

THE GOLD BRICK

By
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TEN thousand dollars a year! Neil Kittrell left the office of the *Morning Telegraph* in a daze. He was insensible of the raw February air, heedless of sloppy pavements; the gray day had suddenly turned gold. He could not realize it all at once; ten thousand a year—for him and Edith! His heart swelled with love of Edith; she had sacrificed so much to become the wife of a man who had tried to make an artist of himself, and of whom fate, or economic determinism, or something, had made a cartoonist. What a surprise for her! He must hurry home.

In this swelling of his heart he felt a love not only of Edith but of the whole world. The people he met seemed dear to him; he felt friendly with every one, and beamed on perfect strangers with broad, cheerful smiles. He stopped to buy some flowers for Edith—daffodils, or tulips, which promised spring, and he took the daffodils, because the girl said:

“I think yellow is such a spirituelle color, don’t you?” and inclined her head in a most artistic manner.

But daffodils, after all, which would have been much the day before, seemed insufficient in the light of new prosperity, and Kittrell bought a large azalea, beautiful in its graceful spread of pink blooms.

“Where shall I send it?” asked the girl, whose cheeks were as pink as azaleas themselves.

“I think I’ll call a cab and take it to her myself,” said Kittrell.

And she sighed over the romance of this rich young gentleman and the girl of the azalea, who, no doubt, was as beautiful as the young woman who was playing *Lottie, the Poor Saleslady* at the Lyceum that very week.

Kittrell and the azalea bowled along Claybourne Avenue; he leaned back on the cushions, and adopted the expression of ennui appropriate to that thoroughfare. Would Edith now prefer Claybourne Avenue? With ten thousand a year they could, perhaps—and yet, at first it would be best not to put on airs, but to go right on as they were, in the flat. Then the thought came to him that now, as the cartoonist on the *Telegraph*, his name would become as well known in Claybourne Avenue as it had been in the homes of the poor and humble during his years on the *Post*. And his thoughts flew to those homes where tired men at evening looked for his cartoons and children laughed at his funny pictures. It gave him a pang; he had felt a subtle bond between himself and all those thousands who read the *Post*. It was hard to leave them. The *Post* might be yellow, but, as the girl had said, yellow was a spiritual color, and the *Post* brought something into their lives—lives that were scorned by the *Telegraph* and by these people on the avenue. Could he make new friends here, where the cartoons he drew and the *Post* that printed them had been contemned, if not despised? His mind flew back to the dingy office of the *Post*; to the boys there, the whole good-natured, happy-go-lucky gang; and to Hardy—ah, Hardy!—who had been so good to him, and given him his big chance, had taken such pains and interest, helping him with ideas and

suggestions, criticism and sympathy. To tell Hardy that he was going to leave him, here on the eve of the campaign—and Clayton, the mayor, he would have to tell him, too—oh, the devil! Why must he think of these things now?

After all, when he had reached home, and had run up-stairs with the news and the azalea, Edith did not seem delighted.

“But, dearie, business is business,” he argued, “and we need the money!”

“Yes, I know; doubtless you’re right. Only please don’t say ‘business is business;’ it isn’t like you, and—”

“But think what it will mean—ten thousand a year!”

“Oh, Neil, I’ve lived on ten thousand a year before, and I never had half the fun that I had when we were getting along on twelve hundred.”

“Yes, but then we were always dreaming of the day when I’d make a lot; we lived on that hope, didn’t we?”

Edith laughed. “You used to say we lived on love.”

“You’re not serious.” He turned to gaze moodily out of the window. And then she left the azalea, and perched on the flat arm of his chair.

“Dearest,” she said, “I am serious. I know all this means to you. We’re human, and we don’t like to ‘chip at crusts like Hindus,’ even for the sake of youth and art. I never had illusions about love in a cottage and all that. Only, dear, I have been happy, so very happy, with you, because—well, because I was living in an

atmosphere of honest purpose, honest ambition, and honest desire to do some good thing in the world. I had never known such an atmosphere before. At home, you know, father and Uncle James and the boys—well, it was all money, money, money with them, and they couldn't understand why I—”

“Could marry a poor newspaper artist! That's just the point.”

She put her hand to his lips.

“Now, dear! If they couldn't understand, so much the worse for them. If they thought it meant sacrifice to me, they were mistaken. I have been happy in this little flat; only—” she leaned back and inclined her head with her eyes asquint—“only the paper in this room is atrocious; it's a typical landlord's selection—McGaw picked it out. You see what it means to be merely rich.”

