

Scorching a Scotchman

“Canny” Campbell and his Confidence Game

A century ago, Scotchmen were the “merchant princes” of Richmond, Virginia. The race is of hospitable fame, and right royally was the national reputation maintained by the Richmond representatives of that ancient day. But a generation ago, the glory of the great Scotch merchants had departed, with a few exceptions. It may here be remarked that the kindly Scottish heart not only [beat to the] “waring o’ the tartan,” but to the sound of the same tongue as well. Scotchmen never lose their clannish love for a “brither Scot,” whatever else may be lost to them, no matter where he may be found.

Among the genial-hearted Scotchmen in Richmond, say thirty years ago, was John Barr, a wealthy and much-esteemed citizen, who was largely interested in the coal property, and carried on an extensive business at that time. He was a widower with two charming and accomplished daughters, who presided at his hospitable mansion.

It will not do to omit mention of “Our House,” – “public,” as Meg Dodds would term it, famous for its fine liquors and general good cheer, —located on 13th street, and under the charge of Charlie Thompson. Now in those days at least, a hot whiskey punch was considered the natural beverage, in moderation, for a full-blooded Scotchman. For that matter, this is not altogether obsolete, even now. And as Scotchman Barr owned the building where Charlie Thompson dispensed his liquids and savory solids, it was but natural that “Our House” should be the main fountain at which the constitutional Scotch thirst should be slaked, when the stomach struck the right hour, say about 11 o’clock A.M., for the first devotions. And so, in a calm, orderly, uniform way, the days and nights of John Barr moved on, without even a ripple of unusual things, until one eventful day which came bigger with events to the unsuspecting coal merchant than often came down upon that moral and peaceable city. It began without a cloud, but there was much hidden thunder in that sky.

One day, as good John Barr was sipping his punch, in the handsome room where “Our House” beverages were dispensed and partaken, his quick ear caught the pleasant sound of the Scotch tongue, calling for the national concoction at the bar. The party, upon whom the eyes of Mr. Barr were instantly turned, was a large, imposing gentleman of about sixty years. He was evidently a stranger, no common person, and a Scotchman, —the last the best of all. He took his drink like a gentleman, paid for it like a gentleman, bowed like a gentleman, and retired like a gentleman.

The next day, at about the same hour, this now distinguished stranger again appeared at “Our House,” took his tod, paid, bowed, and went his way. Promptly on the third day came the mysterious but most interesting gentleman: but he was in less haste than before, and rested himself upon a chair. That John Barr should be eager to open a chat with this unknown brother Scot; that he succeeded in this; and that they should take “a little some thing” jointly and severally, —was just inevitable. To say that the stranger proved to be a very pleasant man would be unjust to the subject. He was simply fascinating. Evidently of much cultivation, he had also

traveled extensively in many parts of the world, and had that air of refinement and dignity which indicated habitual association with educated society. And so, the ice once broken, there followed daily chats between the two Scotsmen, that soon partook of intimacy; and it naturally and easily ripened into this in a short time. This charming human addition to the social life of honest and unsophisticated John Barr was named Campbell, —of the pure blood of that famous stock, which is the pride of every true Scotchman. His business was that of a tobacco dealer; for the purchase of which valuable vegetable he was now in Richmond, in the interest of the large New York house, of which he was the principal. He expected to spend an indefinite time in Richmond, which gave much satisfaction to Mr. Barr. And so, without effort or study (apparently), the two soon became close friends. In a short time, Campbell was a frequent and familiar loungee in the office of Barr: and finally, a visitor at his house, —where many an hour of genial comfort was passed by the twain.

The close friendship which we thus see established was cemented even more strongly, by an [event] which occurred, say some three months after their acquaintance. Now, although John Barr was one of the most quiet and amiable of men, yet he had nerves and was sensitive. As Campbell was taking his ease in Barr's office one day, conversation ensued which will explain a certain important matter,

“What's the trouble, John? You are fidgety, man. Anything gone wrong?”

“Wrong! why, I was to have received drafts this morning, with which I was to pay notes, and now I've got to go out to borrow money; and I hate to borrow.”

“Pshaw! What's the use of fretting about that?”

“Fretting!” exclaimed John, now finding vent for his irate steam. “Fretting! If you hated to borrow money as I do, you would know, sir, what's the use of fretting.” And the coal merchant hopped to and fro, briskly.

“Poh! nonsense [man]. How much will you have to borrow?”

“Five thousand dollars, I suppose.”

“Is that all?”

“All!” And the excited man paused in surprise, at such a question.

“Yes; because I can let you have five thousand dollars – or fifteen thousand dollars, for that matter – if you want it.”

