

The Confidence Man

THE STORY OF THE GREAT OIL BOOM AT BERRYDALE

By Willis Brindley

THE youthful president of the Berrydale Commercial Club smiled and nodded at old Henry Cole, who had been dozing in the front row of chairs.

"All right, Henry!" he said.

Cole roused himself, lifted his great bulk into a vertical position, took his pipe out of his mouth, and made the motion that he was always called upon to make when a new man had made application for membership in the Commercial Club.

"Mr. President, I move you that the rules be suspended, and the secretary be instructed to cast the unanimous vote of the club to admit to membership Mr. Arthur J. Pitkin."

It was so ordered, and the youthful president called for "a few words from our new member, Mr. Pitkin."

Arthur J. Pitkin, as he rose to speak, contrasted strikingly in appearance with the other club members. While they were plainly—some of them shabbily—dressed, Pitkin gave evidence in his garb of what tailors are pleased to call quiet elegance. While they were, to a man, small town or country products, engaged in retail trade in the village, or in raspberry farming outside of it, Pitkin was clearly of the city.

For one thing, the back of his neck was shaved straight down at the sides. For another, he wore a mustache that did not droop over his mouth, but rather bristled from it in short spikes. He was of medium height, rather thickset, apparently in the early forties.

"Gentlemen, I greatly appreciate this vote of confidence," he said, speaking with the easy fluency that comes from practice. "When your banker, Mr. Cousens, suggested that I should make application for membership in this club, I felt grateful to him. I am sure that I shall feel still more grateful to him when I have come to know you better."

He paused, reached into his right hip pocket, and from a fat wallet drew two new bills. He stepped forward and handed these to the treasurer of the club.

"I think that I heard you say, Mr. Treasurer, that the dues are four dollars a year, payable in advance. I am glad to pay mine promptly. It is the least that I can do to show my appreciation of the confidence you have shown in me by electing me to membership."

There was a clapping of hands at this. Pitkin smiled a wide smile that displayed a mouthful of well-cared-for teeth.

"I am not here to make a speech. It has been an interesting meeting, and a helpful one, but I imagine that you are ready now to adjourn and go to your homes. I would like to say just one word. That word is confidence, and it has been used by me before. I am a great believer in confidence. Confidence is the basis of credit, the bulwark of business. Unless we have confidence in one another, and show this confidence in our daily relations, there can be no progress. If I might venture to make a confession upon such short acquaintance, I would like to say that so frequently do I preach this gospel that I am known among my friends as the confidence man."

Pitkin established himself next day, quite comfortably, in a store building which, until recently, had been occupied by a barber. For this he paid three months' rent in advance, at fifteen dollars a month.

There was a room in front, perhaps fifteen feet wide by twenty deep, with a wash bowl that had been left by the barber. Behind this was a smaller space, partitioned off, with a bathtub in it. The new tenant found an old-fashioned roll top desk at the secondhand store, half a dozen chairs, and a cot bed. With this outfit, and plenty of blankets, he made himself decidedly snug and comfortable.

Charley Dibble, who was an undertaker by profession, but a sign painter for the sake of eating between funerals, painted on the front window the words "Arthur J. Pitkin," and nothing more. Meeting old Henry Cole at the post office, after completing the job, he complained about it.

"That's all he'd let me put on it—just 'Arthur J. Pitkin,' and not another word. 'Well,' I says, 'ain't you goin' to put your business on, too? What's your business?' 'That's my business,' he says, not sassy, exactly, but sort of as if he had quit talkin'. So I told him it would be two dollars, and he pulled out a roll that would choke an elephant and peeled me off one."

"H-m!" said Henry Cole. "That's kind of funny. Guess I'll blow up there, after a bit, and have a talk with him."

On his way to the combination office and residence of Arthur J. Pitkin, old Mr. Cole stopped at the bank, and let Mr. Cousens change a five-dollar bill for him.

"Pretty good meeting of the Commercial Club last night," said Mr. Cousens. "I wouldn't be surprised if young Walker made a good president."

"Yeah—rather think he will. Slick-looking chap you brought up there—that Pitkin! Made a good little speech. Fellow's all right, I suppose?"

