

Mr. Clackworthy's Pipe Dream

by Christopher B. Booth

Author of "In the Bandit Car," "Penny Protection," etc.

AN observant eye, my dear James, often fattens the bank balance," philosophized Mr. Clackworthy as he and James Early, his co-plotter upon idle and surplus wealth, walked briskly along La Salle Street toward the city's financial district. "Only an opportunist can hope to be successful in our profession."

"You gotta cut out them chin gymnastics if you want me to get hep," grumbled The Early Bird. "I reckon you're aimin' t' say that the guy what drags in the kale is the bozo what keeps peeled for the yellow stuff, huh?"

"There have been times, James," pursued Mr. Clackworthy, "when you have failed to appreciate my interest in such a variegated assortment of subjects. Recently, for example, you offered strenuous objections to a little motor tour which we took through the State. Apparently I had given myself over to relaxation, but, nevertheless, I had a weather eye out for opportunity—and found it."

At this moment the master confidence man turned into an office building, and the presence of a crowd prevented confidential conversation. An elevator whisked them up to the fourth floor, where the pair stepped from the lift, and Mr. Clackworthy led the way around the corridor to an office, the door of which bore the announcement:

**WILLIAM SACHS & CO.,
Stocks and Bonds.**

Mr. Clackworthy was shown at once into Mr.

Sachs' private office, for he was more or less a regular customer.

"Good morning, Mr. Sachs," said Mr. Clackworthy; "meet Mr. Early. I received your letter in the morning's mail, and I am here, ready to write you a check. You have procured the stock, I believe you said."

The broker nodded as he reached into his desk and produced a fat bundle of stock certificates. "There they are," he replied, fixing his customer with a curious stare. "Four thousand shares in the Stanton Natural Gas Co., par value one hundred dollars a share. That is the total issue with the exception of one thousand shares which we have been unable to find. My agents got most of it for one dollar a share, and narrowly escaped detention as lunacy suspects. As I warned you before, the stock isn't worth the paper that the certificates are printed on. Ordinarily, Mr. Clackworthy, I restrain my curiosity, but I wonder if you would mind telling me what you want with this worthless stock."

"I am buying it as an investment," replied the master confidence man with a smile; "you must admit that four hundred thousand dollars' worth of stock for four thousand dollars is quite a bargain."

"I admit no such thing!" exclaimed the broker. "The Stanton natural gas field gave out completely nearly ten years ago. The stock's worthless, and you know it. This five-hundred-thousand-dollar company was formed when the Stanton boom was at its height, and when it

looked as if that district had enough natural gas to light every city in that part of the State. I happen to remember the details quite well.

"Some farmer around Stanton bored for oil, and, to his own surprise, tapped natural gas instead. One well after another was brought in, and it seemed that the supply was inexhaustible. This company was formed to sell natural gas to all of the artificial gas companies in cities within a radius of fifty miles, but about the time they had finished laying the mains the supply gave out. There wasn't enough gas left in the Stanton area to fry an egg.

"That's what you're buying, and you know it! You've gone into it with your eyes open. I warned you at the time you first commissioned my firm to round up this stock for you. Investment! Bah! You couldn't resell this stock for enough cash to get a shave! If you don't mind telling me, I'd like to know what the idea is."

"Investment," repeated Mr. Clackworthy enigmatically.

"But, hang it all, man, you don't expect the Stanton gas field to be revived, do you?"

"No, I don't expect that," admitted Mr. Clackworthy. "The field is dead beyond all hope of rejuvenation. I don't ever expect to find any one fool enough to buy this stock."

Mr. Sachs threw up his hands. "You're too deep for me!" he exclaimed. "If you don't expect to resell the stock, you've simply thrown away four thousand, five hundred dollars, for I'm going to charge you five hundred dollars as our commission for getting hold of the shares. It was quite a job."

"Yes," agreed the master confidence man, "it probably looks as if I had thrown away some very good money, but I'm not in the habit of stinging myself in such an absurd fashion." He unscrewed the cap of his fountain pen and proceeded to write a check.

"Then you don't care to tell me what you propose to do with this stock?" urged the broker.

"I don't mind in the least telling you what I am going to do with it," replied Mr. Clackworthy. "I am going to keep it."

Mr. Sachs sighed. "Blamed if I wouldn't rather know what your idea is than to have the five hundred dollars commission," he said.

"And I would prefer you to have the

commission," said Mr. Clackworthy laughingly, passing over the check and picking up the certificates. The broker stared at him intently as he moved toward the door.

"Either the deepest man in Chicago, or the nuttiest," he said under his breath. "Probably the nuttiest!"

