

# **THE MAIN CHANCE**

**BY**

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TO

E. K. N.

WHO WILL REMEMBER AND

UNDERSTAND



## THE MAIN CHANCE

# CHAPTER I

## A NEW MAN IN TOWN

"Well, sir, they say I'm crooked!"

William Porter tipped back his swivel chair and placidly puffed a cigar as he watched the effect of this declaration on the young man who sat talking to him.

"That's said of every successful man nowadays, isn't it?" asked John Saxton.

The president of the Clarkson National Bank ignored the question and rolled his cigar from one side of his mouth to the other, as he waited for his words to make their full impression upon his visitor.

"They say I'm crooked," he repeated, with a narrowing of the eyes, "but they don't say it very loud!"

Porter kicked his heels together gently and watched his visitor with eyes in which there was no trace of humor; but Saxton saw that he was expected to laugh.

"No, sir;" the banker continued, "they don't say it very loud, and I guess they don't any of them want to have to prove it. I'm afraid those Boston friends of yours have given us up as a bad lot," he went on, waiving the matter of his personal rectitude and returning to the affairs of his visitor; "and they've sent you out here to get their money, and I don't

blame them. Well, sir; that money's got to come out in time, but it's going to take time and money to get it."

"I believe they sent me because I had plenty of time," said Saxton, smiling.

"Well, we want to help you win out," returned Porter. "And now what can I do to start you off?" he asked briskly. "Have you got a place to stay? Well, sir, I warn you solemnly against the hotels in this town; but we've got a fairly decent club up here, and you'd better stay there till you get acquainted. Been to breakfast? Breakfast on the train? That's good. Just look over the papers till I get rid of these letters and I'll be free."

Porter turned to his desk and replaced the eye-glasses which he had dropped while talking. There was an air of great alertness in his small, lean figure as he pushed buttons to summon various members of the clerical force and rapidly dictated terse telegrams and letters to a stenographer. He continued to smoke, and he shifted constantly the narrow-brimmed, red-banded straw hat that he wore above his shrewd face. It was an agreeable face to see, of a type that is common wherever the North-Irish stock is found in America, and its characteristics were expressed in his firm, lean jaw and blue eyes, and his reddish hair and mustache, through which there were streaks of gray. He wore his hair short, but it was still thick, and he combed it with precision. His clothes fitted him; he wore a bright cravat, well tied, and his shoes were carefully polished. Saxton was impressed by the banker's perfect confidence and ease; it manifested itself in the way he



tapped buttons to call his subordinates, or turned to satisfy the importunities of the desk-telephone at his elbow.

John Saxton had been sent to Clarkson by the Neponset Trust Company of Boston to represent the interests of a group of clients who had made rash investments in several of the Trans-Missouri states. Foreclosure had, in many instances, resulted in the transfer to themselves of much town and ranch property which was, in the conditions existing in the early nineties, an exceedingly slow asset. It was necessary that some one on the ground should care for these interests. The Clarkson National Bank had been exercising a general supervision, but, as one of the investors told his fellow sufferers in Boston, they should have an agent whom they could call home and abuse, and here was Saxton, a conscientious and steady fellow, who had some knowledge of the country, and who, moreover, needed something to do. Saxton's acquaintance with the West had been gained by a bitter experience of ranching in Wyoming. A blizzard had destroyed his cattle, and the subsequent depression in land values in the neighborhood of his ranch had left him encumbered with a property for which there was no market. His friends had been correct in the assumption that he needed employment, and he was, moreover, glad of the chance to get away from home, where the impression was making headway that he had failed at something in the vague, non-interest-paying West. When, on his return from Wyoming, it became necessary for his former acquaintances to identify him to one another, they said, with varying degrees of kindness, that John had gone broke at ranching; and if they liked him particularly,

they said it was too bad; if they had not known him well in his fortunate days, they mildly intimated that a fool and his money found quicker divorce at ranching than in any other way. Most of Saxton's friends and contemporaries had made good beginnings at home, and he felt, unnecessarily perhaps, that his failure made him a marked man among them.

"Now," said Porter presently, scrutinizing a telegram carefully before signing it, "I'll take you up to the office we've been keeping for your people, and show you what it looks like. Some of these things are run as corporations, you understand, and in our state corporations have to maintain a tangible residence."

"So that the sheriff may find them more easily," added Saxton.

"Well, that's no joke," returned Porter, as they entered the elevator from the outer hall; "but they don't necessarily have much office furniture to levy on."

