

# The Power o' Money

By J. D. Beresford

## I

It was in the year of the first Jubilee that old Joe Baker had his wonderful stroke of luck. It was not the first blessing that Fate had bestowed upon him—there was, for instance, Mrs. Baker—but it was most certainly the first time that Providence had ever opened its hands and poured down upon Baker a great shower of gold.

In a sense he had deserved, if not earned, this widen accession of riches. He had displayed, however unwittingly, a certain foresight by selecting the cottage in which he now lived. When Mr. Jacks pensioned Baker after his accident—one of the old sort was Jacks—he offered him ten shillings week and this cottage rent free, or twelve shillings a week and no cottage. Baker chose the cottage, although it was a mile from the next house, and neither he nor Mrs. Baker could manage that distance without great effort.

On the other hand, the situation of that strip of garden was unique. It ran straight down to the railway, and it was actually on a level with the metals. The down expresses came drumming out of the tunnel under Bleak Hill a mile away, crescendoed through the falling depth of the cutting, and at the bottom of Baker's garden went roaring by on the level, to be swallowed up by the further cutting beyond, which grew deeper and deeper until the entertainment was concluded by a despairing scream as the express was engulfed in the black hole that had been bored into the huge mass of Silent Hill. The up expresses, of course, reversed the process, but the effect was much the same. In either case you sat on the rail and post fence at the bottom of the garden and waved your hat as the flying procession whirled hammering past into the unknown.

“You don't think you'll find it lonely at that place?” Jacks had asked—a kindly, thoughtful man, Jacks.

“What, with them trains?” replied Joe Baker.

There had been moments of exaltation when Baker had blessed the accident which had given him the trains. The whole two-mile procession from tunnel to tunnel had so much the effect of being conducted entirely for the benefit of the person who sat on the rail and post fence. From no other point could you witness at such advantage that splendid tear past from the first faint drumming at one end to the last shriek of farewell at the other. Old Baker always waved his hat once more in response to that last farewell shriek.

But the luck, though so intimately connected with those magnificent expresses, entered through the front door which gave on to the lane. It came in the person of a wonderful individual in a vast overcoat that broke into a luxuriant growth of curly black hair all over the collar and lapels and cuffs. The remarkable individual inside had hair to match and an exuberant moustache that had the same crisp tendency. He drove up to the Bakers' in a high dogcart.

He told Baker at once that his strip of garden had unique advantages, a fact already known to Baker. But the individual, who was the agent of the agent of a great financier, told Baker another fact of which that simple, uncultured person had never dreamed—namely, that unique advantages were worth money, especially advantages of position.

Baker never clearly understood what he called the “rights” of what the individual called his “proposition,” but the basis of the proposition was that in the unknown, unrealised country that really existed beyond Bleak and Silent Hills, great erections of brick and stone, called hotels,

were being built, and that other people besides Baker were ignorant of the splendid advantages of these hotels. These ignoramuses, it appeared, were in urgent need of enlightenment, and the plans, extensive and costly, which the financier and his agents were laying were designed solely to facilitate the spread of knowledge.

And just at one infinitesimal point of the whole vast scheme the plan involved old Joe Baker. His garden was one of the few spots in all that hilly country on which could be erected a great sign that would lift the weight of ignorance from the travelling public and would tell them, not of the gorgeous possibilities of the hotel at Freshmouth—there was no time for that—but of the essential fact that there was such an hotel.

The Astrakhanned individual was in a hurry. He overwhelmed Baker with a flood of words. He did not bargain—money was plentiful, and promises even more so, just then—he announced that that strip of garden was what he wanted, that he would pay five pounds a year rent for the sign that was to be erected upon it, and he did actually, as evidence of his *bona fides*, leave a real half-sovereign by way of deposit in old Baker's astonished hand.

“What's he want?” asked Baker of his wife when the superb individual had remounted his dog-cart and gone—cursing the ruts—back up the lane.

“I dunno,” replied Mrs. Baker, who had been present at the interview.

“I ain't agoin' to have no 'otels built in oor garden,” decided Baker doggedly; and doggedly he repeated that observation many times in the course of the next few hours.

Ten days later, however, an unprecedented letter arrived. The postman was, of course, invited in, a cup of tea was made for him, and the astounding document he had brought was given him to decipher.

It was partly in “print,” but a few blank spaces were filled in in a neat handwriting, and at the bottom was a hieroglyphic which even the postman, scholar as he was, could not make head or tail of. But the plain message of the thing was that “the Imperial Palace Hotel Co.” was to pay Joseph Baker, Esq., five pounds per year for the rent of an advertising station.

A there was much wonder and argument in the cottage of Joseph Baker, Esq., that morning, and postman was very late in finishing his round.

There was even more wonderment when the marvellous sign arrived. It came by degrees, and foreign workmen followed to fix it in its ordained on. It was fifteen feet high, it was most solidly and permanently constructed, and it bore in huge wood, gilded letters this firm announcement;

THE IMPERIAL  
PALACE HOTEL,  
FRESHMOUTH.