"Boss," demanded The Early Bird, when he and the master confidence man were again in the street, "was that stuff on the level about the stock bein' N. G.?"

"For marketing purposes, James its value is just that of old paper, an almost infinitesimal fraction of the coin known as one penny."

"An' there ain't no more gas under the ground near that burg than there is in a busted blimp, huh?"

"Mr. Sachs stated it very aptly, James, when he declared that there is not enough gas left in the Stanton field to fry an egg; there is no gas, and there will never be any more gas."

"Then, boss, watcha wanna pay out good dough for that bundle of pretty paper; that's what I wanna know!"

"It was my wish, James, to be in full control of the Stanton Natural Gas Co. and its assets."

"Unleash the chin, boss," begged The Early Bird. "I'm guessin' there ain't no assets."

"I suppose, James," the master confidence man said teasingly, "that it would not be amiss to say that I am, so to speak, indulging in a—well, a pipe dream."

II.

The Early Bird was not favorably impressed; in fact, he was utterly disgusted. He didn't like the looks of Kiethsville, Illinois, and so expressed himself, promptly, positively, and frankly. He had not gone four blocks on the way from the railroad station to the hotel when he began to wail bitterly.

"Honest, boss, you ain't expectin' to take any kale outa this burg?" he demanded incredulously.

"And why else would we be here?" retorted Mr. Clackworthy. "This is hardly the sort of place that one comes to for pleasure."

"You said somethin', boss!"

Kiethsville is on the northern edge of the big coal fields; it is a shabby, sooty place, made up

largely of modest miners' cottages. When the six big coal mines, the profitable properties of The Plunkett Coal Mining Co., are in operation, every one is prosperous, for miners are good spenders when they have it. In the summer season, however, when most of the mines are running only one and two days a week, and some of them not at all, a pall of dejection hangs over the town. Merchants loaf listlessly in their stores and wait for the time when the public begins filling its coal bin.

The Plunkett Coal Mining Co. is but the corporate name for the Hon. Horatio Plunkett, who had, it was estimated, amassed two or three million dollars during the some fifteen years that he had operated the mines. In addition to his mines, he owned the Plunkett Trust Co., and was by far the richest and the shrewdest man in Kiethsville.

As soon as Mr. Clackworthy and The Early Bird had registered at the hotel, the master confidence man at once sent for an automobile at the public garage.

"I propose to spend about ten thousand dollars, James, during our first few hours in this charming little city," he announced. "I am now going to take you for a little ride and give you a look at my prospective purchase."

"Speak the piece, boss," pleaded The Early Bird. "Slip me the low-down. I ain't heard a peep as to why we're in this here junior Pittsburgh. Ten thousand bucks! Huh! I wouldn't give a hundred berries for the whole burg. Whatcha gonna give up all that kale for?"

"I am considering the purchase of a mountain."

"Say! Whatcha givin' me!"

"A mountain, James—a mountain of coal. Here's our machine; we shall now go forth and indulge in what is known as taking a look."

Mr. Clackworthy seemed quite familiar with Kiethsville, the result of a previous visit some weeks before. He directed the chauffeur to take them to the nearest of the Plunkett mines east of town. It was one of the shafts entirely closed down for the summer. The hoisting machinery was idle and silent, and only the pumps, which prevented the mine from being flooded by seepage water, were in operation.

"That's the mountain of coal which I propose

to purchase—at least one of them," explained Mr. Clackworthy, and The Early Bird stared in puzzled curiosity at the sloping sides of the three-hundred-foot-high mound of coal shale some distance from the mine proper.

"I ain't jerry to this minin' business, but it don't take a very smart guy to see that it's the dump pile; it's stuff what's thrown away because it ain't no good, huh?"

"Precisely, James," answered Mr. Clackworthy. "At every coal mine is to be found a great mountain of coal screenings like that, growing year after year without hope of a purchaser; it is too compact and of such poor grade as to be practically without fuel value.

"This particular dump, I would say at rough estimate, contains some ninety or a hundred thousand tons of tailings, for which there is no market. I propose to buy it as well as others like it at each of the Plunkett mines."

"You're gonna give up ten thousand iron men for that worthless stuff; boss, are you sure that the old noodle is hittin' on all cylinders?"

"I should consider fifty thousand dollars as a fair price for all of the Plunkett dumps," said Mr. Clackworthy. "I am sure that Mr. Plunkett will be glad to accept, say, ten thousand dollars cash, and the rest payable later."

"But, boss, you've just said that the stuff won't burn!" protested The Early Bird.

