long time he sat silent. The familiar scene around, which he had always accepted as usual and without interest, suddenly seemed remarkable and inspiring. He thought of these vast fires in the ground beneath his feet, burning away the coal year after year, and discharging their heat upward into the air

uselessly. This tremendous waste seemed now suddenly appalling.

He withdrew his arm from around Anne's shoulder, and, leaning forward, put his hand down close to the little crevice. It was hot there—hot enough to boil water in a kettle, perhaps, he thought. A picture he had seen once, in a book, of James Watt discovering the power of steam, came to his mind. He sat up again and turned to the girl.

“You ever heard of James Watt, Anne?”

Anne shook her head.

“He was the man who discovered about steam. He was just a boy, Anne. One day he was sitting beside his mother's hearth looking at a big iron kettle that had water boiling in it. And he could see that the steam was lifting up the lid of the kettle. And then all at once it came to him how powerful the steam must be, and why couldn't he do something with it.

“You see, Anne, nobody had ever thought of that before. It looks easy enough to us—that you can make steam and use the power—but nobody had ever thought of it then. And it was right in front of their eyes all the time, and they couldn't see it. But James Watt saw it. And when he got the idea he wouldn't give it up, no matter what anybody said. He worked and worked, and finally he built an engine that would use the power that steam has.

“That was the first steam-engine, Anne. Just think of it—the first steam-engine. And James Watt doped it out all by

himself—just because he had noticed how the steam lifted the lid of that kettle. And he had seen it do that hundreds of times before—and so had everybody else—and never thought anything about it. Isn't that wonderful, Anne?"

The girl's eyes were very big and tender as she looked up into his face.

"Yes—it's very wonderful, Jimmy. You know about so many wonderful things," she said softly.

"I was just thinking, Anne—" He paused. "When coal burns underground, you can get the heat out of it just the same. And then if—if—" His voice trailed into silence; he sat staring straight ahead into the distance.

Anne sat quiet, gazing with awe up into his set face, as though she was in the presence of genius. The minutes passed. Then abruptly Jimmy spoke again:

"Why—why do you have to mine coal at all?" he said slowly. "If you can burn it in the ground and get the heat—why do you have to mine it at all?"

Anne did not understand, but she was thrilled by the new note of tenseness in his voice.

She put her hand over his, pressing it encouragingly. "Yes, Jimmy—yes?"

"If—if you could burn the coal right where it is in the ground—and—and put your factory over the heat—then—why, then—"

A long pause; then Jimmy suddenly sprang to his feet.

“I’ve got it, Anne!” he cried excitedly. “I’ve got it—the big idea. Why, it’s as clear as daylight, once you think of it. I’ve got it; I’ve got it!” He threw his arms around the girl, kissing her and hugging her to him with all the strength of his vigorous young arms. “It’s the big idea, Anne—what I’ve always been trying to get. And now I’ve got it!”

Anne struggled from his embrace.

“What, Jimmy?” she asked eagerly. “What is it?”

Jimmy’s face was flushed; his eyes sparkled.

“Why—why, just that, Anne! I’m going to build a factory over where the coal is and burn the coal in the ground without bothering to mine it at all, and just pipe the heat up to the boilers. Don’t you see, Anne? Nobody ever thought of that before. They mine the coal now—dig it out and bring it up to the top and take it away on railroads to factories to be burned. And all you’ve got to do is leave it where it is, and put the factory overhead. Look at the work you save, Anne! Look how easy and simple it is.

“And nobody ever thought of it before. But *I’ve* thought of it now, Anne. And I’m going to do it, no matter what anybody says—or how hard I have to work—or how long it takes. I’m going to do it because it’s a big idea—and nobody else thought of it, only me!”

## CHAPTER II. THE FIRST SETBACK.

It was some minutes before Jimmy's excitement had abated enough for him to tell Anne his plan; or indeed to be able to formulate in his own mind just what this wonderful new idea that had so suddenly come to him would mean. He could understand now how James Watt must have felt as he planned the first steam-engine—a sort of exaltation which Jimmy could feel now in his own heart plainly.

The idea had come to him abruptly, almost full-born, as Jimmy had read such big ideas often do come. He had seized upon it at once with the feeling that it *was* his big idea, believing in it blindly, without stopping to reason it out.

