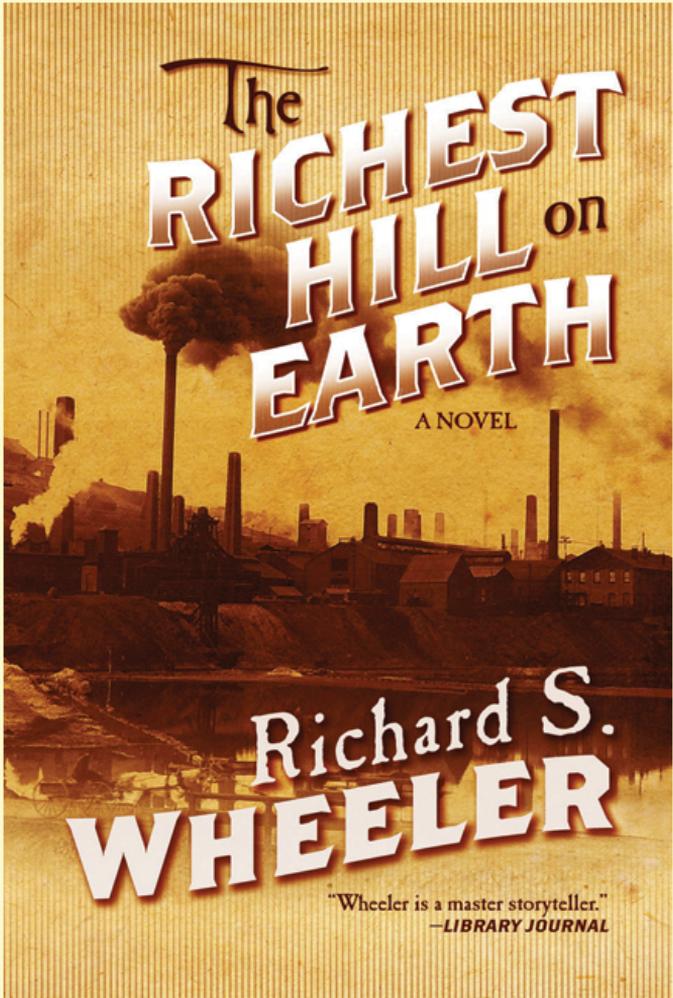


READ IT FIRST



This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations,
and events portrayed in this novel are either products of
the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

THE RICHEST HILL ON EARTH

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{ O N E }

John Fellowes Hall fretted about his middle name. He had changed it from Frank. He couldn't imagine why his parents had inflicted that loutish name on him. Frank has such a pedestrian aura about it, but that had eluded them. Fellowes had just the right tone for a person of his stature, so he had arbitrarily switched it. What's more, it was sonorous, unlike a string of one-syllable names. Anyone of any sensitivity knew that there should be different numbers of syllables in one's given name and surname.

He doubted that his new employer would fathom any of it. The man was a bumpkin in a silk hat. John Fellowes Hall had suffered a string of miserable employers who hadn't the faintest idea of his gifts. Maybe this time things would be better, but he doubted it.

The narrow gauge train from Helena slowed as it entered the flat below Butte, and slowly ground to a halt, hissing steam and

belching cinders. Hall could see from his grimy window that the Western city was just as ugly as it was proclaimed to be, and maybe worse, but that didn't faze him. Butte was the place to get rich. It wasn't money that Hall was after, though he had bargained for as much as his new employer could manage. It was reputation. Here was the place for a distinguished newspaper editor to turn himself into a legend.

On this cold and windy spring day of 1892, the smoke pouring from Butte's mine boilers and mills scraped downward, catching the city in haze. Far up, on the naked crest of the naked slope, stood a forest of headframes and rude sheds, which seemed to catch the eye because they didn't belong there, and insulted the dark grandeur of the forested mountains stretching north and east. The russet hill was burdened with a cancerous mélange of buildings, cramped into gulches, teetering on slopes, while Butte, as far as his eye could see through the jaundiced smoke, seemed to seethe.

Well, he had been warned. The train, down from Helena, squealed and sighed, while passengers collected their Gladstones and duffel, and stepped down to the gravel of the station yard. There would be a trunk on the express car, but he would get that later at the depot. He had everything he needed in his pebbled leather overnighter.

The sulphurous smoke struck him and irritated his eyes. Was there no escape from it in this mountain vastness? He located a hack, operated by a skinny gent with a full beard, and engaged the man with a wave of his hand.

"You got any more luggage?" the cabby asked in a ruined voice.

