

Edgar Wallace

*The Man
Who Bought
London*

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THE END

CHAPTER I

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NIGHT had come to the West End, but though the hour was late, though all Suburbia might at this moment be wrapped in gloom—a veritable desert of deadness relieved only by the brightness and animation of the busy public-houses—the Strand was thronged with a languid crowd all agape for the shady mysteries of the night world, which writers describe so convincingly, but the evidence of which is so often disappointing.

Deserted Suburbia had sent its quota to stare at the evil night-life of the Metropolis. That it was evil none doubted. These pallid shop girls clinging to the arms of their protecting swains, these sedate, married ladies, arm in arm with their husbands, these gay young bloods from a thousand homes beyond the radius—they all knew the significance of those two words: "West End."

They stood for an extravagant aristocracy—you could see the shimmer and sheen of them as they bowled noiselessly along the Strand from theatre to supper table, in their brilliantly illuminated cars, all lacquer and silver work. They stood for all the dazzle of light, for all the joyous ripple of laughter, for the faint strains of music which came from the restaurants.

Suburbia saw, disapproved, but was intensely interested. For here was hourly proof of unthinkable sums that to the strolling pedestrians were only reminiscent of the impossible exercises in arithmetic which they had been set in their earlier youth. It all reeked of money—the Strand—Pall Mall

(all ponderous and pompous clubs), but most of all, Piccadilly Circus, a great glittering diamond of light set in the golden heart of London.

Money—money—money! The contents bills reflected the spirit of the West. "Well-known actress loses 20,000 pounds worth of jewellery," said one; "Five million shipping deal," said another, but that which attracted most attention was the naming bill which *The Monitor* had issued—

KING KERRY TO BUY LONDON

(Special)

It drew reluctant coppers from pockets which seldom knew any other variety of coinage than copper. It brought rapidly-walking men, hardened to the beguilement of the contents-bill author, to a sudden standstill.

It even lured the rich to satisfy their curiosity. "King Kerry is going to buy London," said one man.

"I wish he'd buy this restaurant and burn it," grumbled the other, rapping on the table with the handle of a fork. "Waiter, how long are you going to keep me before you take my order?"

"In a moment, sir."

A tall, good-looking man sitting at the next table, and occupying at the moment the waiter's full attention, smiled as he heard the conversation. His grey hair made him look much older than he was, a fact which afforded him very little distress, for he had passed the stage when his personal appearance excited much interest in his own mind. There were many eyes turned toward him, as, having paid his bill, he rose from his chair.

He seemed unaware of the attention he drew to himself, or, if aware, to be uncaring, and with a thin cigar between his even white teeth he made his way through the crowded room to the vestibule of the restaurant.

"By Jove," said the man who had complained about the waiter's inattention, "there goes the chap himself!" and he twisted round in his chair to view the departing figure.

"Who?" asked his friend, laying down the paper he had been reading.

"King Kerry," said the other, "the American millionaire."

King Kerry strolled out through the revolving doors and was swallowed up with the crowd.

Following King Kerry, at a distance, was another well-dressed man, younger than the millionaire, with a handsome face and a subtle air of refinement.

He scowled at the figure ahead as though he bore him no good will, but made no attempt to overtake or pass the man in front, seeming content to keep his distance. King Kerry crossed to the Haymarket and walked down that sloping thoroughfare to Cockspur Street.

The man who followed was slimmer of build, yet well made. He walked with a curious restricted motion that was almost mincing. He lacked the swing of shoulder which one usually associated with the well-built man, and there was a certain stiffness in his walk which suggested a military training. Reflected by the light of a lamp under which he stopped when the figure in front slowed down, the face was a perfect one, small featured and delicate.

Herman Zeberlieff had many of the characteristics of his Polish-Hungarian ancestry and if he had combined with

these the hauteur of his aristocratic forbears, it was not unnatural, remembering that the Zeberlieffs had played no small part in the making of history.

King Kerry was taking a mild constitutional before returning to his Chelsea house to sleep. His shadower guessed this, and when King Kerry turned on to the Thames Embankment, the other kept on the opposite side of the broad avenue, for he had no wish to meet his quarry face to face.

The Embankment was deserted save for the few poor souls who gravitated hither in the hope of meeting a charitable miracle.

King Kerry stopped now and again to speak to one or another of the wrecks who ambled along the broad pavement, and his hand went from pocket to outstretched palm not once but many times.