Mr. Cousens coughed and leaned as close as he could get without bumping the wicket with his forehead.

"He has excellent credentials—most excellent!"

"H-m! What might his business be?"

"I was not informed. Yes, Mrs. Jones, I'll wait on you. Mr. Cole has finished."

II

AFTER a steady diet of nicotine as served in a pipe, with an occasional treat in the form of a cigar of a brand that has added luster to the name of a bird known for its wisdom, real Cuban tobacco tastes mighty good. Arthur J. Pitkin had a whole box of long, black, oily-looking cigars, and he passed the box, first thing, to Henry Cole. Here was a host worth playing up to! Cole would talk to him about his hobby.

"I was thinking, Mr. Pitkin," he said, and carefully spat into the exact center of a new brass cuspidor, "about what you said last night about confidence. Good little speech, that was! Something to that idea! We'd be better off in a town like this with more confidence in one another. Yes sir!"

Cole stopped, flicked the ash into the center of the cuspidor, held the good cigar at arm's length, and regarded it affectionately. Pitkin said nothing.

"Yes, sir! Take this here deal we had on with the Consolidated Yeast Products Company. You heard about that, of course? No? Well, there was a case where a little more confidence would have brought us a new industry, and what this town needs is industries—pay rolls. These here Consolidated Yeast people wanted to locate here, and started to dicker with old Sim Wiley for that ten-acre piece he owns between the tracks. The deal was getting on all right, too, till somebody spilled the beans that it was Consolidated Yeast that wanted to buy, and then Sim boosted the price to five thousand dollars an acre. Five thousand dollars an acre for stump land—gosh all hemlock!"

Pitkin seemed impressed. Five thousand dollars an acre is an impressive price.

"So the old gentleman wouldn't sell unless he could get five thousand dollars an acre!" he remarked. "Did I meet Mr. Wiley at the Commercial Club last night? What do you figure that piece of land is really worth?"

"No, you didn't meet Sim Wiley at the Commercial Club meeting last night, nor any other night. Not Sim! Sim's rich, but that's no reason why he should spend any money. About his land—why, he got it for fifty dollars an acre on foreclosure. Young fellow came out and tried to make a farm of it; but, shucks, it's too low to raise raspberries, and there's stumps on it thick as cockle burrs on a goat. Of course, it does lie good for an industry—Northern Pacific tracks on one side and Milwaukee tracks on the other, so that it would be easy to run spur tracks on the property and get service from both lines. I guess maybe that land's worth a hundred dollars an acre to anybody that's got nerve enough to clear it and plant it to blackberries. Maybe an industry would pay five hundred dollars an acre for it, but five thousand—gosh all hemlock!"

Old Henry Cole dumped a long ash from his cigar, held what was left of the Havana at arm's length, and regarded it sadly. It would not last much longer.

"You aiming to buy a little land hereabouts, Mr. Pitkin?"

By way of answer, Pitkin reached down into the drawer of his desk, and passed the cigar box.

"Have a fresh cigar, Mr. Cole," he said.
 "Very glad you called—very glad indeed!"

III

DURING the next few days, Arthur J. Pitkin, in tweed knickerbockers and brown walking boots, was a familiar and conspicuous figure about the streets of Berrydale and in the thickly settled farming country adjacent. One thing that made him conspicuous was the fact that he walked. He resisted all efforts to sell or rent him anything in the way of a motor car.

Upon these walks, Pitkin had a way of stopping often to talk to the country people. He showed an intelligent interest in the berry business, and in the lives of the people who made a modest living from small fruits. He asked many questions with reference to the amount of time it took to care for a small place, and what the women, particularly, found to occupy themselves before and after the berry harvest.

With all this, his business in Berrydale remained a mystery. Small-town folk have a quick curiosity, but not a lasting one. If Pitkin had spent another week or two sitting in his office, handy to the cigar box, and tramping the country, he would have been classed as peculiar but harmless, and would have ceased to be an object of general comment; but it did not turn out that way. Something happened, rather, to bring Pitkin right into the center of the spotlight, and that something was the discovery of oil on the ten-acre piece of stump bottom owned by Simeon Wiley.