"It has never been utilized as fuel," admitted Mr. Clackworthy, his eyes twinkling; "it is so fine that it smothers out a fire, and, as I said, the grade is very low. However, it's apparent worthlessness is just the point; it is my present job to buy a total of something like five hundred thousand tons of worthless shale—and make it burn!"

The master confidence man walked back to the waiting automobile, refusing to proffer any further explanation. When they had returned to the hotel, The Early Bird made himself as comfortable as his gnawing curiosity would permit, while Mr. Clackworthy went across the street to the imposing Plunkett Building, where Horatio Plunkett had his business quarters, and where were the executive offices of the Plunkett Coal Mining Co.

Mr. Plunkett's secretary, a thin, haughty little man who was exceedingly proud of his position with Kiethsville's richest and most important

man, was accustomed to receive visitors with a chilling aloofness, but at the sight of the tall, prepossessing, elegantly tailored Mr. Clackworthy he found himself bowing. He decided instantly that it must be something very important, indeed, which would bring such a personage to Kiethsville.

"I am quite sure that Mr. Plunkett will see you, sir," he said in answer to Mr. Clackworthy's inquiry. He did not even ask the nature of the caller's business. A moment later the master confidence man was ceremoniously ushered into Mr. Plunkett's inner sanctum, a richly furnished office with a massive mahogany desk, expensively carved. On the wall facing the desk was a large oil painting of Mr. Plunkett himself.

Horatio Plunkett was florid and portly; an aggressive chin protruded from beneath a bristling gray mustache, and over a slightly bulbous nose were a pair of shrewd, cold eyes which had the habit of narrowing almost to pin points. A shrewd man, one knew instantly, and possessing a ruthless determination to turn his shrewdness into gold.

"What can I do for you, Mr. Clackworthy?" he asked in his booming voice, respectfully fingering the caller's impeccable card. His appraising glance darted up from the visitor's twenty-dollar shoes, along the lines of the hundred-and-fifty-dollar suit, to the pleasant face and faultlessly barbered Vandyke beard.

"I am about to surprise you," announced Mr. Clackworthy with his genial smile, yet getting to his point in quite a blunt, businesslike way. "I want to buy your six shale dumps. I am not a bargain driver, Mr. Plunkett; I will give you ten cents a ton."

Mr. Plunkett was surprised; more than that he was utterly dumfounded. The thin line of his mouth relaxed as his chin dropped in an expression of complete bewilderment.

"W-what!" he stuttered.

"I am both serious and sane," assured Mr. Clackworthy. "Your ears have not tricked you; I am offering to buy your six shale dumps for ten cents a ton; ten thousand dollars cash, and the remainder within a year. I have a bank draft in my pocket."

"What—what do you want with the shale dumps?" demanded Mr. Plunkett.

"I must decline to answer that question," replied Mr. Clackworthy. "You have six shale dumps which grow larger year after year and which are at present utterly worthless. They are without value to you; they are worth ten cents a ton to me, and if I can turn them into a profit, that would be my business. At ten cents a ton, your shale will bring you about fifty thousand dollars, which is just fifty thousand dollars more than you ever expected to get. Do we make a deal?"

"But, my dear sir, I have a right to know what you are going to do with that shale!"

"Not necessarily," returned Mr. Clackworthy. "I must have an immediate answer; if we cannot close a deal, I shall get the first train to Fallsburg, where there are other mines."

Mr. Plunkett's shrewd eyes searched the master confidence man's face for a moment, and he saw no signs of relenting. Swiftly he considered the possible uses to which the shale might be put.

"Do you intend using that shale for fuel?" he demanded.

"I prefer to keep my own counsel," answered Mr. Clackworthy, and Mr. Plunkett smiled in mixed triumph and sneering amusement. Experts had long since given up the problem of fuelizing coal shale.

"Humph!" he thought. "The fellow has a hare-brained notion that he can burn shale. Ten thousand cash! Even if he never completes the payments on the rest of the forty thousand dollars—and, of course, he won't—I'll be just ten thousand dollars ahead. If I don't get his money some operator to the south of me will." For a moment he continued to tap his fingers against the desk top.

"All right, Mr. Clackworthy," he agreed. "I'll deal with you—five hundred thousand tons of shale at ten cents a ton; ten thousand dollars cash, and forty thousand dollars payable in two installments divided over the year. Is that satisfactory?"

"Entirely so," said Mr. Clackworthy. "Call in your attorney and we will draw up a contract."

