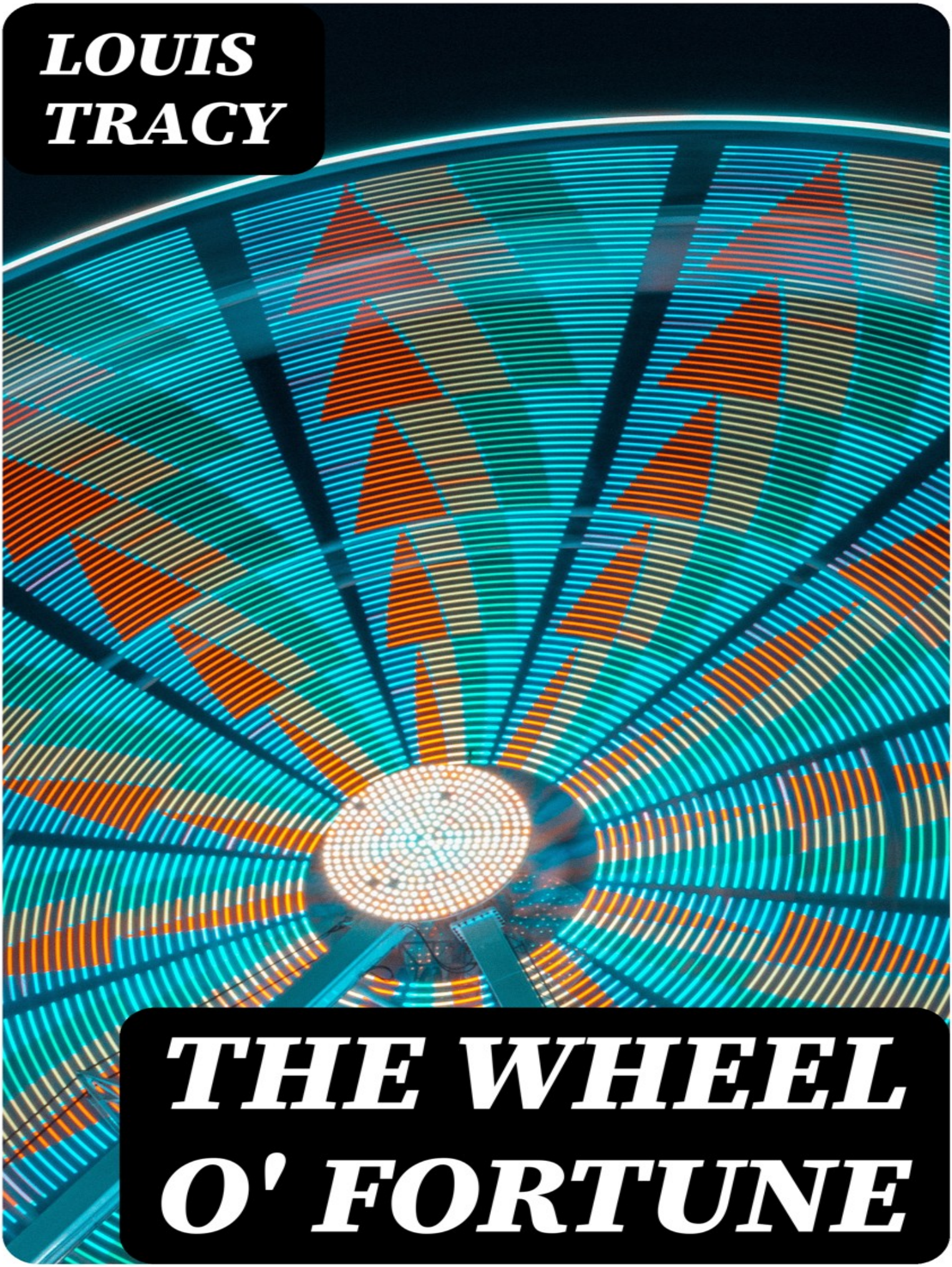
LOUIS TRACY



THE WHEEL O' FORTUNE

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The Wheel O' Fortune

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CHAPTER I

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WHEREIN FORTUNE TURNS HER WHEEL