The room proved to be a small one at the top of the building. On the ground-glass door was inscribed "The Interstate Irrigation Company." The room contained a safe, a flat-top desk and a few chairs. Several maps hung on the wall, some of them railroad advertisements, and others were engineers' charts of ranch lands and irrigation ditches.

"It ain't pretty," said Porter critically, "but if you don't like it you can move when you get ready. The bank is your landlord, and we don't charge you much for it. You've doubtless got your inventory of stuff with you, and here in

the safe you'll find the accounts of these companies, copies of public records relating to them, and so on." As Porter talked he stood in the middle of the room with his hands in his pockets, and puffed at a cigar, throwing his head back in an effort to escape the smoke. He stood with one foot on a chair and pushed his hat away from his forehead as he continued reflectively: "You're going up against a pretty tough proposition, young man. You'll hear a hard luck story wherever you go out here just now; people who owe your friends money will be mighty sorry they can't pay. Many of the ranch lands your people own will be worth something after a while. That Colorado irrigation scheme ought to pan out in time, and I believe it will; but you've got to nurse all these things. Make your principals let you alone. Those fellows get in a hurry at the wrong time,—that's my experience with Eastern investors. Tell them to go to Europe,—get rid of them for a while, and make them give you a chance to work out their money for them. They're not the only pebbles." A slight smile seemed to creep over a small area about the banker's lips, but his cigar only partly revealed it. His eyes rarely betrayed him, and the monotonous drawl of his voice was without humorous intention.

"I'll send the combination of the safe up by the boy," he said, moving toward the door, "and you can get a bird's-eye view of the situation before lunch. Mr. Wheaton, our cashier, is away to-day, but he's familiar with these matters and will be glad to help you when he gets home. He'll be back to-night. When you get stuck call on us. And drop

down about twelve thirty and go up to the club for lunch. Take it easy; you can't do it all in one day," he added.

"I hope I shan't be a nuisance to you," said the younger man. "I'm going to fight it out on the best lines I know how,—if it takes several summers."

"Well, it'll take them all right," said Porter, sententiously.

Left to himself Saxton examined his new quarters, found a feather duster hanging in a corner and brushed the dirt from the scanty furniture. This done, he drew a pipe from his pocket, filled it from his tobacco pouch and sat down by the open window, through which the breeze came cool out of the great valley; and here he could see, far over the roofs and spires of the town, the bluffs that marked the broad bed of the tawny Missouri. He was not as buoyant as his last words to the banker implied. Here he was, he reflected, a man of good education, as such things go, who had lost his patrimony in a single venture. He had been sent, partly out of compassion, he felt, to take charge of investments that were admitted to be almost hopelessly bad. The salary promised would provide for him comfortably, and that was about all; anything further would depend upon himself, the secretary of the Neponset Trust Company had told him; it would, he felt, depend much more particularly on the making over by benign powers of the considerable part of the earth's surface in which his principals' money lay hidden. As his eyes wandered to one of the office walls, the black trail of a great transcontinental railroad caught and held his attention. On one of its northern prongs lay the region of his first defeat.

"Three years of life are up there," he meditated, "and all my good dollars are scattered along the right of way." Many things came back to him vividly—how the wind used to howl around the little ranch house, and how he rode through the snow among his dying cattle in the great storm that had been his undoing. With his eyes still resting on the map, he recurred to his early school days and to his four years at Harvard. There was a burden of heartache in these recollections. Incidents of the unconscious brutality of playmates came back to him,—the cruel candor with which they had rejected him from sports in which proficiency, and not mere strength or zeal, was essential. He had enjoyed at college no experience of success in any of those ways which mark the undergraduate for brief authority or fame. He had never been accepted for the crew nor for the teams that represented the university on diamond or gridiron, though he had always participated in athletics, and was possessed of unusual strength. None of the professions had appealed to him, and he had not heeded his father's wish that he enter the law. The elder Saxton, who was himself a lawyer of moderate success, died before John's graduation; he had lost his mother in his youth, and his only remaining relative was a sister who married before he left college.

A review of these brief and discouraging annals did not hearten him; but he fell back upon the better mood with which he had begun the morning; he had a new chance, and he proposed to make the best of it. He put aside his coat and hat, lighted the pipe which he had been holding in his hand, and opened his desk. The banker had sent up the

combination of the safe, as he had promised, and Saxton began inspecting its contents and putting his office in order.