The contract was a matter of simple legal composition, and within the hour it was signed, and Mr. Plunkett had the ten thousand dollars. When Mr. Clackworthy returned to the hotel he found The Early Bird standing in the lobby,

staring intently at a map of the State which hung on the wall.

"Boss," he said, "I just been givin' this here map the double O, an' it just filters through the bean that this burg is just twenty miles across country from the town of Stanton."

"Yes," admitted Mr. Clackworthy. "I believe that is so."

"An'," pursued James exultantly, "I ain't forgot that Stanton is the place where is them gas wells that ain't gassin' any more."

"Quite so," encouraged Mr. Clackworthy.

"An' you went an' bought up all the stock in that gasless gas company."

"Your deduction progresses, my dear James."

I gotta first-class hunch that you buyin' this coal that won't burn has got somethin' to do with gas wells what won't gas."

"Proceed, James; proceed, and let us see just how closely you can hit the nail on the head."

Hit it on the head, m'eye!" exclaimed The Early Bird. "How'm I gonna hit it on the head when I can't even see the nail!"

III.

Mr. Clackworthy could not remain long in a town without the town being gaspingly aware of his presence, and so it was with his presence in Kiethsville. He moved swiftly to the business in hand. The lumber company, for two thousand dollars of his money, had delivered large quantities of building material to a vacant plot of ground near the railroad tracks; a double force of carpenters were set to work, and a rough, shedlike structure, measuring some one hundred by fifty feet, went up almost like magic. When the carpenters went away, brick masons were put to work building a large oven along one side of the factory; then machinery began to arrive.

During these operations, Mr. Horatio Plunkett continued to chuckle over the bit of good fortune that had sent an unexpected ten thousand dollars his way. Since Mr. Clackworthy banked with the Plunkett Trust Co. it was a simple matter for the local magnate to know that of the original thirty thousand dollars that the stranger had brought to Kiethsville, only fifteen thousand dollars remained, and that, with Mr.

Clackworthy's lavish check writing, this balance was dwindling. This seemed to Mr. Plunkett to indicate that his chances of getting another payment on his shale was negligible, but, well, ten thousand dollars was better than nothing.

It was one morning while Mr. Plunkett was considering these matters that Dawson, his secretary, entered and laid upon the desk a clipping from a Chicago morning paper.

"Here's what they are up to," announced Dawson. Mr. Plunkett saw that there had just been incorporated at the State capital, The New Era Coal Brick Co., Kiethsville, Illinois, Mr. Amos Clackworthy, president.

"Coal bricks!" exclaimed Mr. Plunkett. "Bah! Who ever heard of coal bricks! Don't bother me with such nonsense." Nevertheless, the coal magnate was possessed of a normal curiosity, and more than once he found himself wondering just what "coal bricks" were supposed to be. He was wondering when Mr. Clackworthy telephoned.

"Mr. Plunkett," said the master confidence man, "we are turning out our first coal bricks this afternoon, and thought you might like to come over."

For a moment the mine operator hesitated, but curiosity won, and he accepted the invitation. When he reached the shedlike factory, workmen were unloading shale hauled in from the Plunkett mines, and Mr. Clackworthy came forward with his genial smile.

"You are about to witness the production of our first coal brick," he said. "There you see your shale—worthless in its present state. In a few minutes it will be transformed into coal bricks which can be sold at the price of your best-mined coal."

Mr. Plunkett grunted skeptically as he stared about the unpretentious interior of the factory, if a shed could be dignified by such a name. Fires had been started in the big brick oven, and in the middle of the room was a ponderous machine with a big hopper and a cylinder with a capacity of about three tons of shale.

"Only one machine installed at present," explained Mr. Clackworthy. "It gives us a capacity of a hundred tons a day, but we'll expand. After we've cleaned up our profit on your five hundred thousand tons of shale, we'll step out

and buy other shale dumps. Not much investment in factory, as you can see; not necessary."

"Humph!" grunted Plunkett. "What are you going to do with—er—coal bricks after you have—ah—manufactured them?"

"Burn 'em," replied Mr. Clackworthy. "Fuel on a par with your best-mined coal—cleaner and more convenient; and, as you doubtless know, ten cents a ton is far cheaper than you can mine coal."

"Humph!" grunted Mr. Plunkett again. He eyed the master confidence man closely, impressed despite himself by the brisk, sure manner and the confident voice. "I'll have to see it."

"And see it you shall," promised Mr. Clackworthy. "The shale is shoveled into the hopper and fed into a cylinder which is revolved under compression; that is our secret process. I can't show you the process, only the result."