There were some who, slinking towards him with open palms, whined their needs, but he was too experienced a man not to be able to distinguish between misfortune and mendicancy.

One such a beggar approached him near Cleopatra's Needle, but as King Kerry passed on without taking any notice of him, the outcast commenced to hurl a curse at him. Suddenly King Kerry turned back and the beggar shrunk towards the parapet as if expecting a blow, but the pedestrian was not hostile.

He stood straining his eyes in the darkness, which was made the more baffling because of the gleams of distant lights, and his cigar glowed red and grey.

"What did you say?" he asked gently. "I'm afraid I was thinking of something else when you spoke."

"Give a poor feller creature a copper to get a night's lodgin'!" whined the man. He was a bundle of rags, and his long hair and bushy beard were repulsive even in the light which the remote electric standards afforded.

"Give a copper to get a night's lodging?" repeated the other.

"An' the price of a dri—of a cup of coffee," added the man eagerly.

"Why?"

The question staggered the night wanderer, and he was silent for a moment.

"Why should I give you the price of a night's lodging—or give you anything at all which you have not earned?"

There was nothing harsh in the tone: it was gentle and friendly, and the man took heart.

"Because you've got it an' I ain't," he said—to him a convincing and unanswerable argument.

The gentleman shook his head.

"That is no reason," he said. "How long is it since you did any work?"

The man hesitated. There was authority in the voice, despite its mildness. He might be a "split"—and it would not pay to lie to one of those busy fellows.

"I've worked orf an' on," he said sullenly. "I can't get work what with foreyners takin' the bread out of me mouth an' undersellin' us."

It was an old argument, and one which he had found profitable, particularly with a certain type of philanthropist.

"Have you ever done a week's work in your life, my brother?" asked the gentleman.

One of the "my brother" sort, thought the tramp, and drew from his armoury the necessary weapons for the attack.

"Well, sir," he said meekly, "the Lord has laid a grievous affliction on me head—"

The gentleman shook his head again.

"There is no use in the world for you, my friend," he said softly. "You occupy the place and breathe the air which might be better employed. You're the sort that absorbs everything and grows nothing: you live on the charity of working people who cannot afford to give you the hard-earned pence your misery evokes."

"Are you goin' to allow a feller creature to walk about all night?" demanded the tramp aggressively.

"I have nothing to do with it, my brother," said the other coolly. "If I had the ordering of things I should not let you walk about."

"Very well, then," began the beggar, a little appeased.

"I should treat you in exactly the same way as I should treat any other stray dog—I should put you out of the world."

And he turned to walk on.

The tramp hesitated for a moment, black rage in his heart. The Embankment was deserted—there was no sign of a policeman.

"Here!" he said roughly, and gripped King Kerry's arm.

Only for a second, then a hand like teak struck him under the jaw, and he went blundering into the roadway, striving

to regain his balance.

Dazed and shaken he stood on the kerb watching the leisurely disappearance of his assailant. Perhaps if he followed and made a row the stranger would give him a shilling to avoid the publicity of the courts; but then the tramp was as anxious as the stranger, probably more anxious, to avoid publicity. To do him justice, he had not allowed his beard to grow or refrained from cutting his hair because he wished to resemble an anchorite, there was another reason. He would like to get even with the man who had struck him—but there were risks.

"You made a mistake, didn't you?"

The beggar turned with a snarl.

At his elbow stood Hermann Zeberlieff, King Kerry's shadower, who had been an interested spectator of all that had happened.

"You mind your own business!" growled the beggar, and would have slouched on his way.

"Wait a moment!" The young man stepped in his path. His hand went into his pocket, and when he withdrew it he had a little handful of gold and silver. He shook it; it jingled musically.

"What would you do for a tenner?" he asked.

The man's wolf eyes were glued to the money.

"Anything," he whispered, "anything, bar murder."

"What would you do for fifty?" asked the young man.

"I'd—I'd do most anything," croaked the tramp hoarsely.

"For five hundred and a free passage to Australia?" suggested the young man, and his piercing eyes were fixed on the beggar.

"Anything—anything!" almost howled the man.

The young man nodded.

"Follow me," he said, "on the other side of the road."