"Trunk I can leave in the express office."

"Moving here, eh?"

Hall was offended by the man's familiarity, and didn't reply.

"I can carry the trunk if you want."

"I will send for it when I need it."

“You headed for the company?” the driver asked.

That secretly pleased Hall, but he would not confess it. That would be the headquarters of the Anaconda Copper Mining Company. The cabby had taken him for an executive, as well he should. Hall wore a fine three-piece gray broadcloth suit, a fine polka-dot cravat, a lean shirt with a starched white collar, and polished high-top shoes.

“Call me Fat Jack,” the cabby said. “Where to?”

Hall hated to disillusion the man. “I’ll be stopping temporarily at the *Butte Mineral*,” he said. “Of course, before going up the hill.”

Fat Jack eyed the editor, and nodded. The man was anything but fat, just as Hall was anything but a copper executive, even if he looked the part. The editor extracted a dainty handkerchief and mopped his face. The harsh wind had already deposited a layer of soot on it, which Hall noted on the clean white folds of his handkerchief. Ah, well, he thought. To live is to suffer.

“You seeing Clark?” Fat Jack asked, as he steered his lumbering dray north, up mud-soaked thoroughfares.

“Clark?”

“Himself.”

The cabby was referring to William Andrews Clark, owner of the *Mineral* and other rags, owner of many of those mines and reduction works up the hill, owner of the street railway, owner of a bank, owner of surrounding forests, owner of thousands of mortal souls, and about to be the owner of John Fellowes Hall.

“I am planning to interview him, yes.”

“I think he’ll do the interviewing,” Fat Jack said, slapping the lines over the croup of the dray to hasten him uphill.

Hall considered the hack man insolent and resolved not to leave a tip.

In a rude part of town below the commercial center, Fat Jack reined the dray to a halt. This appeared to be newspaper row, with the *Butte Mineral* sandwiched between some others. There was no

sign of prosperity emanating from the weary storefront. At least cobblestones paved this street; others appeared to be mire.

“Two bits,” Fat Jack said. “Want me to stay?”

That was extortion, so Hall simply handed the man a quarter and smiled icily. He lifted his knobby bag and eased to the grimy pavement. Fat Jack eyed the quarter, stared hard, and slapped the dray forward. Hall eyed the *Mineral* with vast distaste. No one had washed its windows. There was no brass on the door. The name had been stenciled in black on the windows. There should have been a gilded sign above. The street had not been swept and was deep in dung. A wave of disdain swept the editor. What sort of rag was this?

He would make short work of it and seek employment elsewhere. He smoothed his three-piece gray broadcloth suit, adjusted his cravat, eyed his hightops, and then pushed his way through the creaking door, to the sound of a bell.

The familiar smell of hot lead, and the bitter smell of ink, caught his nostrils. He heard the clatter of Linotypes. That was good. The new machines made quick work of typesetting and printing. No one showed up at the counter, so he hunted for a bell to clang, but found none. The interior was as grimy as the exterior, and he hesitated to touch any ink-sprayed surface, knowing his hand would be smeared. These things were not good omens.

At last a printer emerged and eyed Hall.

“You’re the man,” he said.

“John Fellowes Hall.”

“You’ll want to talk to Mr. Clark. The old man’s not here. He’s up at his bank.”

“May I see my office?”

“We haven’t got them. But Louis the Louse could steal one.”

“Never mind. I’ll just look around.”

The printer eyed him. “Without a smock?”

Everything in a print shop stained clothing black.

“I’ll interview Clark first,” Hall said. “Steer me.”

“Two blocks uphill, and left.”

“Will this bag be safe?”

“For ten minutes. The next bandits are due at four.”

Hall intended to fire the man.

He settled his knobby black bag in an obscure corner and headed into the cold smoke. The spring weather did nothing to improve the looks of Butte. He might have enjoyed the stroll but for the foul wind, which drove ash into him as he toiled upslope. Butte seemed to be a thriving town, with solid brick commercial buildings everywhere, a streetcar system, and electric wires strung in a crazy quilt pattern. He wondered how Amber would react to it, not that it mattered.

He found the bank, W. A. Clark and Bro., readily enough. This enterprise at least was gaudily announced with gilded letters across its brick front. He pulled open the polished brass door, eyed the lobby, decided that Clark would be upstairs, ascended stairs of creaking imported oak, and found himself at a reception desk, with a comely lady in charge. She had a typing machine before her.

“John Fellowes Hall to see Mr. Clark. He’s expecting me.”