Two days previously George Bascom and "Pop" Blanchard, two of Mr. Clackworthy's trusted coworkers, had arrived in Kiethsville. George was to be the sales manager and Pop was in charge of the factory. The latter, in overalls and jumper, was busy directing the workers when Mr. Clackworthy called him over.

"Mr. Plunkett, I want you to meet Mr. Blanchard, our mechanical genius. You may proceed now, Mr. Blanchard."

The hopper of the ponderous machine was opened, and it was shoveled full of dry shale; a cloud of sooty dust arose and filled the shed. The hopper door was closed, clamped down, an electric motor switched on, and the big drum began to revolve. The ground trembled with the heavy motion of the machine. Mr. Plunkett looked on curiously and stared questioningly.

"You are, I see, going to be much surprised," said Mr. Clackworthy. "As you know, of course, there is a certain amount of oil in all coal. Our process is merely to get sufficient excretion of oil from the shale to make it both readily combustible and cohesive. After the shale is taken from the machine you will see it sticky with oil; we mold it into bricks and bake it hard. The oil will make the coal bricks burn readily."

"Utter nonsense!" exclaimed Mr. Plunkett, but he waited to see the result. After some ten minutes the machine was stopped and the drum opened. The shale came out, moist and gleaming

with oil. Mr. Plunkett, with a look of amazement on his face, picked up a handful of it.

"It—it's unbelievable!" he sputtered. "There—there can't be that much oil in shale."

"Yet there is; you have to admit that," replied Mr. Clackworthy.

"It must be a trick of some sort; what you've done is simply scientifically impossible!" protested the coal magnate. He strongly suspected that Mr. Clackworthy would presently draw him to one side and offer to sell him stock, and he was very much on his guard. He stepped closer and examined the machine; he had to admit that there was no conceivable place where enough oil to saturate three tons of coal shale might have been hidden. He looked about the factory; certainly there was not a secret nook or cranny in this barren interior.

The oil-soaked shale was trundled to the pressing machines and molded into blocks about the size of an ordinary brick; then the blocks were placed upon a shelved truck and rolled into the bake oven. Twenty minutes of baking and there was the finished product.

"Behold!" exclaimed Mr. Clackworthy. "The New Era coal brick!"

"Let's see it burn," said Mr. Plunkett skeptically.

"With pleasure," agreed Mr. Clackworthy, gathering up some wood shavings, kindling a fire, and permitting the coal bricks to ignite. Mr. Plunkett stared at the now blazing coal shale which burned with a ready and hot flame.

"High degree of inflammability," explained the master confidence man. "Easy to handle, no clinkers. Coal bricks should sell well, don't you think, at three dollars a ton, f. o. b. Kiethsville?"

Mr. Plunkett compressed his lips. He knew that the thing was ridiculous, and yet it was done. He sensed a trick of some sort, yet, confound it, there couldn't be a trick!

"You are offering stock for sale, of course?" he questioned shrewdly.

"Oh, no," replied Mr. Clackworthy. "We have too good a thing, and if our present plans go forward we can struggle along without outside capital. Quick sales is what we look forward to. The money will be rolling in soon, and that will give us the money to increase our production. We launch our selling campaign at once. Hey,

George!"

George Bascom strolled over.

"Bascom, meet Mr. Plunkett—Mr. Horatio Plunkett. And, George, we will turn out our first hundred tons today, I hope. We'll have our first carload in Chicago to-morrow night and open up our display room the day following. Release those full-page advertisements in the newspapers, George.

"You see," he added to Mr. Plunkett, "our idea is to create a demand among consumers at once; that will start the dealers ordering."

"Humph!" grunted the coal magnate; his tone indicated the opinion that sales for coal bricks might not be so easy as Mr. Clackworthy imagined. He looked about the cheaply built factory again; again he sought for the trick. If the thing was on the square—and he began to admit that he couldn't for the life of him see how it could be otherwise—the cost of production was very low. He did a swift problem in multiplication and figured that The New Era Coal Brick Co. was about to realize a profit of a million and a quarter dollars on the shale for which Mr. Clackworthy had paid ten cents a ton!

Thoughtfully Mr. Plunkett returned to his ornate offices in the Plunkett Building and at once called in Dawson, his secretary.

"Dawson," he said crisply, "you and Jerry Hunt, the railroad freight agent, are good friends."

"He is Mrs. Dawson's cousin," replied the secretary.

"Good," replied Mr. Plunkett. "I want you to find out if this fellow Clackworthy has shipped in any crude oil. Find out for me to-day, if you can; if the thing is on the square—humph!" His voice trailed off musingly. "A million and a quarter profit—on my shale! Quick sales! Humph! We'll see about that; we'll see about that!"

