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The Financier



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CHAPTER I

The Philadelphia, into which Frank Algernon Cowperwood was born, was a city of two hundred and fifty thousand and more. It was set with handsome parks, notable buildings, and crowded with historic memories. Many of the things that we and he knew later were not then in existence—the telegraph, telephone, express company, ocean steamer, city delivery of mails. There were no postage stamps or registered letters. The streetcar had not arrived. In its place were hosts of omnibuses, and, for longer travel, the slowly developing railroad system, still largely connected by canals.

Cowperwood's father was a bank clerk at the time of Frank's birth, but ten years later, when the boy was already beginning to turn a very sensible, vigorous eye on the world, Mr. Henry Worthington Cowperwood, because of the death of the bank's president and the consequent moving ahead of the other officers, fell heir to the place vacated by the promoted teller, at the, to him, munificent salary of thirty-five hundred dollars a year. At once he decided, as he told his wife joyously, to remove his family from 21 Buttonwood Street to 124 New Market Street, a much better neighborhood, where there was a nice brick house of three stories in height as opposed to their present two-storied domicile. There was the probability that someday they would come into something even better, but for the present, this was sufficient. He was exceedingly grateful.

Henry Worthington Cowperwood was a man who believed only what he saw and was content to be what he was—a banker, or a prospective one. He was at this time a significant figure—tall, lean, inquisitorial, clerkly—with nice, smooth, closely-cropped side whiskers coming to almost the lower lobes of his ears. His upper lip was smooth and curiously long, and he had a long, straight nose and a chin that tended to be pointed. His eyebrows were bushy, emphasizing vague, grayish-green eyes, and his hair was short and smooth and nicely parted. He wore a frock coat always—it was quite the thing in financial circles in those days—and a high hat. And he kept his hands and nails immaculately clean. His manner might have been called severe, though really it was more cultivated than austere.

Being ambitious to get ahead socially and financially, he was very careful of whom or with whom he talked. He was as much afraid of expressing a rabid or unpopular political or social opinion as he was of being seen with an evil character, though he had really no opinion of great political significance to express. He was neither anti- nor pro-slavery, though the air was stormy with abolition sentiment and its opposition. He believed sincerely that vast fortunes were to be made out of railroads if one only had the capital and that curious thing, a magnetic personality—the ability to win the confidence of others. He was sure that Andrew Jackson was all wrong in his opposition to Nicholas Biddle and the United States Bank, one of the great issues of the day; and he was worried, as he might well be, by the perfect storm of wildcat money, which was floating about, and which was constantly coming to his bank—discounted, of course, and handed out again to anxious borrowers at a profit.

His bank was the Third National of Philadelphia, located in that center of all Philadelphia and indeed, at that time, of practically all national finance—Third Street—and its owners conducted a brokerage business as a sideline. There

was a perfect plague of State banks, great and small, in those days, issuing notes practically without regulation upon insecure and unknown assets and failing and suspending with astonishing rapidity; and a knowledge of all these was an important requirement of Mr. Cowperwood's position. As a result, he had become the soul of caution. Unfortunately, for him, he lacked in a great measure the two things that are necessary for distinction in any field—magnetism and vision. He was not destined to be a great financier, though he was marked out to be a moderately successful one.

Mrs. Cowperwood was of a religious temperament—a small woman, with light-brown hair and clear, brown eyes, who had been very attractive in her day, but had become rather prim and matter-of-fact, and inclined to take very seriously the maternal care of her three sons and one daughter. The former, captained by Frank, the eldest, were a source of considerable annoyance to her, for they were forever making expeditions to different parts of the city, getting in with bad boys, probably, and seeing and hearing things they should neither see nor hear.

Frank Cowperwood, even at ten, was a natural-born leader. At the day school he attended, and later at the Central High School, he was looked upon as one whose common sense could unquestionably be trusted in all cases. He was a sturdy youth, courageous and defiant. From the very start of his life, he wanted to know about economics and politics. He cared nothing for books. He was a clean, stinky, shapely boy, with a bright, clean-cut, incisive face; large, clear, gray eyes; a wide forehead; short, bristly, dark-brown hair.

He had an incisive, quick-motivated, self-sufficient manner, and was forever asking questions with a keen desire for an intelligent reply. He never had an ache or pain, ate his food with gusto, and ruled his brothers with a rod of iron. "Come on, Joe!" "Hurry, Ed!" These commands were issued in no rough but always a sure way, and Joe and Ed came. They

looked up to Frank from the first as a master, and what he had to say was listened to eagerly.