"I'm in for a long stay," he reflected. "Watson and Terrell and those other fellows are just about reaching Park Street, perhaps with virtuous thoughts of having given me a job, if they haven't forgotten me. It's probably a pleasant day in Boston, with the flowers looking their best in the Gardens; but this is better than my Wyoming pastures, anyhow." The books and papers began to interest him, and he was soon classifying the properties that had fallen to his care. He was one of those fortunate individuals who are endowed with a capacity for complete absorption in the work at hand,—the frequent possession of persons, who, like Saxton, enjoy immunity from visits of the alluring will-o'-the-wisps that beguile geniuses. He was so deeply occupied that he did not mark the flight of time and was surprised when a boy came with a message from Porter that he was ready to go to luncheon.

"Yon mustn't overdo the thing, young man," said the banker amiably, as he closed his desk. "Don't you adopt our Western method of working all the hours there are. I do it now because my neighbors and customers would talk about me if I didn't, and say that I had lost my grip in my old age."

They started up the sloping street, which was intensely hot.

"In my last job I worked twenty hours a day," said Saxton, "and lost money in spite of it."

"You mean up in Wyoming; the Neponset people wrote me that you were a reformed cattleman."

"Yes, I was winter-killed at the business." He assumed that Porter would not care particularly for the details of his failure. Western men are, he knew, much more tolerant of failure than Eastern men; but he was relieved to hear the banker drawling on with a comment on Clarkson, its commercial history and prospects.

At the twentieth anniversary of the founding of the Clarkson Chamber of Commerce, the local boy orator, who made a point of quoting Holy Writ in his speeches, spoke of Clarkson as "no mean city," just as many another orator has applied this same apt Pauline phrase to many another metropolis. The business of Clarkson had to do with primary employments and needs. The cattle of a thousand hills and of many rough pastures were gathered here; and here wheat and corn from three states were assembled. In exchange for these products, Clarkson returned to the country all of the necessities and some of the luxuries of life. Several important railway lines had their administrative offices here. Ores were brought from the Rockies, from Mexico, and even from British Columbia, to the great smelters whose smoke and fumes hung over the town. Neither coal, wood nor iron lay near at hand, so that manufacturing was almost unknown; but the packing-houses and smelters gave employment to many laborers, drawn in great measure from the Slavonic races.

Varney Street cut through the town at right angles to the river, bisecting the business district. It then gradually threw

off its commercial aspect until at last it was lined with the homes of most of Clarkson's wealthiest citizens. An exaggerated estimate of the value of corner lots had caused many of them to be left vacant; and weeds and signboards exercised eminent domain between booms. North and south of Varney Street were other thoroughfares which strove to be equally fashionable, and here citizens had sometimes built themselves houses that were, as they said, as good as anything in Varney Street. Everywhere ragged edges remained; old unpainted frame buildings lingered in blocks that otherwise contained handsome houses. Sugar-loaf cubes of clay loomed lonesomely, with houses stranded high on their summits, where property owners had been too poor to cut down their bits of earth to conform to new levels. The clay banks were ugly, but they were doomed to remain until the next high tide of prosperity.

The Clarkson Club stood at the edge of the commercial district, and its Milwaukee brick walls rose hot and staring in the July sun as Porter and Saxton approached.

"Here we are," said Porter, leading the way into the wide hall. "We'll arrange about your business relations later. There's a very bad lunch ready upstairs, and we'll go against that first."

There were only a few men in the dining-room, seated at a round table. Porter exchanged salutations with them as he passed on to a small table at the end of the room. Those who were of his own age called Porter, "Billy," and he included them all in the careless nod of old acquaintance. Porter offered Saxton the wine card, which the young man



declined with instinctive knowledge that he was expected to do so. They took the simple table d'hôte, which was, as Porter had predicted, very bad. The banker ate little and carried the burden of the conversation.

They went from the table for an inspection of the club, and arranged with the clerk in the office for a room on the third floor, which Mr. Saxton was to have, so Porter told the clerk, until he didn't want it any more.

"It's all right about the rules," he said; "if the house committee kick about it, send them to me." They stopped in the lounging room, where the men from the round table were now talking or looking at newspapers. Porter introduced Saxton to all of them, stating in his humorous way, with variations in every case, that this was a new man in town; that victims were scarce in hard times, and that they must make the most of him. Several of the men who shook hands with Saxton were railroad officials, but nearly every line of business was represented. All seemed to wear their business consciously, and Saxton was made aware of their several employments in one way or another as he stood talking to them. He felt that their own frankness should elicit a response on his part, and he stated that he had come to represent the interests of "Eastern people,"—a phrase which, in that territory, has weight and significance. This, he thought, should be sufficiently explicit; and he felt that his interlocutors were probably appraising him with selfish eyes as a possible customer or client. However, they were very cordial, and presently he found that they were chaffing one another for his benefit, and trying to bring him within the arc of their own easy comradeship.

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