IV.

If Mr. Amos Clackworthy had, as he had intimated to Mr. Plunkett, optimistic visions of an avalanche of orders for coal bricks, he was doomed to disappointment. Two thousand dollars spent in newspaper advertising had stirred no demand from the wholesalers or retailers in coal.

But Mr. Clackworthy was far from

disappointed. Keen analyst of human nature, he had anticipated this very turn in events. He knew that Mr. Plunkett was interested; he knew that he had put coal bricks through his laboratory and had found them high-class fuel. He had discovered, also, that Mr. Plunkett had blocked the sale of coal bricks; his agents had gone among the dealers, whispering warningly that they would find it to their advantage to "lay off" of coal bricks. It was broadly hinted that dealers who did handle coal bricks might find it difficult to get mined coal when they needed it most. It was a boycott, pure and simple.

Mr. Clackworthy sat in the offices of The New Era Coal Brick Co. and with him were The Early Bird, Bascom, and Pop Blanchard. The factory was deserted, for production had been suspended. Coal bricks wouldn't sell, so what was the use in making them?

"Well, my dear friends," began the master confidence man, "we don't seem to be a howling success, eh?"

"Coal bricks is sellin' like palm-leaf fans at a football game," grumbled The Early Bird.

"It's a conspiracy!" exclaimed George Bascom. "The dealers are scared to handle our product."

"Of course," went on Mr. Clackworthy; "that is what I was depending on."

"But," protested The Early Bird, "if them coal bricks ain't gonna sell, how're you figgurin' on gettin' a wise bloke like Plunkett t' cough up real dough for a factory what's shut down an' losin' dough?"

"My dear but sometimes dense friends," replied Mr. Clackworthy laughingly, "this is the work of Mr. Plunkett. He is noted in the coal trade for stifling the life of competition. He's trying to get us discouraged so that he can buy us out for a song. On my trip to Chicago yesterday I secured a nice collection of affidavits which give us the proof that Mr. Plunkett's agents have conspired to ruin us.

"Now, Pop, I think it's about time that you and I quarreled."

Pop Blanchard nodded cordially and leaned comfortably back in his chair.

"You don't like the way I have handled the business," went on Mr. Clackworthy. "You are demanding that I buy your stock. I have in the

bank a balance of nearly five thousand dollars. I shall give you a check for it and you will turn over to me your stock. You cash the check and leave town this afternoon."

"Just as you say," agreed Pop good-naturedly. The Early Bird was about to demand explanations, but he saw from the twinkle in the master confidence man's eye that he would not have long to wait.

"That being settled," said Mr. Clackworthy, "I will now attend to a little matter of simple mechanics." He got a spade and a wrench which he carried into the factory. Winking at Pop, who, alone, seemed to be in on the secret, he began to dig a trench from the wall of the building to the big machine which performed the reputed function of extracting oil from coal shale. On he dug, without concern for his twenty-dollar shoes, and presently there was revealed a length of pipe. The Early Bird, watching eagerly, saw a great light.

The pipe led up through a hole in the platform on which the machine rested, entering the drum through a hollow space in the base, so well concealed that even a mechanic would have had a hard time figuring it out.

"I gotcha!" exclaimed The Early Bird. "That oil comes from—"

"From Stanton, of course," finished Mr. Clackworthy. "This is the old pipe line of the Stanton Natural Gas Co., which passes through Kiethsville on its way to Owentown. I was very careful to build our factory directly over a point where the old pipe line runs. The rest was simple.

"The pumps at Stanton were put in repair at a small expense. Our old friend, Jack Prichard, is over there with a mechanic. The gas line would carry oil as well as gas, and Jack has simply been pumping oil through the abandoned pipe line. When the machine was set in motion it opened a valve which permitted enough crude oil to pass into the drum to saturate the shale.

"I knew that Plunkett suspected a trick, and that he would move heaven and earth to find out if we had shipped in any oil. We hadn't, of course. Moreover, there wasn't a square foot inside this shed where a gallon of oil could be hidden.

"The oil made fine coal bricks, and the only trouble is that it costs about six dollars a ton to make 'em—about twice as much as we were

trying to sell them for. Now you understand why I was not more heartbroken when we found it so difficult to sell our coal bricks."

The Early Bird wrinkled his brow thoughtfully. "Boss," he said, "mebbe you got this game all figgered out, but I gotta hunch that when Plunkett gets hep to the fact he's been stung—"

"I have considered that possibility," said Mr. Clackworthy easily. "I am ready to meet that emergency."

V.