He was forever pondering, pondering—one fact astonishing him quite as much as another—for he could not figure out how this thing he had come into—this life—was organized. How did all these people get into the world? What were they doing here? Who started things, anyhow? His mother told him the story of Adam and Eve, but he didn't believe it. There was a fish market not so very far from his home, and there, on his way to see his father at the bank, or conducting his brothers on after-school expeditions, he liked to look at a certain tank in front of one store where were kept odd specimens of sea life brought in by the Delaware Bay fishermen. He saw once there a sea horse—just a queer little sea animal that looked somewhat like a horse—and another time he saw an electric eel, which Benjamin Franklin's discovery had explained. One day, he saw a squid and a lobster put in the tank, and in connection with them was witness to a tragedy, which stayed with him all his life and cleared things up considerably intellectually.

The lobster, it appeared from the talk of the idle bystanders, was offered no food, as the squid was considered his rightful prey. He lay at the bottom of the clear glass tank on the yellow sand, apparently seeing nothing—you could not tell, in which way his beady, black buttons of eyes were looking—but apparently, they were never off the body of the squid. The latter, pale and waxy in texture, looking very much like pork fat or jade, moved about in torpedo fashion; but his movements were apparently never out of the eyes of his enemy, for by degrees small portions of his body began to disappear, snapped off by the relentless claws of his pursuer. The lobster would leap like a catapult to where the squid was apparently idly dreaming, and the squid, very alert, would dart away, shooting out at the same time a cloud

of ink, behind which it would disappear. It was not always completely successful, however. Small portions of its body or its tail were frequently left in the claws of the monster below. Fascinated by the drama, young Cowperwood came daily to watch.

One morning, he stood in front of the tank, his nose almost pressed to the glass. Only a portion of the squid remained, and his ink bag was emptier than ever. In the corner of the tank sat the lobster, poised apparently for action.

The boy stayed as long as he could, the bitter struggle fascinating him. Now, maybe, or in an hour or a day, the squid might die, slain by the lobster, and the lobster would eat him. He looked again at the greenish-copperish engine of destruction in the corner and wondered when this would be. Tonight, maybe. He would come back tonight.

He returned that night, and lo! The expected had happened. There was a little crowd around the tank. The lobster was in the corner. Before him, was the squid cut in two and partially devoured.

"He got him at last," observed one bystander. "I was standing right here an hour ago, and up he leaped and grabbed him. The squid was too tired. He wasn't quick enough. He did back up, but that lobster he calculated on his doing that. He's been figuring on his movements for a long time now. He got him today."

Frank only stared. Too bad he had missed this. The least touch of sorrow for the squid came to him, as he stared at it slain. Then he gazed at the victor.

"That's the way it has to be, I guess," he commented to himself. "That squid wasn't quick enough." He figured it out.

"The squid couldn't kill the lobster—he had no weapon. The lobster could kill the squid—he was heavily armed. There was nothing for the squid to feed on; the lobster had the squid as prey. What was the result to be? What else could it be? He

didn't have a chance," he concluded finally, as he trotted on homeward.

The incident made a great impression on him. It answered in a rough way that riddle, which had been annoying him so much in the past, "How is life organized?" Things lived on each other—that was it. Lobsters lived on squids and other things. What lived on lobsters? Men, of course! Sure, that was it! And what lived on men? he asked himself. Was it other men? Wild animals lived on men. And there were Indians and cannibals. And some men were killed by storms and accidents. He wasn't so sure about men living on men; but men did kill each other. How about wars and street fights and mobs? He had seen a mob once. It attacked the Public Ledger building, as he was coming home from school. His father had explained why. It was about the slaves. That was it! Sure, men lived on men. Look at the slaves. They were men. That's what all this excitement was about these days. Men killing other men—black men.

He went on home quite pleased with himself at his solution.

"Mother!" he exclaimed, as he entered the house, "he finally got him!"

"Got who? What got what?" she inquired in amazement. "Go wash your hands."

"Why, that lobster got that squid I was telling you and pa about the other day."

"Well, that's too bad. What makes you take any interest in such things? Run, wash your hands."

"Well, you don't often see anything like that. I never did." He went out in the backyard, where there was a hydrant and a post with a little table on it, and on that a shining tin-pan and a bucket of water. Here he washed his face and hands.

"Say, papa," he said to his father, later, "you know that squid?"

“Yes.”

“Well, he’s dead. The lobster got him.”

His father continued reading. “Well, that’s too bad,” he said, indifferently.

But for days and weeks Frank thought of this and of the life he was tossed into, for he was already pondering on what he should be in this world, and how he should get along. From seeing his father count money, he was sure that he would like banking; and Third Street, where his father’s office was, seemed to him the cleanest, most fascinating street in the world.

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