They had not been gone more than ten minutes when two men came briskly from the direction of Westminster. They stopped every now and again to flash the light of an electric lamp upon the human wreckage which lolled in every conceivable attitude of slumber upon the seats of the Embankment. Nor were they content with this, for they scrutinized every passer-by—very few at this hour in the morning.

They met a leisurely gentleman strolling toward them, and put a question to him.

"Yes," said he, "curiously enough I have just spoken with him—a man of medium height, who spoke with a queer accent. I guess you think I speak with a queer accent too," he smiled, "but this was a provincial, I reckon."

"That's the man, inspector," said one of the two turning to the other. "Did he have a trick when speaking of putting his head on one side?"

The gentleman nodded.

"Might I ask if he is wanted—I gather that you are police officers?"

The man addressed hesitated and looked to his superior.

"Yes, sir," said the inspector. "There's no harm in telling you that his name is Horace Baggin, and he's wanted for murder—killed a warder of Devizes Gaol and escaped whilst serving the first portion of a lifer for manslaughter. We had word that he's been seen about here."

They passed on with a salute, and King Kerry, for it was he, continued his stroll thoughtfully.

"What a man for Hermann Zeberlieff to find?" he thought, and it was a coincidence that at that precise moment the effeminate-looking Zeberlieff was entertaining an unsavoury tramp in his Park Lane study, plying him with a particularly villainous kind of vodka; and the tramp, with his bearded head on one side as he listened, was learning more about the pernicious ways of American millionaires than he had ever dreamt.

"Off the earth fellers like that ought to be," he said thickly. "Give me a chance—hit me on the jaw, he did, the swine—I'll millionaire him!"

"Have another drink," said Zeberlieff.

CHAPTER II

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THE "tube" lift was crowded, and Elsie Marion, with an apprehensive glance at the clock, rapidly weighed in her mind whether it would be best to wait for the next lift and risk the censure of Mr. Tack or whether she should squeeze in before the great sliding doors clanged together. She hated lifts, and most of all she hated crowded lifts. Whilst she hesitated the doors rolled together with a "Next lift, please!"

She stared at the door blankly, annoyed at her own folly. This was the morning of all mornings when she wished to be punctual.

Tack had been mildly grieved by her innumerable failings, and had nagged her persistently for the greater part of the week. She was unpunctual, she was untidy, she was slack to a criminal extent for a lady cashier whose efficiency is reckoned by the qualities which, as Tack insisted, she did not possess.

The night before he had assembled the cash girls and had solemnly warned them that he wished to see them in their places at nine o'clock sharp. Not, he was at trouble to explain, at nine-ten, or at nine-five, not even at nine-one—but as the clock in the tower above Tack and Brighton's magnificent establishment chimed the preliminary quarters before booming out the precise information that nine o'clock had indeed arrived, he wished every lady to be in her place.

There had been stirring times at Tack and Brighton's during the past three months. An unaccountable spirit of

generosity had been evinced by the proprietors—but it had been exercised towards the public rather than in favour of the unfortunate employees. The most extraordinary reductions in the sale price of their goods and the most cheeseparing curtailments of selling cost had resulted—so traitorous members of the counting-house staff said secretly—in a vastly increased turnover and, in some mysterious fashion, in vastly increased profits.

Some hinted that those profits were entirely fictitious, but that were slander only to be hinted at, for why should Tack and Brighten, a private company with no shareholders to please or pain, go out of their way to fake margins? For the moment, the stability of the firm was a minor consideration.

It wanted seven minutes to nine, and here was Elsie Marion at Westminster Bridge Road Tube Station, and Tack and Brighton's Oxford Street premises exactly twelve minutes away. She shrugged her pretty shoulders. One might as well be hanged for a sheep as a lamb, she thought. But she was angry with herself at her own stupidity. The next lift would be as crowded—she was left in no doubt as to that, for it was full as soon as the doors were open—and she might have saved three precious minutes.

She was crowded to the side of the lift and was thankful that the unsavoury and often uncleanly patrons of the line at this hour in the morning were separated from her by a tall man who stood immediately before her.

He was bareheaded, and his grey hair was neatly brushed and pomaded. His high forehead, clean-cut aquiline nose and firm chin, gave him an air of refinement and

suggested breed. His eyes were blue and deep-set, his lips a trifle thin, and his cheek-bones, without being prominent, were noticeable on his sun-tanned face. All this she took in in one idle glance. She wondered who he was, and for what reason he was a traveller so early in the morning. He was well-dressed, and a single black pearl in his cravat was suggestive of wealth. His hat he held between his two hands across his breast. He was an American, she gathered, because Americans invariably removed their hats in elevators when women were present.

