

## Blue Skies

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October 29, 1929. It was a beautiful day. Mr. Baruch couldn't remember a time when the air had felt so clean or seemed so clear—it smelled almost like country air, almost organic. He could discern details he would rarely have noticed, like the mottled patterns flowing through the heavy marble columns of the First National building across from the Exchange.

Mr. Baruch saw that he had a little time, so he thought he'd take advantage of the fresh air before confronting the strum and drang of the Exchange. He walked to the corner, crossed the street, and bought a paper at a newsstand. Stepping away from the newsstand, he spied Billy, the shoeshine boy, in the middle of the block, and without a customer. Mr. Baruch walked down the block and approached Billy.

"Billy," Mr. Baruch said.

"Mr. Baruch," said Billy, "shoe shine?"

Mr. Baruch tucked the newspaper up under his arm, raised his pant leg, and placed his foot on Billy's shoe box. Billy began brushing off the dust of Mr. Baruch's shoe.

Mr. Baruch pulled the newspaper out from under his arm, unfolded it, and turned to the stock page. "Any tips for me today, Billy?"

There was no little irony in this question, Mr. Baruch being the richest man on Wall Street and Billy possibly the poorest.

"Yes, sir, Mr. Baruch. Sell."

"Sell what, Billy?"

"Sell everything, Mr. Baruch."

Mr. Baruch gave a little laugh. "That's a lot, Billy. Where'd you get your information?"

"It's in the air, Mr. Baruch."

Mr. Baruch looked up into the morning air, into the brilliant blue sky. “It’s a beautiful morning, Billy.”

“T’won’t be, Mr. Baruch. Today you sell.”

Mr. Baruch watched the back of Billy’s head as the boy slapped thick black wax on his shoes. He watched Billy artfully crack the shine rag above the toes of his shoes, then seesaw it back and forth on the black leather until it achieved a high gloss.

But as Mr. Baruch daydreamed over Billy’s work, he felt rumblings deep inside. Mr. Baruch looked up and down the street, at the flow of humanity and the traffic. Now and then someone would walk past and say, “Mornin’, Mr. Baruch. Beautiful morning.” “Mornin’,” Mr. Baruch would respond back.

“Okay, Mr. Baruch,” said Billy, bringing him out of his reverie. “That’ll be two bits, Mr. Baruch, as always.”

Mr. Baruch reached into his pocket, found a quarter, and flipped it into the air. Billy caught it and slapped it onto the back of his hand.

“Heads, Mr. Baruch. You win.” Billy put the coin into his own pocket. “Have a good day, Mr. Baruch, and don’t forget.”

“Forget what, Billy?” said Mr. Baruch as he tucked the paper back up under his arm.

“To sell.” Billy grinned and winked.

As soon as Mr. Baruch got to the Exchange, he started selling. He was both amazed at his actions yet sure of what he was doing. He sold everything. He sold it as quickly as possible, as quietly as possible. He knew this day was coming, just not when. Days later he would marvel at how something, someone, how Billy had settled the issue for him.

With his last stock sold, Mr. Baruch retreated to his windowed office, which looked down onto the trading floor. It wasn't long before he saw people running round, trailing tickertape behind them. Now and then someone would knock on his door in a perfunctory manner, then barge in. "Mr. Baruch, Mr. Baruch..." The person would hold up the tickertape, say something, and run out. There was a dreamlike quality to it all. Mr. Baruch felt far away.

As the day wore on, the world continued its collapse. Panic reigned. By late afternoon people were jumping out of windows, even though the sky was blue and the air crystal clear.

By nightfall the world had truly changed. Everything. Well, not everything. Mr. Baruch was still the richest man on Wall Street, and Billy still one of the poorest.

That afternoon Mr. Baruch had left work early. After eating a light supper he retreated to his study. Settling into his favorite chair, Mr. Baruch picked up the book he had been reading the night before and opened it to its bookmark. He started to read, then paused. Looking up into the richly paneled ceiling of the study, Mr. Baruch thought of an old saw his father, himself a poor man, never grew tired of saying: *Them who has, gets.*