Pitkin happened upon Sim one afternoon when the old man was busy with a stump puller. To say that he was busy is putting it mildly; he was engrossed, absorbed, and perspiring.

The stump puller was a hand rig, of the type that is operated by pulling a handle back and forth, oar fashion, the handle operating to turn a drum, which in turn pulls upon a cable. By getting a double hitch, the thing has wonderful power, and the stump just naturally has to come—but not until the operator has almost pulled his stomach from where it is hitched to his backbone, in the operation.

Younger men than Simeon Wiley have tackled land clearing with a hand stump puller, and have given up the occupation for something genteel, like check raising, which leads a man to some easier work, such as making shoes in a penitentiary.

Coming upon a little creek, made by a tiny spring, Pitkin sat down to rest from his walk, and watched old Sim pull at the oar. Tiring of the show, he watched the creek, which, at this point, had overflowed to make a boggy little pond. Presently old Sim, who had heard about this stranger, but who had not heretofore had a chance for a close inspection of him, unkinked his back, left the stump puller in gear, and came down to sit on the bank.

"Gosh all hemlock, but that's hard work!" he said.

Pitkin nodded in agreement. It evidently was.

"You aiming to settle hereabouts?"

By way of answer, Pitkin drew from a coat pocket a leather case stuffed with black cigars, and handed it to Sim, who gingerly removed one, bit the end off, struck a match on his overalls, and lighted up.

"Pretty fancy cigar!" Puff, puff! "How much does a cigar like this cost, do you suppose?"

"Twenty cents." Pitkin was looking hard at the water in the boggy pond.

"Twenty cents! That's interest for four years on a dollar. What you see so interesting in that bog?"

Pitkin continued to look, his eyes directed at the far edge, where moss hung over the dead water.

"Why, it looks to me like oil. Has there ever been any oil found in this section?"

"Oil! Oil! Gosh all hemlock!"

With an agility surprising in a man of his years, old Sim slid down the bank, splashed through the little stream, and lay flat on his stomach, to get a close look at the place which had attracted Pitkin's attention. There was undoubtedly a cloudy scum on the surface of the water. Wiley looked at it long and hard, dabbled his hand in it, and then came back and sat on the bank again, beside the stranger.

For some moments neither man spoke. Old Sim Wiley took off his hat and polished the shiny dome of his head with a large blue handkerchief. For good measure, he wiped his forehead and the back of his neck.

Then he looked again at the spot in the bog where the oily scum was clearly visible. He puckered his forehead in heavy thought. He glanced sidewise at the city chap beside him—who, if he observed this scrutiny, paid no heed to Sim, but continued to smoke contemplatively.

Finally Sim cleared his throat and gave utterance to a pertinent question:

"I don't suppose you planted this here stuff with an oil can, or something, eh?"

"No."

And then, after another silence:

"You ain't ever seen it before, or told anybody about it?"

"No."

"And there ain't no cause for you to tell anybody about it?"

"No."

"All right, then! I guess the thing for me to do next is to start digging an oil well. It does beat the Dutch—one minute a man's bustin' his back grubbin' out stumps, and next minute he's a millionaire."

Pitkin smiled at this.

"I think you'll find, Mr. Wiley, that it is quite a distance from the sight of oil on a pond to the spending of a millionaire's income. There may be no oil, except what you see on the pond. Digging for oil means employing men who know the trade, and arranging for expensive machinery. It probably will cost you fifty thousand dollars to find out whether you really have oil. Suppose we stroll back to Berrydale, and have a talk with Mr. Cousens at the bank?"

The idea of talking to Mr. Cousens, or anybody else, did not at first appeal to Sim Wiley; but by frequent reiteration of his opinion that fifty thousand dollars would be required for the project, Pitkin finally won his point.

There followed a long conference with Mr. Cousens, in his little room at the back of the bank. The conference made progress and adjourned for dinner, and then resumed for the afternoon.

Out of it all resulted an agreement, drawn up in the best style of Attorney Lawrence Ellis, whereby Arthur J. Pitkin and associates contracted to sink a well, and, if oil were struck, to pay Simeon Wiley, as his share, one-fourth of all the oil. At the last moment Sim had one more idea, and succeeded in getting into the agreement a clause whereby Pitkin and associates, in the event of their failure to strike oil, would buy the ten-acre property for five hundred dollars an acre.