She was so pretty thus that he kissed her, and then she went on:

“And so, dear, if I didn't seem to be as impressed and delighted as you hoped to find me, it is because I was thinking of Mr. Hardy and the poor, dear, common little *Post*, and then—of Mr. Clayton. Did you think of him?”

“Yes.”

“You'll have to—to cartoon him?”

“I suppose so.”

The fact he had not allowed himself to face was close to both of them, and the subject was dropped until, just as he was going down-town—this time to break the news to Hardy—he went

into the room he sarcastically said he might begin to call his studio, now that he was getting ten thousand a year, to look for a sketch he had promised Nolan for the sporting page. And there on his drawing-board was an unfinished cartoon, a drawing of the strong face of John Clayton. He had begun it a few days before to use on the occasion of Clayton's renomination. It had been a labor of love, and Kittrell suddenly realized how good it was. He had put into it all of his belief in Clayton, all of his devotion to the cause for which Clayton toiled and sacrificed, and in the simple lines he experienced the artist's ineffable felicity; he had shown how good, how noble, how true a man Clayton was. All at once he realized the sensation the cartoon would produce, how it would delight and hearten Clayton's followers, how it would please Hardy, and how it would touch Clayton. It would be a tribute to the man and the friendship, but now a tribute broken, unfinished. Kittrell gazed a moment longer, and in that moment Edith came.

"The dear, beautiful soul!" she exclaimed softly. "Neil, it is wonderful. It is not a cartoon; it is a portrait. It shows what you might do with a brush."

Kittrell could not speak, and he turned the drawing-board to the wall.

When he had gone, Edith sat and thought—of Neil, of the new position, of Clayton. He had loved Neil, and been so proud of his work; he had shown a frank, naïve pleasure in the cartoons Neil had made of him. That last time he was there, thought Edith, he had said that without Neil the "good old cause," as he called it, using Whitman's phrase, could never have triumphed

in that town. And now, would he come again? Would he ever stand in that room and, with his big, hearty laugh, clasp an arm around Neil's shoulder, or speak of her in his good, friendly way as "the little woman?" Would he come now, in the terrible days of the approaching campaign, for rest and sympathy—come as he used to come in other campaigns, worn and weary from all the brutal opposition, the vilification and abuse and mud-slinging? She closed her eyes. She could not think that far.

Kittrell found the task of telling Hardy just as difficult as he expected it to be, but by some mercy it did not last long. Explanation had not been necessary; he had only to make the first hesitating approaches, and Hardy understood. Hardy was, in a way, hurt; Kittrell saw that, and rushed to his own defense:

"I hate to go, old man. I don't like it a little bit—but, you know, business is business, and we need the money."

He even tried to laugh as he advanced this last conclusive reason, and Hardy, for all he showed in voice or phrase, may have agreed with him.

"It's all right, Kit," he said. "I'm sorry; I wish we could pay you more, but—well, good luck."

That was all. Kittrell gathered up the few articles he had at the office, gave Nolan his sketch, bade the boys good-by—bade them good-by as if he were going on a long journey, never to see them more—and then he went.

After he had made the break it did not seem so bad as he had anticipated. At first things went on smoothly enough. The campaign had not opened, and he was free to exercise his

talents outside the political field. He drew cartoons dealing with banal subjects, touching with the gentle satire of his humorous pencil foibles which all the world agreed about, and let vital questions alone. And he and Edith enjoyed themselves: indulged oftener in things they loved; went more frequently to the theater; appeared at recitals; dined now and then downtown. They began to realize certain luxuries they had not known for a long time—some he himself had never known, some that Edith had not known since she left her father's home to become his bride. In more subtle ways, too, Kittrell felt the change: there was a sense of larger leisure; the future beamed with a broader and brighter light; he formed plans, among which the old dream of going ere long to Paris for serious study took its dignified place. And then there was the sensation his change had created in the newspaper world; that the cartoons signed "Kit," which formerly appeared in the *Post*, should now adorn the broad page of the *Telegraph* was a thing to talk about at the press club; the fact of his large salary got abroad in that little world as well, and, after the way of that world, managed to exaggerate itself, as most facts did. He began to be sensible of attentions from men of prominence—small things, mere nods in the street, perhaps, or smiles in the theater foyer, but enough to show that they recognized him. What those children of the people, those working-men and women who used to be his unknown and admiring friends in the old days on the *Post*, thought of him—whether they missed him, whether they deplored his change as an apostasy or applauded it as a promotion—he did not know. He did not like to think about it.

