



Drake's Fortune: The Fabulous True Story of the World's Greatest Confidence Artist

Richard Rayner

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Over the course of twenty years, from 1914 to 1933, Oscar Hartzell conned millions of dollars from tens of thousands of trusting, innocent people. And when he was caught, they gave him more.

There are no folk heroes more all-American than con artists. Though we may openly condemn them, deep down we admire their brazen bravado, their cleverness, their shrewd understanding of how to rouse ambition and greed in their hapless victims. They offer the American dream on the quick, and, after all, don't suckers get what they deserve?

Oscar Hartzell was born in 1876, on the Illinois prairie. Rising from humble origins, he worked hard as a farmer and then as a rancher on the grand scale in Iowa and Texas. But his flair for business didn't match his ambition, and his dream of success foundered. A bankrupt, he was in his late thirties when in 1915 he met a couple who promised to turn his mother's six thousand dollars into six million by delivering to her a share of the long-lost fortune of Sir Francis Drake. Hartzell joined their operation, apparently believing in it, before realizing it was a fraud and then boldly stealing it from under their noses and turning it into an enterprise that netted him millions.

Hartzell moved to London, out of the reach of frustrated American lawmen, restyling himself as an English aristocrat. While living a life of hedonistic grandeur, he played the hayseed for the folks back home, selling as many as a hundred thousand Midwesterners on a get-rich-quick scheme that seemed every bit as reasonable as the wildly speculative investments being touted on Wall Street. The year 1929 came, the stock market crashed — and then his life began to get very strange. His victims turned him into a messiah.

The extraordinary story of Oscar Hartzell has been all but forgotten and never told in full until now. Richard Rayner employs a wealth of original research and previously unseen documents to re-create a saga that stands out both for the sheer longevity and outrageousness of Hartzell's con and for what its amazing twists and turns tell us about the tens of thousands of solid American citizens who, crushed by the Depression, believed to death in the most outrageous of frauds.

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