IV

MURDER will out, as the proverb says. Almost anything will out in a small town, and oil will out about as promptly as anything else.

When Arthur J. Pitkin returned to his combination office and dwelling, he found a small crowd gathered in front of his door. They followed him in—old Henry Cole, Charley Dibble, the young Mr. Walker, who had presided at the Commercial Club; Harvey Bemis, from the People's Store, and half a dozen others. Cole came to the point at once.

"We want to know what there is to this story that oil has been found on Sim Wiley's stump bottom," he declared.

"Mr. Wiley and I discovered oil seepage," Pitkin told him.

They looked at one another, coughed behind their hands, shuffled their feet, and fingered their hats. Pitkin did not ask them to sit down. Finally Cole spoke again.

"Well, Mr. Pitkin, this is big news. I guess that I speak for the rest of us here in saying that if there's going to be an oil well in this neighborhood, we all want to be in on it, on any terms that are fair."

Pitkin smiled a bit at that. He motioned them to seats, stepped to the door, locked it, and brought forth his box of twenty-cent cigars.

"Here is all there is to this, gentlemen—Mr. Wiley and I discovered oil seepage on his place this morning. We have decided to drill a well, and I am to put up the money, with any associates whom I care to take in with me. If oil is discovered, Mr. Wiley is to get every fourth barrel for his share. If oil is not discovered, and the project is abandoned, I agree to pay Mr. Wiley five hundred dollars an acre for his land. The project will take about fifty thousand dollars—I mean, the average well costs that much before oil is struck—and if any of you want a share, up to one-half of the total, I am willing to let you in. Is it clear so far?"

They nodded. It was. If anybody wondered about security for his money, his fears were dissipated by what Pitkin said next.

"I propose to handle this by organizing the Berrydale Development Company, with a capital of fifty thousand dollars. I have deposited twenty-five thousand dollars in the bank for my half of it, and each of you may deposit as much as he pleases, except that the total must not exceed twenty-five thousand dollars. Mr. Cousens, at the bank, will give each of you a receipt for his money, this to be exchanged for stock when

the incorporation of the company has been completed."

"Who's going to run it?" asked Henry Cole.

The others nodded. This was important.

"The papers provide that the management of the project shall be in the hands of Mr. Wiley, Mr. Cousens, and myself. Is that satisfactory to you all?"

They nodded. It was. With two local men on a board of three, the town ought to get a square deal. By noon of the next day Mr. Cousens, at the bank, had taken in twenty-five thousand dollars in hard cash, and the books of the Berrydale Development Company were closed. Pitkin took a trip to the city to talk to well drillers.

Berrydale, of course, seethed with excitement. The seepage in Sim Wiley's stump lot was duly inspected by pretty nearly the entire population. Sim himself stood guard, most of the time, as if to prevent any one stealing oil, and his stump puller hung in the air, suspended between stumps.

In due course there arrived much machinery, some heavy lumber, and some men who chewed tobacco, wore blue flannel shirts, and were undoubtedly expert at drilling. A great derrick rose, as in the pictures of oil fields familiar to moving picture patrons, and a walking beam began its persistent up and down performance. This continued so steadily that the average citizen, viewing it, was convinced that such a rig might be depended upon, if necessary, to drill clear through to China in its relentless search for oil.

Of course, here and there were scoffers—as, for example, one Billy Dobson, janitor at the bank, who asserted that the rig didn't look like an oil rig to him. He had seen a lot of oil rigs, he said, during a visit to a daughter who had married an Oklahoma operator.

For the most part, however, the performance going on in Sim Wiley's stump lot gave complete satisfaction. The experts who wore blue flannel shirts and chewed tobacco were a decent enough lot. They were very chary of information, however, refusing to let anybody get inside the fence which had been built around the works, and positively declining to make any estimates as to when oil would be struck, or as to how big a well it would prove to be.

Finally there came a day when there was a definite development, when something was struck.