Now, our estimable friend of the black diamond dealer neither considered nor cared whether his dear friend Campbell had five dollars or five thousand. In that kindly heart no selfish thoughts had intruded. The companionship had given him new and grateful pleasure, and he was satisfied with that. If, then, Campbell came very near to his bosom as a friend, how would he seem, when he had not only five thousand but fifteen thousand to loan to his friend in need? The reader will

readily see how Campbell advanced in Barr's regard, when he gave his check for five thousand dollars, on the bank of Virginia, with the assurance that he was in no haste to have the sum returned, as he was not buying very heavily just then. The money was repaid the next day; but the generous aid was faithfully remembered.

And in this intimate way matters progressed. Campbell attended all the great sales at the tobacco warehouses, bid on very large lots; was often seen, hurrying from one warehouse to another with leaf samples under his arm, and came to be considered as a very heavy dealer. In after months, however, although all recollected his bidding cautiously, nobody remembered his buying a single pound.

By and by, Campbell's transactions required large sums of money. Sometimes his drafts failed to come in time; but the ample deposits of Barr were all at his service, and occasionally used. Campbell always had money to loan when Barr chanced to require it, and he was exact in paying what he borrowed. This state of things continued about a year. One morning, Campbell failed to visit Barr's counting room. There was nothing surprising in this, only it broke out a great deal of Barr's daily necessities. Campbell had become a part of his very existence.

And so Barr fretted and fidgeted, and finally went home in much solitude. All the next day there was no Campbell. As the shades of evening fell, Barr [dispatched] a note by a servant, addressed to Campbell at his boarding-house, tendering any assistance in his power, in case he was confined by sickness. Of course Campbell must be sick. But judge of his emotions if you can, when word was brought that Campbell had taken his luggage, and left for parts unknown, two days before! And Campbell at that moment, had *twenty-two thousand dollars* of Barr's money in his possession. If there ever was a "pretty kettle of fish," did not John Barr have it, when that horrid news froze his very blood, metaphorically speaking?

It would be useless to dwell upon the condition of poor Barr's lacerated soul. In fact, he didn't pause long over it himself. Twenty-two thousand dollars was a sufficient sum to put all sentimentalism to flight. Inquiries were at once set on foot, but neither policemen nor railroad officials, had seen him moving towards distant parts. Finally Barr started northward after his treacherous and fugitive friend or enemy. At Washington, not the least clue of Campbell could be found. In Baltimore, it was equally obscure; but taking the suggestion that pursuit southward would now be useless, Barr concluded to push on. Philadelphia could give no aid, and he started for New York, about hopeless of success, and with a heart of lead.

Arrived in New York, the afflicted gentleman proceeded at once to the office of the famous "Old Hayes," then at the head of the police of that city. Inquiries were made of all officers who might know of such a man's arrival as Barr was hunting, but not a word of hope could they give. Old Hayes finally advised that inquiry should be made of a certain firm of professional detectives. He said that sort of business was just in their line, and they would be much more likely to know anything that could be learned of the case than the regular police force would. It was night. Poor John Barr had been racked with anxiety, and without rest or sleep, for two days and nights. Not one ray of hope had come to cheer him. That he should seek this firm of detectives, rather from desperation than a belief that any good may come of it, may well be believed.

Reaching the office he sought a short, square built man, about forty years of age was found there; and the moment he heard Barr's inquiry he answered, —

“All right, sir. Campbell arrived here two days ago. He has been absent for a long time; and as it was full time for him to finish any job on hand, we have been on the lookout for him for two or three weeks. The moment he arrived we put a man on him. He [stayed] at a boarding-house one day, and yesterday moved to another. He is there now.”

A flood of great joy made Barr speechless. Recovering, he proposed to march at once upon the enemy, and capture him.

“Softly, Mr. Barr,” said the detective. “Campbell is sharp, and no fool to be caught so easy as that. If you go now, we will lose him, sure. You just keep cool, and let us work it out. We know our man.”

At this John Barr rebelled. He couldn't see why an arrest should not be made [instantly]. He didn't want Campbell now so much as he did once; but he wanted the money. Finally, after expostulation, the sensible adviser said, —

“Mr. Barr, you are nervous and worn out. You want sleep. Take my advise. Go to a hotel; eat a good supper; and get a good night's sleep; and come down here about nine o'clock, and then we will do something. Campbell must be let alone, to-night, at least.”

And Barr, per force, followed this advice, —omitting no part of it, as he himself declared. After a sound sleep, he arose a new man; full of confidence that his money was within his reach.

Promptly at nine o'clock Barr was at the office of his detective friend, not in the least rebellious, but ready to be submissive to good counsel. He sat uneasily, and he winced — how could he help it — when Mr. Barry — calm and cool detective Barry — in reply to a strong hint that it was time to go for Campbell, said, “Don't you fret now, Mr. Barr. You've had enough of that.”