“Oh, the newsman.”

“Editor.”

She retreated to a corner office, vanished, and then reappeared. “He will see you in a little while,” she said. “Do have a seat.”

Which was a polished walnut bench resembling a pew, and probably was. The worshipers of this god required pews.

But Clark surprised him. Moments later the dapper man boiled out of his lair, greeted Hall effusively, shepherded the editor into the sanctum, and settled Hall in a quilted leather chair.

“Ah, so it’s you, Hall. I’ve been awaiting this moment with more anticipation than buying a new smelter.”

John Fellowes Hall had never been compared to a smelter, and didn’t quite know how to respond, but his wit saved him.

“Ah, yes, I get the bullion out of the ore,” he said.

“Well, the *Mineral*’s not going to be doing that. I’ve hired you to cut off the tentacles of the octopus. You will hack away, one by one, without remorse, and without surcease. You will win the allegiance of the people of Butte and you will support the Democrat Party and you will discreetly remind the public of who it is who wants to keep Montana independent, free, fair, and honest. We will elect Democrats this November and they will make me senator.”

“It sounds like a job made in heaven.”

“There is divine purpose in it,” Clark said. “We must rescue Montana from the octopus. We must not allow a single corporation to own the government, own the governor, own the legislators, own the regulators, own the tax collectors. I’m determined to fight to the last, so that the people of this state are free. I will be honored to become a senator.”

Clark was so earnest it surprised Hall. Did the little tycoon actually believe all that?

“I can see you doubt me,” Clark said. He headed for a window. “Up there are a dozen properties of the Anaconda Company. The best mines, reduction works, mills, and a little railroad too. Over in Anaconda is the most advanced smelter in the world. That’s Marcus Daly’s empire. That’s his town. He built it. He erected his smelter, platted the streets, started the houses, built his fancy hotel. Now he wants to put the state capital in his backyard. He wants to own the government, just like he owns most of that hill up there, owns his own city, owns half the forests in Montana, owns a railroad, owns a horse racing stable, and owns every Irishman in Butte. He wants Montana’s public buildings, its governor, its legislators, under his thumb. He wants to see them from his office windows. He wants to tell them how to tax and regulate. He wants to own Montana. He cares nothing about the farmers and ranchers and all the rest of the people. And he doesn’t want me in office. You will stop him. He may own papers across the state, and a deluxe paper

in Anaconda, and another here, and more in every town that can support a daily. But you'll stop him, and when you do, God will smile on you."

Hall debated whether to sound reassuring and confident, or whether to sound a little more modest.

"Let me at him. What's a newspaper for? I'll show you what a bulldog is."

"I don't want to own a bulldog. I want a shark."

"You've bought one," Hall said.

"Good. Now, I imagine you'd like to bring your wife and children here, but I will require you to hold off for the time being. You have more important things to do than raise a family. Keep her back East."

That took Hall aback. "But Mr. Clark—"

"And you may consider that your lodging is taken care of, Hall. I will supply it."

"Well, I'll take a room tonight."

"No need. You are going to board with me, Hall."

"With you? I wouldn't want to intrude in your private life, sir."

"Oh, pshaw, you haven't a notion about me, do you? I have a house with so many rooms I've lost track of them. There are rooms for an army. You will stay in my house. You will enjoy the most modern plumbing in Montana. A half dozen indoor water closets. Not even Daly's plumbing can match it. Not that he cares about plumbing. Any old outhouse will do for Daly. But let me tell you, Hall, you'll live in beauty and luxury. You might live there but you'll not see me. Not that I will avoid you, but our paths won't cross. You'll be in the servants' quarters, of course, where life is lived entirely beyond my gaze. If I invite you for breakfast, you'll come, and bring a notepad so you will have my directions on papers. Agreed?"

"I'm your pet shark," Hall said.

Clark stared. "Hall, I am very good at reading men. You are taking this much too lightly, making smart jokes. I don't know

about you. Are you the man I want? Pet shark. I don't know at all about you. A serious man wouldn't make bad little quips. A serious man would know exactly what I mean, and dedicate himself to the cause. I'm going to put you on probation for a month, and then we'll see about a job."

"Well, I'm not sure I'll work under such conditions. I find them rather heavy. If you think you can buy my loyalty as well as my pen, sir, then—"

"Oh, pshaw, Hall. You're hired. Get to work. The miners have ten-hour days, but you don't and never will. I will own you twenty-four hours of every day including Sundays. And call me Senator. Senator Clark. I'd like to get used to it in advance."



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