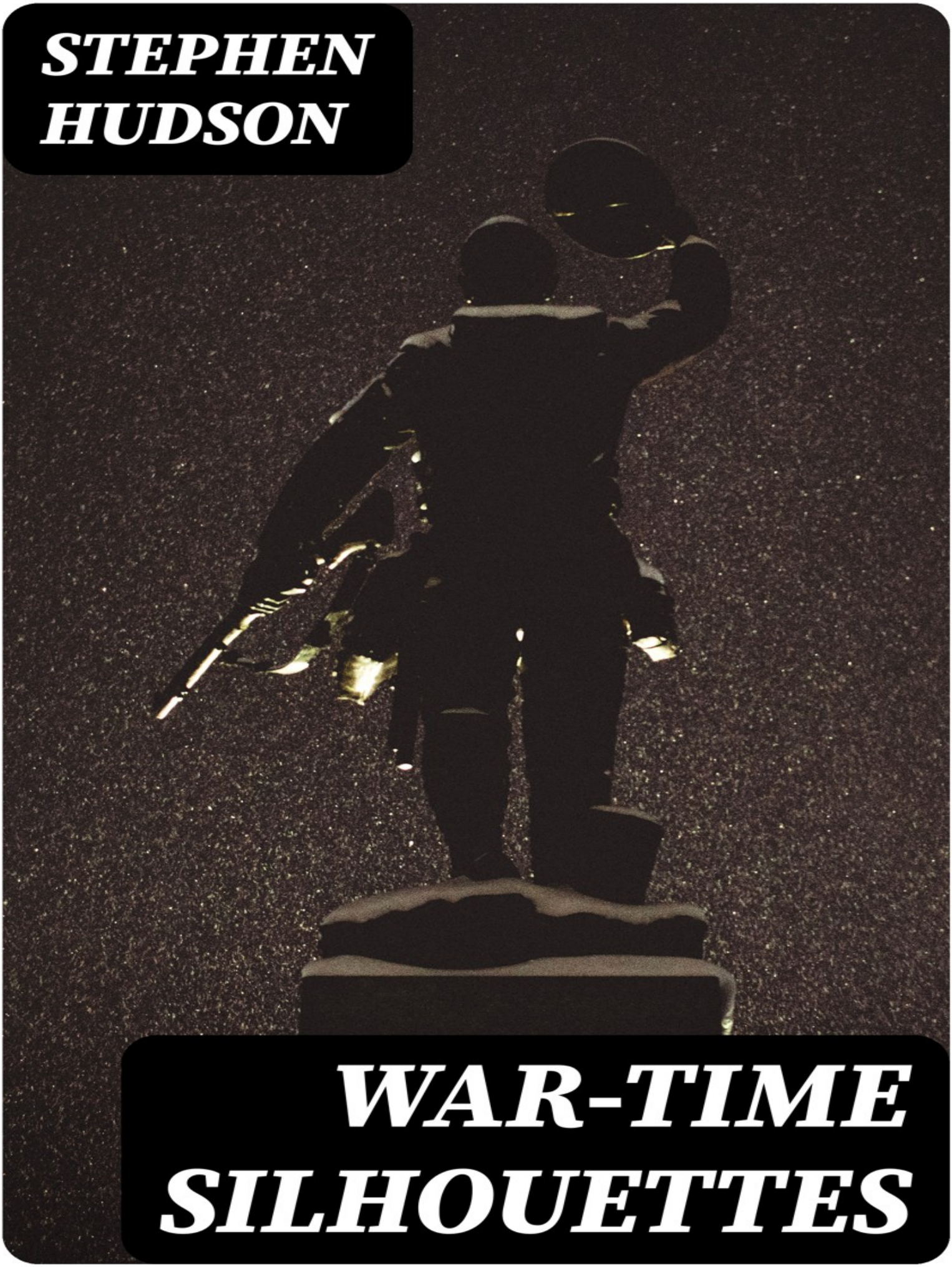
STEPHEN HUDSON



WAR-TIME SILHOUETTES

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I. MR. REISS’S FINAL GRIEVANCE

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Mr. Adolf Reiss, merchant, sits alone on a gloomy December afternoon. He gazes into the fire with jaundiced eyes reflecting on his grievance against Life. The room is furnished expensively but arranged without taste, and it completely lacks home atmosphere. Mr. Reiss’s room is, like himself, uncomfortable. The walls are covered with pictures, but their effect is unpleasing; perhaps this is because they were bought by him as reputed bargains, sometimes at forced sales of bankrupt acquaintances Making and thinking about money has not left Mr. Reiss time to consider comfort, but for Art, in the form of pictures and other saleable commodities, he has a certain respect. Such things if bought judiciously have been known to increase in value in the most extraordinary manner, and as this generally happens long after their creators are dead, he leaves living artists severely alone. The essence of successful speculation is to limit your liability.

