

**HARD-PAN: A STORY
OF BONANZA
FORTUNES**

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Hard-pan: a story of bonanza fortunes by Geraldine Bonner

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GERALDINE BONNER

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A STORY OF BONANZA FORTUNES

BY

GERALDINE BONNER



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1900

HARD-PAN

I

DINNER was coming to an end. The Chinaman, soft-footed in his immaculate white, had just finished his circuit of the table, leaving a tiny gold-rimmed coffee-cup at each of the four plates. Into hers Letitia was lowering a lump of sugar, when a thought occurred to her, and she dropped the sugar into the cup with a little splash, and looking across at her vis-à-vis, said:

“Oh, John, I’ve been going to ask you half a dozen of times, and have always forgotten: did you know that Colonel Ramsay Reed had a daughter?”

To see the effect of her question, she stretched forward a plump white hand and tilted to one side one of the pink silk petticoats that veiled the candle-flames. The obstruction removed, she looked with vivacious interest at the person to whom she had addressed her query. He, too,

had just dropped his sugar into his coffee, and was stirring it slowly, watching the little maelstrom in the cup.

"Colonel Ramsay Reed," he said, without looking up. "Yes, I think I've heard something about his having a daughter. But why do you ask me? Is n't Maud a much better person? She knows everything about everybody."

He glanced at his sister-in-law, the dark, brown-eyed woman, very splendid in her white-and-yellow dress, who sat at the head of the small table. It was just a family party—Mr. and Mrs. Mortimer Gault, Mrs. Mortimer's sister, Letitia Mason, and Mortimer's brother, John Gault. Mrs. Gault, who seemed to be quite oblivious to the impertinence of her brother-in-law's remark, answered smartly:

"I should n't be surprised to hear that Colonel Reed had daughters by the dozens. Who knows really anything about those old bouanza men who've lost their bonanzas? They drop out of sight, and nobody ever hears of them again. Colonel Reed was in his glory before I was born."

This was a slight exaggeration. Mrs. Mortimer Gault had been born a full thirty-eight years ago, in a house which now has a bakery beneath and furnished rooms above, in the environs of North Beach. It was quite fitting

and proper that she should have first seen the light there, as in that day North Beach was fashionable. But that this should have occurred thirty-eight years ago was a subject she quietly ignored. She was still so effective in her dark, quick-flashing style, so much admired and so fond of being admired, that she turned her back on and denied the thirty-eight years whenever she had the chance.

Her husband looked at her with indulgent and humorous appreciation of her quickness.

"I don't see, if Colonel Reed has a daughter," he said, "what he keeps her on. She can't live on the memory of his bonanza glories. The old fellow has n't got a cent in the world. White Pine scooped the last dollar he had. When did his wife die?"

Letitia, who was twelve years her sister's junior, and, even if she had not been, would not have felt sensitive about her accumulating birthdays, answered:

"Oh, long ago. Colonel Reed's always been a widower ever since I can remember."

"I remember hearing about his wife when I was a boy," said Mortimer. "She was a young actress, and married the colonel when everything was going his way. Then she died in a year or two of consumption. I did n't know there was a child."

"She must be quite young, then," said Maud

Gault. "What did you hear about her, Letitia?"

"Nothing much; only that she was pretty, and lived in an old ramshackle house somewhere across town, and that nobody knows anything about her. One of the girls was talking about it the other day at Mamie Murray's lunch, and I thought it was so funny, everybody knowing about Colonel Reed, that he should have had a daughter that none of us had ever heard of. That's why I asked John. He knows more of those queer, left-over people than anybody else."

She again tilted the candle-shade and looked at John Gault. For the first time since the conversation had turned on Colonel Reed's daughter, he met her eyes. His were brown and deep-set, and being near-sighted, he generally wore a pince-nez. He had taken this off, and looked at Letitia with his eyes narrowed to mere slits, after the manner of short-sighted people. Having finished his coffee, he was leaning back, the candle-light striking a smooth gleam from his broad expanse of shirt-bosom. The restless fire of diamonds broke the glossy surface, for John Gault, like many rich Californians of a passing era, clung to the splendid habits of the bonanza days. Sitting thus, he looked a spare, muscular man verging on forty, with dark hair and an iron-gray mustache.

"I don't know whether that 's meant to be a compliment," he said, with the lazy smile with which he generally treated Letitia's sallies. "Have I got a larger collection of freaks than most people?"

"What did *you* hear about Colonel Reed's daughter?" asked Maud Gault.

"Really, I don't recollect anything in particular," he said; "probably just what Letitia heard—that she was pretty and lived somewhere across town."

"If a man 's going to remember everything he hears about girls that are pretty and live somewhere across town, he 'd have to get Professor What's-his-name's Memory System down by heart," said Mortimer, pushing back his chair. "Come, Maud, you don't want to sit here all night, do you?"

They rose, and together, the rustling ladies first, passed through the intervening hall into the drawing-room beyond. It was a warm, glossy, much-upholstered room, with an appearance of overcrowded cheeriness. Lamps casting halos of mellow light through beruffled silk shades like huge primeval flowers, glowed from the corners and sent glistening rays along the leaves of tropical plants. The ornaments disposed upon the tables and mantel-shelves were numerous and interesting enough to have claimed an afternoon's careful attention. There

were mounds of cushions on the divans, and sudden prolongations of the surroundings in unexpected mirrors. Framed in the folds of the portières was the bright, distant picture of the deserted dining-table, with its bloom of candles and glint of glass and silver.

The small family party all knew one another so well, and so constantly met for these little informal dinners, that when John Gault excused himself on the ground of an evening engagement, no one criticized his defection or urged him to stay. Letitia, who had put on her new pink gauze dinner-dress that evening, was more hurt by the fact that he did not comment upon its splendors than that he left so early. She was used to his unceremonious inclusion of herself in the family party, whom he called by their Christian names and treated with brotherly informality.

This evening, as usual, she went into the hall with him for a last word or two while he put on his coat. Secretly she was hoping that he would notice her dress; for if Letitia had a weakness, it was for rich apparel. Fortunately she could indulge it. She had a fair fortune in her own right, and being an orphan who made her home with her married sister, her income was hers to spend as she pleased.

Standing under the hall light, she regarded Gault with grave attention as he attempted,