The lift sank downward to the platform sixty feet below, and as it did she heard the faint sound of a "ting," which told her she had missed a train. That would mean another three minutes' wait. She could have cried with vexation. It was a serious matter for her—an orphan girl absolutely alone in the world and dependent upon her own exertions for a livelihood. Cashiers were a drug on the market, and her shorthand and typewriting lessons had only advanced to a stage where she despaired of their getting any further.

Her salary was very small, and she thought regretfully of the days when she had spent more than that on shoes, before dear old spendthrift Aunt Martha had died, leaving her adopted daughter with no greater provision for the future than a Cheltenham education, a ten-pound note, and a massive brooch containing a lock from the head of Aunt Martha's love of the sixties.

Between the beginning of a lift's ascent and the moment the doors open again a girl with the cares of life upon her can review more than a man can write in a year. Before the giant elevator touched bottom Elsie Marion had faced the

future and found it a little bleak. She was aware, as she turned to make her exit, that the tall man before her was watching her curiously. It was not the rude stare to which she had now grown callous, but the deeper, piercing glance of one who was genuinely interested. She suspected the inevitable smut on her nose, and fumbled for her handkerchief.

The stranger stepped aside to let her pass down first, and she was compelled to acknowledge the courtesy with a little nod. He followed her closely, instinct told her that; but so many people were following closely in that hurried slither to the platform.

There was some time to wait—two full minutes—and she strolled to the deserted end of the platform to get away from the crowd. She disliked crowds at all times, and this morning she hated them.

"Excuse me!"

She had heard that form of introduction before, but there was something in the voice which now addressed her which was unlike any of the impertinent overtures to which she had grown accustomed.

She turned and confronted the stranger. He was looking at her with a pleasant little smile.

"You'll think I'm crazy, I guess," he said; "but somehow I just had to come along and talk to you—you're scared of elevators?"

She might have frozen him—at least, she might have tried—but for some unaccountable reason she felt glad to talk to him. He was the kind of man she had known in the heyday of Aunt Martha's prosperity.

"I am a little scared," she said, with a quick smile. "It is absurd, because they are so safe."

He nodded.

"I'm a little scared myself," he confessed easily. "Not that I'm afraid of dying, but when I think of the thousands of human beings whose future rests upon me and my life—why my hair goes up every time I cross the street."

He was not asking her to be interested in himself. She felt that he was just voicing a thought that had occurred to him in a simple, natural way. She looked at him with greater interest.

"I've just been buying a lunatic asylum," he said, and with an inquiring lift of his eyebrows, which at once asked permission and offered thanks when it was granted, he lit a cigar.

She stared at him and he laughed.

Whilst suspicion was gathering in her eyes, the train came hissing into the station.

The girl saw with dismay that it was crowded, and the mob which besieged each doorway was ten deep.

"You won't catch this," said the man calmly. "There'll be another in a minute."

"I'm afraid I must try," said the girl, and hurried along to where the surging throng were struggling to get aboard.

Her strange companion followed with long strides, but even with his assistance there was no chance of obtaining foothold, and she was left behind with a score of others. "Time's money," said the grey-haired stranger cheerfully. "Don't be mean with it!"

"I can't afford to be anything else," said the girl, pardonably exasperated. "Possibly you haven't to face the wrath of an employer with a watch in his hand and doom on his face."

She laughed a little in spite of her vexation.

"I'm so sorry," she pleaded; "but I did not intend allowing myself the luxury of a grumble about my worries—you were saying you have bought a lunatic asylum."

He nodded, a twinkle in his eye.

"And you were thinking I had just escaped from one," he said accusingly. "Yes, I've just bought the Coldharbour Asylum—lock, stock, and barrel—"

She looked at him incredulously.

"Do you mean that?" she asked, and her scepticism was justified, for the Coldharbour Asylum is the largest in London, and the second largest in the world.

"I mean it," he said. "I am going to build the cutest residential club in London on that site."

There was no time to say any more. Another train came in and, escorted by the grey-haired man, who in the shortest space of time had assumed a guardianship over her which was at once comforting and disconcerting, she found a seat in a smoking carriage. It was so easy to chat with him, so easy to confide hopes and fears which till that moment she had not put into words.