For some days Mr. Plunkett had expected a visit from Mr. Clackworthy, and he smiled smugly when Dawson came in to announce him. As the master confidence man entered the local magnate's office his smile was missing, and he looked badly beaten.

"Mr. Plunkett," he said dully, "we're at the end of our string. Coal bricks won't sell."

A pleased chuckle sounded from the depths of Mr. Plunkett's throat, and he massaged his palms almost gleefully.

"They burn," he admitted. "How much are you out?"

"Thirty thousand dollars—every cent that I brought to this town is gone now. My bank balance is just twenty-one dollars. Blanchard threatened to throw us into the hands of the receiver; I know coal bricks are all right, so I bought him out."

"Ah, I see!" murmured Mr. Plunkett. "So you control the company?"

"I own ninety per cent of the stock now."

Horatio Plunkett leaned back in his chair.

"I'll be generous," he said. "I'll let you out with a whole skin—thirty thousand dollars." As a matter of fact, Mr. Clackworthy had pinched out of his thirty thousand, including the five thousand dollars which Pop Blanchard had just drawn from the bank, a total of some ten thousand dollars. This made the expense of the adventure, including the ten thousand dollars paid to Plunkett for the shale, an even twenty thousand dollars.

"Ouch!" exclaimed Mr. Clackworthy. "You drive a hard bargain—too hard. I won't take it."

"Then you'll get nothing," answered the coal magnate snappily.

"I'll seek outside capital," declared Mr. Clackworthy.

"Seek is right," said Mr. Plunkett sneeringly. "Finding it will be the rub. Who will be interested when they find that the dealers have refused to have anything to do with your coal bricks, that your product has been virtually blacklisted?"

Mr. Clackworthy's body grew rigid with the pretense of great surprise. "So!" he exclaimed. "That's it? I begin to understand. Blacklisted, eh? Whose blacklist? I know the answer. You've worked a boycott on us; that means you must have wanted my company and wanted it badly."

Horatio Plunkett stared as he saw Mr. Clackworthy thus transformed, and he realized in panic that he had been too hasty.

"Since I know that you really want to get your grasping fingers on my company, I guess I will have a little something to say about price!" exclaimed Mr. Clackworthy, triumphantly. "My price is one hundred thousand dollars cash. I'm letting you off easy, at that."

"You—you're crazy!" yelled the mine operator. "Fifty thousand—and it's my last word."

"I've got your number now, Plunkett, and I'm going to do a little squeezing myself. What an idiot you must think I've been! I've let you put over a neat little boycott on me. Coal bricks would have sold if it hadn't been for that; you'll clean up something like a million and a quarter as you figure it. I can't get capital, eh? Well, we'll see about that!"

For half an hour they bargained, and, finally, in his desperation, Mr. Plunkett raised his offer to seventy-five thousand dollars and Mr. Clackworthy, willing to give the magnate the feeling that he had triumphed, accepted it. Mr. Clackworthy went to the hotel for the stock certificates, and when he returned Mr. Plunkett had drawn his check. Reluctantly, as was his habit when parting with money, the coal magnate passed over the slip of paper.

"All right. I control the New Era Coal Brick Co. I shall take charge in the morning."

"I will be at the factory to turn affairs over to you," promised Mr. Clackworthy. He hurried out, for it was only a few minutes until the Plunkett Trust Co. would close, and he wanted to lose no time in exchanging Horatio Plunkett's personal check for a bank draft. It was so easy to stop

payments on personal checks!

As soon as he had the draft the master confidence man found George Bascom and gave him instructions to catch the first train to Chicago to collect the money on the draft.

The next morning at nine o'clock Mr. Plunkett was ready to take over the factory, but Mr. Clackworthy reported from his room at the hotel that he was slightly indisposed, and he remained indisposed until he received a telegram from Bascom that he had safely collected on the draft. Then he telephoned to Mr. Plunkett that he was feeling better, which was true.

Thus it was that, a little after noon, Mr. Clackworthy and The Early Bird joined the coal magnate and the latter's mechanical engineer at the shedlike factory. The Early Bird was nervous.

"Look, boss!" he whispered apprehensively. "Plunkett's got a force of men ready; he's goin' to try an' make coal bricks."

"Of course," answered Mr. Clackworthy complacently.

"But, boss, he's gonna know in about two minutes that he's been stung."

"He is that, James."

"But, he—he'll have us pinched. Y' know, boss, I had a feelin' last night that the best thing I could do was t' sneak out of the hotel an' touch a match t' this dump. That would of covered our tracks; he couldn't of proved nothin' then."

"Arson is a reprehensible crime, James," reproved Mr. Clackworthy.