Mr. Reiss is a short, stoutish, ungainly man past seventy, and he suffers from chronic indigestion. He is one of those people of whom it is difficult to believe that they ever were young.

But it is not on account of these disadvantages that Mr. Reiss considers himself ill treated by Fate. It is because since the War he regards himself as a ruined man. Half his fortune remains; but Mr. Reiss, though he hates the rich, despises the merely well-off. Of a man whose income would generally be considered wealth he says, “Bah! He hasn’t a

penny.” Below this level every one is “a pauper”; now he rather envies such pitiable people because “they’ve got nothing to lose.” His philosophy of life is simple to grasp, and he can never understand why so many people refuse to accept it. If they did, he thinks that the world would not be such an unpleasant place to live in. Life in his opinion is simply a fight for money. All the trouble in the world is caused by the want of it, all the happiness man requires can be purchased with it. Those who think the contrary are fools, and if they go to the length of professing indifference to money they are “humbugs.”

“Humbug” and “Bunkum” are favourite words of his. He generally dismisses remarks and stops discussion by the use of either or both. His solitary term of praise is the word “respectable” and he uses it sparingly, being as far as he can conscientiously go in approval of any one; he thus eulogizes those who live within their means and have never been known to be hard up. People who are hard up are “wasters.” No one has any business to be hard up; “respectable” men live on what they’ve got. If any one were to ask him how people are to live within their means when they’ve not got any, he would reply with the word “bunkum” and clinch the argument with a grunt. It will be understood that conversation with Mr. Adolf Reiss is not easy.

A knock on the door. Mr. Reiss’s servant announces some one and withdraws.

Intuitively Mr. Reiss, who is rather deaf, and has not caught the name, grasps the paper and hides behind it. From long experience he has discovered the utility of the newspaper as a sort of parapet behind which he can better await attack.

A slight figure in khaki advances into the room, observes the newspaper above the legs and smiles slightly.

“Hello, uncle!” It’s a fresh young voice.

Mr. Reiss grunts, slowly lowers the paper and gazes at the youth over his eyeglasses.

“Oh, it’s you. When did you come up?”

“Just arrived, uncle. We’re ordered out. I thought I’d look you up at once as there are one or two things—”

“Eh—what?”

Among Mr. Reiss’s characteristics is a disconcerting habit of making people repeat their remarks. This is deliberate and its purpose twofold—to gain time and to embarrass the person addressed.

The young fellow sits down rather uncomfortably and begins again—

“We’re ordered out, you know—”

“No, I didn’t know. How could I? You never write—”

Mr. Reiss consolidates his defence with the pretence of a grievance.

“I didn’t know myself until yesterday. They don’t give one much time, you know.”

“They—who?”

“The War Office people. You see, our first battalion has had a lot of casualties and three of us subs are being taken from the third. We’ve got to join the day after to-morrow. Bit of a rush. And I’ve got things to get. I’m afraid I must ask you to give me a leg up, uncle. I’m a bit short—”

“Short? Why, you’ve got an ample allowance besides your pay and the Government pays for your outfit at an extravagant rate.” Mr. Reiss never ceases denouncing the extravagance of the Government. He now adjusts his glasses and glowers at the youngster, who fidgets under the scrutiny. “Yes, I know. I—” he stammers.

“Well—well?”

“The fact is—when Staples, our captain, went back—he—I—”

A grunt. Then, “Eh—what?”

“He was engaged, you know.”

“Well—well?” irritably.

“I can’t explain, uncle, if you don’t give me a chance.”

Another grunt.

“Jimmie—I mean Staples—wanted to give his girl a ring before he went back. He hadn’t enough money—so I lent him fifty pounds.”

Mr. Reiss drops his glasses, gets up from his chair, and stands before the fire, facing his nephew.

“So you lent him fifty pounds, did you? A third of your annual allowance. You had no business to—and if Captain Whatever’s-his-name were a respectable man, he would have saved the money to pay for the ring. Instead of that *I* have to pay for it.”

“Oh no, uncle.”