She found herself at Oxford Circus all too soon, and oblivious of the fact that the hands of the station clock pointed to twenty minutes after nine. "A sheep as a lamb," said her footsteps hollowly, as she went leisurely along the vaulted passage-way to the lift.

"Were you going to Oxford Circus?" she asked, suddenly seized with a fear that she had taken this purchaser of lunatic asylums out of his way.

"Curiously enough, I was," he said. "I'm buying some shops in Oxford Street at half-past nine."

Again she shot a swift glance at him, and he chuckled as he saw her shrink back a little.

"I am perfectly harmless," he said mockingly.

They stepped out into Argyll Street together, and he offered his hand.

"I hope to meet you again," he said, but did not tell her his name—it was King Kerry—though, he had read hers in the book she was carrying.

She felt a little uncomfortable, but gave him a smiling farewell. He stood for some time looking after her.

A man, unkempt, with a fixed, glassy look in his eye, had been watching the lift doors from the opposite side of the street. He started to cross as the grey-haired stranger made his appearance. Suddenly two shots rang out, and a bullet buzzed angrily past the grey man's face.

"That's yours, Mister!" howled a voice, and the next instant the owner was grabbed by two policemen.

A slow smile gathered at the corners of the grey man's lips.

"Horace," he said, and shook his head disapprovingly, "you're a rotten shot!"

On the opposite side of Oxford Street, a man watched the scene from the upper window of a block of offices.

He saw the racing policemen, the huge crowd which gathered in a moment, and the swaying figures of the

officers of the law and their half-mad prisoner. He saw, too, a grey-haired man, unharmed and calm, slowly moving away, talking with a sergeant of police who had arrived on the scene at the moment. The watcher shook a white fist in the direction of King Kerry.

"Some day, my friend!" he said between his clenched teeth, "I will find a bullet that goes to its mark—and the girl from Denver City will be free!"

CHAPTER III

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MR. TACK stood by the cashier's desk in the ready-made department. He wore upon his face the pained look of one who had set himself the pleasant task of being disagreeable, and yet feared the absence of opportunity.

"She won't come; we'll get a wire at eleven, saying she's ill, or her mother has been taken to the infirmary," he said bitterly, and three sycophantic shop-walkers, immaculately attired in the most perfect fitting of frock-coats who stood at a respectful distance, said in audible tones that it was really disgraceful.

They would have laughed at Mr. Tack's comment on the sick mother, but they weren't sure whether he wanted them to laugh, because Mr. Tack was a strict Churchman, and usually regarded sickness as part and parcel of the solemn ritual of life.

"She goes on Saturday week—whatever happens," said Mr. Tack grimly, and examined his watch. "She would go at once if it wasn't for the fact that I can't get anybody to take her place at a minute's notice." One of the shop-walkers, feeling by reason of his seniority of service that something was expected from him, remarked that he did not know what things were coming to.

It was to this unhappy group that Elsie Marion, flushed and a little breathless, came in haste from the stuffy dressing-room which Tack and Brighton's provided for their female employees.

"I'm so sorry!" she said, as she opened the glass-panelled door of the cash rostrum and swung herself up to the high stool.

Mr. Tack looked at her. There he stood, as she had predicted, his gold chronometer in his hand, the doom on his face, an oppressive figure.

"Nine o'clock I was here, miss," he said.

She made no reply, opening her desk, and taking out the check pads and the spikes of her craft.

"Nine o'clock I was here, miss," repeated the patient Mr. Tack—who was far from patient, being, in fact, in a white heat of temper.

"I'm very sorry!" she repeated.

A young man had strolled into the store, and since the officials responsible for piloting him to the counter of his desire were at that moment forming an admiring audience about Mr. Tack, he was allowed to wander aimlessly. He was a bright boy, in a fawn dustcoat, and his soft felt hat was stuck on the back of his head. He had all the savoir-faire and the careless confidence which is associated with one profession in the world—and one only. He drew nearer to the little group, having no false sense of modesty.

"You are sorry!" said Mr. Tack with great restraint. He was a stout little man with a shiny bald head and a heavy, yellow moustache. "You are sorry! Well, that's a comfort! You've absolutely set the rules—my rules—at defiance. You have ignored my special request to be here at nine o'clock—and you're sorry!"

Still the girl made no reply, but the young man in the soft felt hat was intensely interested.