That something was water—a big head of water that spouted out of the hole to the top of the derrick. When this happened, the men with blue flannel shirts were seen to get very busy indeed, being apparently engaged in drawing from the casing the drill which had bored the hole. Then they hitched an elbow of pipe to the top of the well casing, and attached to this several lengths of pipe, so as to throw the water into a concrete reservoir which had been built a short distance from the well.

All of this, as explained by Henry Cole and Charley Dibble and the others, who had been wising up on such things, meant simply that they were getting ready to remove the water, with a view to further boring for oil. They were a little vague about details, but their cocksureness passed for knowledge with the crowd.

The men with blue flannel shirts called it a day, and everybody went home. Next day there seemed to be nothing much doing at the well, and the next day the same. The drillers seemed to have left town.

It occurred to somebody to make inquiry from Arthur J. Pitkin, but Pitkin's door was locked. Mr. Cousens, at the bank, didn't know anything about it, and Sim Wiley, in spite of the fact that he was supposed to be one of the three managers, was clearly up in the air.

Saturday passed, and Sunday. On Monday morning it was seen that Pitkin's shade was up, and that he himself was sitting inside, calm as you please, at his old-fashioned desk, smoking one of his twenty-cent cigars.

Old Henry Cole and Charley Dibble called on him. He was reading a newspaper when they entered, and did not look up for a moment. Then, when he saw that he had visitors, he reached for the cigar box; but Cole and Dibble had not come for a smoke. They waved away his offer and faced him, grim-visaged and earnest.

"We would like to know, Mr. Pitkin, whether everything is all right at the well," said Henry Cole.

"Oh, quite," said Pitkin.

"Well, if that's so, then what's the idea in the men going away, and—"

"And me going away."

Pitkin smiled, but there was no warmth in his smile. It was the sort of smile that a banker uses in greeting a borrower before advising him that a further extension of his loan will not be allowed.

"You men are entitled to know the truth, of course. I suggest that you pass the word around to all those who have invested their money in the project we jointly undertook, advising them that there will be a meeting in this room at eight o'clock to-night."

Arthur J. Pitkin resumed the reading of his newspaper, and Henry Cole and Charley Dibble departed. They would have preferred to know the truth, however unpleasant, right then and there, but Pitkin's manner forbade further questions.

V

THEY were all present at eight o'clock—Henry Cole, Charley Dibble, young Walker, the president of the Commercial Club, Billy Dobson, Mr. Cousens of the bank, Sim Wiley, and an assortment of citizens who had put their money into this thing. They wanted to know the truth. They had very grave doubts about this sleek Arthur J. Pitkin, and they had arranged with the night marshal to take his post at the rear of the building, while a deputy sheriff lounged carelessly on the sidewalk in front.

"Before I tell you how we stand in this matter," said Pitkin, "I want to remind you that I was vouched for by Mr. Cousens when I first came to Berrydale, and that I was unanimously elected to membership in the Commercial Club. I will also remind you that when I talked to the club for a few minutes, my subject was confidence. I remarked that confidence was the basis of credit, the bulwark of business. I might have said then what I propose to say now—that lack of confidence, especially as shown in small communities, has killed many worthy projects, while overconfidence has resulted in the loss of savings by persons who could ill afford such loss.

"The Consolidated Yeast Products Company came to Berrydale, proposing to establish an industry which would give employment to many persons, and would help the business of your merchants. You were suspicious, rather than confident, in your dealings with the emissaries of the company. You allowed the owner of a piece of stump land to ask a price ten times as high as the most liberal estimate of its worth for a manufacturing site. And then, a few weeks later, the same people turned over their savings to a highly speculative project, joining up in this venture with a man who was an entire stranger to them. And now—"

But he got no further. The big voice of old Henry Cole boomed a question that was on everybody's lips:

"That's all right, but we didn't come here to hear a speech. What we want to know is, where's the oil?"

"There isn't any oil. There never was any oil."

Instantly the place was in an uproar. Everybody shouted at once, and everybody shook his fist at the speaker—that is, everybody but Mr. Cousens, of the bank. Mr. Cousens climbed upon the desk and demanded that they should hear what Pitkin had to say. When it was quiet enough, Pitkin proceeded, unruffled, calm, deliberate.