At the end of an hour, Barry took his hat and quietly remarked, “I guess it's about time to start.” His companion was instantly upon his feet. “Let me see” — musing. “About the first place to go to Campbell is a swell-head rascal, and affects Wall street. Let's go to Wall street first, and see what we can find there.” And the two sallied forth.

They entered Wall street, and had not advanced twenty steps from Broadway, when they came plump upon the fugitive, face to face. The moment Campbell discovered Barr, he hastened to seize that worthy person's hand in both his own, and, with the heartiest shake of a rejoicing man, poured out his assurances of unbounded delight at meeting his dear friend once more.

“The fact is,” said the smiling Campbell, “I have been in the greatest worry about my leaving Richmond so suddenly, and without a word to you. I got letters from my house, that compelled me to leave instantly, and I was just on my way to a friend's office to write an apology and explanation of the whole matter. But I am delighted to see you here.”

Poor, guilty John Barr. How he wished he had not come to New York. What a fool he was to leave Richmond. And how mean and ungrateful to have distrusted such a friend. It was all plain enough. Why did he not think that sudden business might have called this noble man away, unexpectedly? He was full of shame and abasement. He blushed and stammered, under his overwhelming sense of wrong and guilt, and was in a mighty pucker, when the calm voice of Barry startled him with fresh alarm.

“Come, gentlemen, let us step in somewhere and take something.”

What should Barr do, in this strait? The detective would certainly expose his shameful distrust of the estimable Campbell and the wicked purpose which had treacherously brought him to New York. In his desperation he tried one or two winks but Barry was unintelligent as a stone. Somehow, Barry did not seem to appreciate the sweet re-union, nor Campbell’s gushing; but moved on to the proposed talking of something, as though he were absorbed in that. And the nervous, trembling, humbled Barr had no help, but to follow. The three were presently seated in a quiet room, alone, whither the landlord took them in a very knowing way. Two of these customers he had seen, and knew, before.

“Well, gentlemen, what will you have?”

Barr ordered whiskey punch – Scotch; but he had no hankering for it, just then. Brandy and water came for the other two. Now the cigars; and then, sip – puff—that. It was wonderful to see the satisfied twinkle in the eye of the detective, and the smiling and courteous ease of Campbell, contrasted with the fidgety anxiety of Barr. What should he do? Every moment he expected the terrible explosion to come. How could he explain his shame of distrust, so as to be forgiven by this dearly cherished and now so greatly and cruelly wronged friend? And out it came, at last, sure enough. When the supply of liquids number two, and cigars were brought in, and the sip and puff were quietly in progress, Barry opened fire.

“Well, Campbell, you understand what we want of you. You have twenty-two thousand dollars of Mr. Barr’s money, and he wants it.”

As this thunderbolt came, Barr felt much like shooting from the room; but the answer of Campbell produced another revulsion and a convulsion in his tumultuous breast. The moment the detective made his speech, in a cold, measured, hard tone, Campbell’s whole manner and mode of speech changed.

“Look here, Barry, I have spent a whole year on this job, and it was a cursed poor one, at best. It is hard, —d—d hard; but I suppose I must do something. I will give Mr. Barr ten thousand dollars, and not a d—d cent more. That won’t leave me enough to pay my expenses hardly.”

John Barr’s eye glared. His Scotch blood was beginning to boil, and his fingers to play. He felt a sudden appetite for his beloved Campbell’s throat. But he had been warned to keep silent and let things take their course; and Barry’s voice recalled him to reason.

“Mr. Barr wants twenty-two thousand dollars,” was all the reply made by Barry.

“He won’t get it, then. Just consider the time it has taken, and the expense.” This was put with a serious air of sound business argument. “I can’t afford to give even ten thousand.”

“It is hard, I know. But you can’t expect to win always, you know. Twenty-two thousand is the figure, and not a dollar less.”

“If you will say fifteen thousand, I suppose I will go that. But it is cussed hard on me.”

“Twenty-two thousand, and now.”

“Then you may whistle for it, and be d—d.” This was said with a dogged air and tone.

“Look here, Campbell, you are no fool. You know you are caught, and if you won’t help yourself out, nobody else will. The case is exactly this. You can fork over the cash. If you won’t you have property that will bring it; but this will take time. Now Mr. Barr don’t want to trouble you. He only wants his money; and that he is sure of. The choice for you is, to pay the cash, and make it up in another job: or go to state prison for years, and have the money taken out of you in another way.”

“D—d hard!” muttered Campbell.

“You must decide. Either pay the money down and go, or I arrest you on the spot. You understand my style, and what I mean. Now decide.”

Campbell swore in a mighty rage, over his hard luck. The loss of so much time, and so much expense, seemed to weigh him down. But he paid John Barr twenty-two thousand dollars; Barr paid the detective five hundred of it; and he returned to Richmond, a richer and a wiser if not a happier man than he had been for twelve months before.

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