But March came, and the politicians began to bluster like the season. Late one afternoon he was on his way to the office with

a cartoon, the first in which he had seriously to attack Clayton. Benson, the managing editor of the *Telegraph*, had conceived it, and Kittrell had worked on it that day in sickness of heart. Every lying line of this new presentation of Clayton had cut him like some biting acid; but he had worked on, trying to reassure himself with the argument that he was a mere agent, devoid of personal responsibility. But it had been hard, and when Edith, after her custom, had asked to see it, he had said:

“Oh, you don’t want to see it; it’s no good.”

“Is it of—him?” she had asked.

And when he nodded she had gone away without another word. Now, as he hurried through the crowded streets, he was conscious that it was no good, indeed; and he was divided between the artist’s regret and the friend’s joy in the fact. But it made him tremble. Was his hand to forget its cunning? And then, suddenly, he heard a familiar voice, and there beside him, with his hand on his shoulder, stood the mayor.

“Why, Neil, my boy, how are you?” he said, and he took Kittrell’s hand as warmly as ever. For a moment Kittrell was relieved, and then his heart sank; for he had a quick realization that it was the coward within him that felt the relief, and the man the sickness. If Clayton had reproached him, or cut him, it would have made it easier; but Clayton did none of these things, and Kittrell was irresistibly drawn to the subject himself.

“You heard of my—new job?” he asked.

“Yes,” said Clayton, “I heard.”

“Well—” Kittrell began.

“I’m sorry,” Clayton said.

“So was I,” Kittrell hastened to say. “But I felt it—well, a duty, some way—to Edith. You know—we—need the money.” And he gave the cynical laugh that went with the argument.

“What does *she* think? Does she feel that way about it?”

Kittrell laughed, not cynically now, but uneasily and with embarrassment, for Clayton’s blue eyes were on him, those eyes that could look into men and understand them so.

“Of course you know,” Kittrell went on nervously, “there is nothing personal in this. We newspaper fellows simply do what we are told; we obey orders like soldiers, you know. With the policy of the paper we have nothing to do. Just like Dick Jennings, who was a red-hot free-trader and used to write free-trade editorials for the *Times*—he went over to the *Telegraph*, you remember, and writes all those protection arguments.”

The mayor did not seem to be interested in Dick Jennings, or in the ethics of his profession.

“Of course, you know I’m for you, Mr. Clayton, just exactly as I’ve always been. I’m going to vote for you.”

This did not seem to interest the mayor, either.

“And, maybe, you know—I thought, perhaps,” he snatched at this bright new idea that had come to him just in the nick of time, “that I might help you by my cartoons in the *Telegraph*; that is, I might keep them from being as bad as they might—”

“But that wouldn’t be dealing fairly with your new employers, Neil,” the mayor said.

Kittrell was making more and more a mess of this whole miserable business, and he was basely glad when they reached the corner.

“Well, good-by, my boy,” said the mayor, as they parted. “Remember me to the little woman.”

Kittrell watched him as he went on down the avenue, swinging along in his free way, the broad felt hat he wore riding above all the other hats in the throng that filled the sidewalk; and Kittrell sighed in deep depression.

When he turned in his cartoon, Benson scanned it a moment, cocked his head this side and that, puffed his brier pipe, and finally said:

“I’m afraid this is hardly up to you. This figure of Clayton, here—it hasn’t got the stuff in it. You want to show him as he *is*. We want the people to know what a four-flushing, hypocritical, demagogical blatherskite he is—with all his rot about the people and their damned rights!”

Benson was all unconscious of the inconsistency of having concern for a people he so despised, and Kittrell did not observe it, either. He was on the point of defending Clayton, but he restrained himself and listened to Benson’s suggestions. He remained at the office for two hours, trying to change the cartoon to Benson’s satisfaction, with a growing hatred of the work and a disgust with himself that now and then almost drove him to mad destruction. He felt like splashing the piece

with India ink, or ripping it with his knife. But he worked on, and submitted it again. He had failed, of course; failed to express in it that hatred of a class which Benson unconsciously disguised as a hatred of Clayton, a hatred which Kittrell could not express because he did not feel it; and he failed because art deserts her devotees when they are false to truth.

“Well, it’ll have to do,” said Benson, as he looked it over; “but let’s have a little more to the next one. Damn it! I wish I could draw. I’d cartoon the crook!”

In default of which ability, Benson set himself to write one of those savage editorials in which he poured out on Clayton that venom of which he seemed to have such an inexhaustible supply.