"The first few days of my stay in your community were devoted to a study of the neighborhood. I found that you were a decent, home-loving people, occupied for the most part in the raising of small fruits—the kind of folks that any industry would be glad to welcome as employees and stockholders. Mr. Wiley's stump land lay excellently for our purpose, between two railroad tracks, and my problem was to figure some way to acquire it at a reasonable price. With no definite plan in mind, but knowing from what I had been told about him that it would be impossible to trade with him openly and frankly, as I would have preferred, I called upon him. The discovery of a trifle of oil seepage, and the subsequent excitement, gave me the answer to my problem, and you know the rest."

"We don't know the rest," said Henry Cole; "and particularly we don't know what's happened to our money!"

"All right—I'll tell you. The Consolidated Yeast Products Company intends to establish a yeast plant on the property of Mr. Wiley. Mr. Wiley will recall that he made me agree to pay him five hundred dollars an acre for his land in case of failure to discover oil. What we discovered, instead of oil, was artesian water of a purity that makes it satisfactory for use in the manufacture of yeast. I had to assure myself on this point before I could buy the land from Mr. Wiley. The analysis—made last week, while you thought that I had run away from you—established the fitness of the water for our project. As for your money, it is safe in Mr. Cousens's bank. Each of you may have it back, with interest; or, if you prefer, I am authorized by the company to sell you stock at par, which is about twenty points below the market

price. We will do this for the sake of acquiring the good will of local people; and I personally, as resident manager, shall be glad to have my friends and neighbors interested in Berrydale's new industry."

"All right, Mr. Pitkin!" said Henry Cole. "I'll buy yeast stock with my money; but there's just one thing I'd like to know, and that is, if there was oil showing, why didn't your well strike oil?"

Pitkin smiled. This time there was warmth in his smile.

"There are three things that this community has had a chance to learn from our recent experience. The first is the value of mutual confidence and fair dealing. The second is that pure water is necessary in the manufacture of yeast. The third is that about the best evidence that there is no oil to be discovered on a property is the fact that oil seepage is noted. If there is oil at the surface, it indicates that the formation is such as to have prevented oil formation below the surface."

A Big Day

THE STRANGE ADVENTURES OF A FLIVVER THAT WAS WORTH
AT LEAST A MILLION DOLLARS

By William Slavens McNutt

HERBERT HATHAWAY marched into the bank, stepped up to the paying teller's window, and asked the amount of his balance.

"Two hundred and one dollars and fifty-eight cents," the teller informed him.

Herbert wrote out a check for two hundred and one dollars and fifty-eight cents, and passed it in.

"Closing out your account?" the teller inquired.

"I am," Herbert said emphatically. "So help me, I'll never have another one as long as I live!"

He went from the bank to the Brevoort Hotel and called on Bob Folwell, a young sculptor, who had just returned to New York after two years in Europe.

"Still looking for a studio?" Herbert asked.

"Yes."

"You can have mine."

Folwell was surprised.

"You moving?" he asked.

"You bet your life I'm moving!" Herbert replied savagely.

"What's the matter?"

"Everything," Herbert said bitterly. "Oh, not with the studio. It's all right. The trouble is with me."

"What's happened?"

"Nothing—that's the trouble. Nothing ever happens to me."

"What do you mean?"

"Just what I said. I live and breathe and sleep, and nothing happens. Might as well be a vegetable. The trouble with me is that my system's wrong."

"Run down?"

"I don't mean that kind of system. I mean my system for getting ahead in the world—or, rather, for standing absolutely still in the world."

"Oh, you have a system!"

"No—I had one," Herbert corrected him. "I had one until this morning. This morning I quit it."

"Go wrong on you?"

"It was wholly wrong from the beginning," Herbert said gloomily. "If I hadn't been such a persistent damn fool, I'd have chucked it years ago. You may possibly have noticed, Bob, that I lead a peculiarly regular life."

"I know that you're not famous for hitting the high spots."

"No! That's my system—not to hit the high spots. Believe me, I haven't hit them. The trouble is that I not only don't hit them in dissipation, but I don't hit them