"We're ready," announced Mr. Plunkett. "As you see, I'm going to start production at once, and my engineer here will take charge."

"Here is the key," said Mr. Clackworthy. He waited as the workmen were put to work. At once they were instructed to shovel the dry shale into the machine while the engineer looked on doubtfully.

"You say you saw it done, Mr. Plunkett," he said, "but I don't see how. That looks like a converted concrete mixer to me."

"I saw it done," insisted Mr. Plunkett.

The motor hummed, and the big drum revolved. At the end of ten minutes it was stopped again, and the drum opened. Out poured the shale as dry as when it entered. Mr. Plunkett's face paled, and the engineer nodded an "I told you so."

"What—what has happened?" demanded Mr.

Plunkett hoarsely. "There—there is no oil secretion. The—the shale is dry! What has happened?"

"I wouldn't say," replied Mr. Clackworthy, and he wouldn't, of course.

A horrible suspicion dawned upon the coal magnate, and he stared at the master confidence man and The Early Bird. James was having a hard time to disguise his growing panic.

"Fix that machine and fix it quick!" roared Mr. Plunkett.

"I only handled the financial end," replied Mr. Clackworthy. "I couldn't make a coal brick to save my life. Now if Blanchard were here—"

"Where is Blanchard?" demanded Mr. Plunkett.

"I don't know; he has left town," said Mr. Clackworthy.

"I think it must be a trick of some sort." accused the engineer. "That's only a concrete mixer with some fancy trimmings."

"Yes, it's a trick!" shouted Mr. Plunkett. "You are a crook! Give me back my draft for seventy-five thousand dollars, or I'll have you arrested. Understand? Your man Blanchard skipped out; the whole thing's a fake. You had some way of putting oil in that machine; you never did extract any oil from shale."

"You saw it done," reminded Mr. Clackworthy with dignity. "I dare you to prove any way that I poured oil into the machine. I dare you to prove that I shipped in a gallon of crude oil."

"Just the same your coal bricks are a fake!" cried Mr. Plunkett. "Give me back my money or I'll send you and that man, Early, to the pen. I'll have a warrant for your arrest in twenty minutes."

The Early Bird's face paled, but Mr. Clackworthy lost none of his calmness. The master confidence man stepped toward the office and motioned for Mr. Plunkett and James to follow.

"I thought you'd come across—you crook!" ejaculated Mr. Plunkett.

Inside the office, however, Mr. Clackworthy showed no signs of fear.

"Take a look at this, Plunkett," he said snappily. "This is an affidavit made by Gregg, one of your men. He confesses that you personally ordered him to carry on a boycott, and that is a

Federal offense. Gregg is where I can find him, and I'll send him to the Federal officials if you try to get nasty. The district attorney don't love you any too well; he's been trying to get the goods on you for some time, for juggling coal prices and a few other things. Gregg's testimony will get you indicted by the Federal grand jury."

"You bribed my man, Gregg!" whispered Mr. Plunkett.

"We will not discuss his motives in signing this affidavit," retorted Mr. Clackworthy. "The fact remains that I've got the goods on you for a conspiracy in restraint of trade, of boycotting the goods of a competitor in an effort to make their stock worthless and buy in their company for a song.

"I'll admit that the machine doesn't work today; I'll even admit that it may never work. I know nothing about mechanics; to make the machine work is a problem for your engineer. You say coal bricks are a fake; you say I've flim-flammed you. Prove it! Prove, if you can, that I ever shipped a gallon of crude oil into Kiethsville. You can't do it.

"If you try any foolish move like having me arrested for obtaining money under false pretenses, your former man, Gregg, goes to the district attorney and tells what he knows. I won't give you back a cent; do just as you please."

"Buncoed!" gasped out Horatio Plunkett. He knew that he was licked. Mr. Clackworthy had him dead to rights; he had no proof that oil had been injected into the mixing machine, and Mr. Clackworthy had proof that would result in a Federal prosecution.

"Some day, you crook," he cried as he shook his fist in impotent anger and moved toward the door, "some day I'm going to get even with you for this."

The Early Bird sank into a chair and gasped for breath. "You—you bluffed him out of it!" he muttered. "I sure had a picture of the sheriff bringin' our breakfast in to us! You cleaned up fifty-five thousand dollars—a nice little piece of change t' split five ways, I'll say. Some—some little pipe dream! Boss, I gotta good one. Ask me—when is it that a coal brick ain't a coal brick? Ask me! This is rich!"

"All right, James, I'll bite."

"When—when it's a GOLD BRICK!"