But on one point Benson was right: Kittrell was not up to himself. As the campaign opened, as the city was swept with the excitement of it, with meetings at noon-day and at night, office-seekers flying about in automobiles, walls covered with pictures of candidates, hand-bills scattered in the streets to swirl in the wild March winds, and men quarreling over whether Clayton or Ellsworth should be mayor, Kittrell had to draw a political cartoon each day; and as he struggled with his work, less and less the old joy came to cheer and spur him on. To read the ridicule, the abuse, which the *Telegraph* heaped on Clayton, the distortion of facts concerning his candidature, the unfair reports of his meetings, sickened him, and more than all, he was filled with disgust as he tried to match in caricature these libels of the man he so loved and honored. It was bad enough to have to flatter Clayton’s opponent, to picture him as a noble, disinterested character, ready to sacrifice himself for

the public weal. Into his pictures of this man, attired in the long black coat of conventional respectability, with the smug face of pharisaism, he could get nothing but cant and hypocrisy; but in his caricatures of Clayton there was that which pained him worse—disloyalty, untruth, and now and then, to the discerning few who knew the tragedy of Kittrell's soul, there was pity. And thus his work declined in value; lacking all sincerity, all faith in itself or its purpose, it became false, uncertain, full of jarring notes, and, in short, never once rang true. As for Edith, she never discussed his work now; she spoke of the campaign little, and yet he knew she was deeply concerned, and she grew hot with resentment at the methods of the *Telegraph*. Her only consolation was derived from the *Post*, which, of course, supported Clayton; and the final drop of bitterness in Kittrell's cup came one evening when he realized that she was following with sympathetic interest the cartoons in that paper.

For the *Post* had a new cartoonist, Banks, a boy whom Hardy had picked up somewhere and was training to the work Kittrell had laid down. To Kittrell there was a cruel fascination in the progress Banks was making; he watched it with a critical, professional eye, at first with amusement, then with surprise, and now at last, in the discovery of Edith's interest, with a keen jealousy of which he was ashamed. The boy was crude and untrained; his work was not to be compared with Kittrell's, master of line that he was, but Kittrell saw that it had the thing his work now lacked, the vital, primal thing—sincerity, belief, love. The spark was there, and Kittrell knew how Hardy would nurse that spark and fan it, and keep it alive and burning until it should eventually blaze up in a fine white flame. And Kittrell

realized, as the days went by, that Banks' work was telling, and that his own was failing. He had, from the first, missed the atmosphere of the *Post*, missed the *camaraderie* of the congenial spirits there, animated by a common purpose, inspired and led by Hardy, whom they all loved—loved as he himself once loved him, loved as he loved him still—and dare not look him in the face when they met!

He found the atmosphere of the *Telegraph* alien and distasteful. There all was different; the men had little joy in their work, little interest in it, save perhaps the newspaper man's inborn love of a good story or a beat. They were all cynical, without loyalty or faith; they secretly made fun of the *Telegraph*, of its editors and owners; they had no belief in its cause; and its pretensions to respectability, its parade of virtue, excited only their derision. And slowly it began to dawn on Kittrell that the great moral law worked always and everywhere, even on newspapers, and that there was reflected inevitably and logically in the work of the men on that staff the hatred, the lack of principle, the bigotry and intolerance of its proprietors; and this same lack of principle tainted and made meretricious his own work, and enervated the editorials so that the *Telegraph*, no matter how carefully edited or how dignified in typographical appearance, was, nevertheless, without real influence in the community.

Meanwhile Clayton was gaining ground. It was less than two weeks before election. The campaign waxed more and more bitter, and as the forces opposed to him foresaw defeat, they became ugly in spirit, and desperate. The *Telegraph* took on a tone more menacing and brutal, and Kittrell knew that the

crisis had come. The might of the powers massed against Clayton appalled Kittrell; they thundered at him through many brazen mouths, but Clayton held on his high way unperturbed. He was speaking by day and night to thousands. Such meetings he had never had before. Kittrell had visions of him before those immense audiences in halls, in tents, in the raw open air of that rude March weather, making his appeals to the heart of the great mass. A fine, splendid, romantic figure he was, striking to the imagination, this champion of the people's cause, and Kittrell longed for the lost chance. Oh, for one day on the *Post* now!

One morning at breakfast, as Edith read the *Telegraph*, Kittrell saw the tears well slowly in her brown eyes.

"Oh," she said, "it is shameful!" She clenched her little fists. "Oh, if I were only a man I'd—" She could not in her impotent feminine rage say what she would do; she could only grind her teeth. Kittrell bent his head over his plate; his coffee choked him.

"Dearest," she said presently, in another tone, "tell me, how is he? Do you—ever see him? Will he win?"

"No, I never see him. But he'll win; I wouldn't worry."

"He used to come here," she went on, "to rest a moment, to escape from all this hateful confusion and strife. He is killing himself! And they aren't worth it—those ignorant people—they aren't worth such sacrifices."

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