Now with Anne sitting adoringly beside him, imploring him to explain it to her, he felt suddenly self-conscious and embarrassed. The real reason was that he had no knowledge of the subject, no technical information upon which to base an opinion of whether the idea was feasible or not.

But Jimmy did not know that. He only knew, now that he thought it over, that what he had already said was almost all he could say—all that was in his mind, in fact.

"Tell me about it, Jimmy," Anne entreated. "How would it work?" Anne looked up to Jimmy as to a vastly superior intellect. But she had herself an acquisitive mind—untrained, immature, but naturally keenly alert. Now that the first thrill of

Jimmy's announcement had passed, she was interested in the subject not only because of Jimmy, but because of the idea itself. And so, just a little with the air of one who demanded to be convinced, Anne wanted to know how it would work.

"Why—why, you see, Anne, it's like this," Jimmy explained. "The way they do it now is to mine the coal—and you know all the expense and time and hell that is—then when it is mined it has to be shipped away hundreds of miles to the factories to be used. Now, if you don't do any of that, but just burn it in the ground where it is, you save all that. Don't you see?"

"There ain't any factories over coalmines," said Anne.

"No, but there could be just as easy as not. It don't make so much difference where a factory is, so long as it's got a railroad. That's the idea—I'm going to build a factory where the coal is instead of taking the coal to where the factory is."

"How you going to burn the coal in the ground?" Anne wanted to know.

Jimmy thought a moment.

"Why, just—just burn it," he answered finally. "You see, Anne," he hastened to add, "the heat will come up in pipes to the factory boilers at the top—just like the heat comes up." Jimmy pointed to the smoking crevice at their feet.

"Why won't it just get to be a big fire like this?" Anne objected. "This is burning underground—"

"It won't."

“Why won’t it?”

“Well, it won’t because, you see, Anne”—Jimmy was thinking fast now—“because, don’t you see, a fire can’t burn without air. I won’t give it only just so much air. This one got started and ran away with itself before they could stop it. Mine will be ’way down very deep, where there ain’t any air, only just what I pump down to it.

“If I give it lots of air, it will burn hard, and there’ll be lots of heat come up. Then if I don’t want so much heat, I won’t give it so much air. And if I shut the air all off, it’ll go out altogether. Don’t you see?”

“Yes,” said Anne, convinced. “It’s wonderful, Jimmy.” She put her hand with a sudden timidity on his shoulder.

“You’re—you’re wonderful, too, Jimmy.”

The boy kissed her abstractedly, his mind still busily groping with the flood of ideas that were surging into it. “I can control it easy, Anne, if I start it right, by the air I give it. Why, it’s just like when we have a fire here in the mine. You remember the fire started in C tunnel last fall—your father was working there. He found it when it was only in that one room. All we did was wall up that room from the main tunnel, and it went right out when it couldn’t get any air, didn’t it?”

Anne nodded.

“Besides, over in Coatesville, didn’t a whole mine get away from them a few years ago?” Jimmy continued earnestly. “The fire got to the mine-bottom before they could shut it off, and



the white-damp began exploding, so they had to get out of the whole mine. All they did then was seal up the shafts at the top to shut off all the air in the whole mine. The fire went out of itself when all the air was used up.”

Again the girl nodded; his arguments seemed sound and quite unanswerable.

“Well, that’s just the way I’m going to do it. It’ll work, Anne—I know it will,” said Jimmy.

“Yes,” said Anne. “So do I, Jimmy.”

It would work. The more Jimmy thought about it, the more sure he was that it would work. For a long time he sat silent, holding Anne’s hand tightly clasped in his, planning in his mind the things he was going to do. His ideas in detail were vague, absurd almost, from a practical standpoint; but Jimmy did not realize that. They looked concise enough to him.

He would go to New York to live for a time while he was putting the idea over. All the big business men that he would have to see and convince were there. Jimmy had saved several hundred dollars from his earnings in the Fallon Brothers Mine during the last few years, so that lack of money offered no obstacle. Then, too, he realized with satisfaction, his mother and sister were not dependent on his wages. The large insurance that his father had scrupulously kept up, and the money that he had saved and carefully invested, had left Mrs. Rand, while not rich, at least comfortably independent. That made Jimmy think of his mother’s farm property; and the fact

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