“Ope no one 'ull think it means my little place,” was Baker's comment. In two years the comment had matured into a perfectly sound witticism. . . .

II

For many months that sign was the great show of the neighbourhood. Everyone came to see it, including the Rector and Mr. Jacks. And the scholars of the place all tried to read the announcement backwards from the cottage door, although it was not one of those legends—like TUO YAW—that do equally well either way. But despite this defect the sign stood up in grand silhouette against the sky.

To old Baker it was a never-failing joy; and if he were sitting on the fence with his back to the line, enjoying the prospect of this beautiful announcement, he would not turn round to greet anything less than an express; the slow trains and the luggage trains went by, forlornly, unhailed.

It was in October that the sign was fixed, and at the end of twelve months old Joe and his wife held a quiet festival to celebrate the fact that they had earned five pounds—"a power o' money," as they both agreed. It did not trouble them at all that the money had not yet been sent to them. They had it in print that that sum would be paid, and it was perhaps just as well that the great and rich hotel company should keep money safely for the Bakers, who would have been terrified to have had so large a sum in the house. They had no urgent need for the money just then; indeed, Mrs. Baker had nearly eleven shillings "put by, come ciaristmas."

Nor did it worry the Bakers when October, 1889 came round, and still there was no further letter from the Imperial Palace Hotel Co. They did not expect a letter, and it came to old Joe sometimes as a terrifying thought that the Astrakhan gentleman might one day drive up in his dogcart and pour out ten golden pounds on the table. Aye! It was ten pounds now. Joe looked at his Missus with an awed face. "Dunno what us 'ud do wi' such a power o' money," he said.

Mrs. Baker agreed.

So the years rolled on, and the sign still stood firm as ever. The gold letters had long ago turned black, it is true; but the legend was as plain and substantial as on the day it had been erected.

In 1898 the second "I" in Imperial was blown off in a gale; but that made little difference.

In 1901, however, Mr. Jacks died. That was a tragedy in any case; but the full force of it was borne in upon the Bakers when they found that young Mr. Jacks was of different stuff from his father, and that their pension of ten shillings a week was to be stopped.

It took old Joe, now grown rather decrepit, a day or two to realise the inner meaning of this great change; but when it was made quite clear to him that the time had come for his removal to the workhouse, he quavered into a thin laugh.

"Work'us? Me and the Missus?" he piped. "Why, us is rich. Us is worth a power o' money." And from the bottom of the best tea-caddy was produced, after much fumbling, the evidence of wealth; a document grown weak in the joints, but still plainly legible.

Young Jacks laughed, and left the cottage saying that he would believe in that wealth when he saw it in cash.

Old Mrs. Baker spent a day in a journey to the Rectory, and took the priceless document with her. The Rector was sympathetic and helpful. He promised to write and make formal application to the company for the amount involved—no less a sum than seventy pounds.

Joe and his wife had never worked it out, and when Mrs. Baker returned in the Rectory pony-cart and informed Joe of the sum that was due to them he was smitten to speechless amazement. Seventy pounds was a sum beyond the reach of their imagination. It seemed quite impossible to them that any company could be rich enough to pay out such a horde of wealth in one transaction.

"Us'll get it bit by bit, like," they agreed.

The Rector wrote to the address given on the agreement, and in the Government's good time his letter was returned to him, marked "Not Known."

After that the Rector made inquiries, and discovered without much difficulty that the Imperial Palace Hotel Co. had been wound up and forgotten some twelve years before, and, incidentally, that the Imperial Palace Hotel at Freshmouth had never been completed.

The Rector was not unprepared for this awful news, but old Joe Baker was. . . .

For some hours after the Rector had gone, old Joe sat and tried to realise that he was no longer a potential millionaire. That effort was too great for him, but he did realise that the magnificent sign had in some way lied to him. When he had firmly grasped that idea, he found the wood-chopper and went out into the garden.

For one long afternoon, he sat on the rail and post fence, disregarding even the expresses, and gazed reproachfully at the splendid lie in his garden.

“Thur bain’t no Jmperial Pallis ’otel, Freshmouth,” he repeated again and again. “It’s a Loie. Thur bain’t no Imperial Pallis ’otel, Freshmouth.” But even this full recognition of the sign’s explicit falsity was not enough to overcome the admiration of long years. . .

Mrs. Baker coming out to fetch old Joe in for his tea, found him in senile tears.

Two days later the Bakers were taken to the workhouse. . . .

But the sign still stands in the same place, and there are enough letters remaining to enable one to guess its message. I have seen it many times, and once I was stirred to inquire if there was or had ever been an Imperial Palace Hotel at Freshmouth. The answer received excited my curiosity, and that is how I am able to tell the story of this one un-recognised creditor of the ill-conceived Hotel Company, this one insignificant victim of frenzied finance. . . .

He has been dead this ten years, but old Mrs. Baker is still alive—and hearty, considering that she has turned eighty.