“How d’you mean—‘no, uncle’? Aren’t you asking me for money? It’s always the same story with the lot of you. You like to be generous at other people’s expense. I’ve told you I’m a ruined man. The fortune which was the result of my hard work all my life has disappeared. I’m a poor man. I spend nothing on myself. I’ve given up my car. I’ve put down everything. I’m trying to dispose of my pictures and to sell the lease of this place. You don’t seem to understand what this infernal war means to people like myself. *You* don’t have to pay for it. Do you realize that one-third of my entire income goes for income tax? I’ve paid your bills over and over again, but I can’t do it any more. For this once I’ll—” The boy holds up his hand.

“Look here, uncle. I’d better tell you at once. I shall need another fifty to make me square. But I’ll pay you back—on my honour—”

“Bah! Your honour! Pay me back. I know what that means. So it’s a hundred pounds you want. Very well. You shall have your hundred pounds. But I solemnly warn you that it’s the last penny I intend to pay for your extravagance. As for that waster of a Captain What’s-his—”

The boy flushes to the roots of his light, wavy hair.

“I say, uncle. He’s not a waster. He’s the finest fellow in the regiment. I can’t allow you—Look here—never mind the money. The jeweller knows it’s all right. I’d rather—”

He stops. The words won’t come. He gazes at his uncle helplessly. Mr. Reiss goes slowly to the writing-table and sits down. Taking a blank cheque from a pocket-book he always carries, he fills it in and passes it to the boy without speaking.

“I don’t like taking it, uncle. I don’t, really—”

Mr. Reiss half turns round. He still says nothing, he does not even grunt. He knows that there are times when silence is golden. Moreover, he knows that money talks.

A few minutes later Mr. Adolf Reiss is again sitting alone, gazing into the fire. And he has another grievance against Life.

The philosophy of Mr. Reiss is a natural result of his early environment. In Magdeburg, where he was born and brought up, education in business principles is combined with the theory of family duty. Whether this theory takes the place of affection or not, its application in the case of Mr. Reiss resulted in his migration at an early age to England, where he soon found a market for his German industry, his German thriftiness, and his German astuteness. He established a business and took out naturalization papers. Until the War came Mr. Reiss was growing richer and richer. His talent for saving kept pace with his gift for making.

He spent evening after evening, when he came home from the City, thinking out different ways of tying up his fortune on Percy, so that it could remain intact as long as possible. Some of his schemes for insuring the safety of his capital, for the resettlement of the greater part of the income by trustees—for combining, in fact, a maximum of

growing power for the fortune with a minimum of enjoyment for the heir—were really marvels of ingenuity.

But since the War his thoughts have taken a different turn. Half his fortune has gone. He is too old now to catch up again. It's all over with money-making. The most he can hope for is to keep "the little that is left." If only Percy had been older and had a son, he could settle the money upon his great-nephew. Then there would have been time for the money to accumulate again.

And now he's gone to the Front. He might be killed. It doesn't bear thinking about. He has toiled all his life. Surely after *all* his self-sacrifice and self-denial he is not to be robbed of the one satisfaction he asks for, to know that the beggarly remains of his wealth shall be safe after his own death.

Every day he scans the papers anxiously. His one preoccupation is the daily casualty list.

Spring is at hand, and though there is chill in the air Mr. Reiss is economical and sits before an empty grate. Self-mortification always seems to him to be evidence of moral superiority and to confirm his right to special grievances. He is reading a letter over again received that morning from Percy. It bears the stamp of the Base Censor and is some days old.

DEAR UNCLE ADOLF,

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You remember my friend Jimmy Staples—the one I told you about, who was engaged and I lent that money to? Well, he's been killed, or rather he has just died of wounds. He has done splendidly. Our Brigadier had sent in his name for a V.C. I'll tell you all about it when I see you. But what I wanted to say is that it's all right about the money. I've got lots in the bank now, and in another couple of months I shall be able to pay you back. One can't spend anything much out here. I'm quite fit, but I'm rather in the blues about Jimmy. Mother will give you all my news.

Your affectionate Nephew.

P.S.—By the way, I gave your name as nearest relative in case of accidents, to save mother.

Mr. Reiss has a curious and unaccustomed feeling of flatness as he re-reads the letter. Somehow or other he does not want Percy to pay him back that fifty pounds. He thinks he'll write and tell him so at once.

He sits down at the writing-table—the same one at which he had written the cheque the last time he saw Percy. The scene comes back to him with a strange vividness as he dips his pen in the ink. He hesitates a moment before beginning the letter. Was there anything he could say that would please Percy? He has a curious and at the same time a strong desire to do something now—at once. He has never felt like this before. Supposing he were to—A knock on the door. His servant brings in a telegram. Why do Mr. Reiss's fingers tremble so? Why does Mr. Reiss begin cleaning his glasses before he opens the envelope?