At ten o'clock on a morning in October—a dazzling, sunlit morning after hours of wind-lashed rain—a young man hurried out of Victoria Station and dodged the traffic and the mud-pools on his way towards Victoria Street. Suddenly he was brought to a stand by an unusual spectacle. A procession of the "unemployed" was sauntering out of Vauxhall Bridge Road into the more important street. Being men of leisure, the processionists moved slowly. The more alert pedestrian who had just emerged from the station did not grumble at the delay—he even turned it to advantage by rolling and lighting a cigarette. The ragged regiment filed past, a soiled, frayed, hopeless-looking gang. Three hundred men had gathered on the south side of the river, and were marching to join other contingents on the Thames Embankment, whence some thousands of them would be shepherded by policemen up Northumberland Avenue, across Trafalgar Square, and so, by way of Lower Regent Street and Piccadilly, to Hyde Park, where they would

hoarsely cheer every demagogue who blamed the Government for their miseries.

London, like Richard Royson, would stand on the pavement and watch them. Like him, it would drop a few coins into the collecting boxes rattled under its nose, and grin at the absurd figure cut by a very fat man who waddled notably, among his leaner brethren, for hunger and substance are not often found so strangely allied. But, having salved its conscience by giving, and gratified its sarcastic humor by laughing, London took thought, perhaps, when it read the strange device on the banner carried by this Vauxhall contingent. "Curse your charity—we want work," said the white letters, staring threateningly out of a wide strip of red cotton. There was a brutal force in the phrase. It was Socialism in a tabloid. Many a looker-on, whose lot was nigh as desperate as that of the demonstrators, felt that it struck him between the eyes.

It had some such effect on Royson. Rather abruptly he turned away, and reached the less crowded Buckingham Palace Road. His face was darkened by a frown, though his blue eyes had a glint of humor in them. The legend on the banner had annoyed him. Its blatant message had penetrated the armor of youth, high spirits, and abounding good health. It expressed his own case, with a crude vigor. The "unemployed" genius who railed at society in that virile line must have felt as he, Dick Royson, had begun to feel during the past fortnight, and the knowledge that this was so was exceedingly distasteful. It was monstrous that he should rate himself on a par with those slouching wastrels. The mere notion brought its own confutation. Twenty-four

years of age, well educated, a gentleman by birth and breeding, an athlete who stood six feet two inches high in his stockings, the gulf was wide, indeed, between him and the charity-cursers who had taken his money. Yet—the words stuck....

Evidently, he was fated to be a sight-seer that morning. When he entered Buckingham Palace Road, the strains of martial music banished the gaunt specter called into being by the red cotton banner. A policeman, more cheerful and spry than his comrades who marshaled the procession shuffling towards Westminster, strode to the center of the busy crossing, and cast an alert eye on the converging lines of traffic. Another section of the ever-ready London crowd lined up on the curb. Nursemaids, bound for the parks, wheeled their perambulators into strategic positions, thus commanding a clear view and blocking the edge of the pavement. Drivers of omnibuses, without waiting for the lifted hand of authority, halted in Lower Grosvenor Gardens and Victoria Street. Cabs going to the station, presumably carrying fares to whom time meant lost trains, spurted to cross a road which would soon be barred. And small boys gathered from all quarters in amazing profusion. In a word, the Coldstream Guards were coming from Chelsea Barracks to do duty at St. James's, coming, too, in the approved manner of the Guards, with lively drumming and clash of cymbals, while brass and reeds sang some jaunty melody of the hour.

The passing of a regimental band has whisked many a youngster out of staid Britain into the far lands, the lilt and swing of soldiers on the march have a glamour all the more

profound because it is evanescent. That man must indeed be careworn who would resist it. Certainly, the broad-shouldered young giant who had been momentarily troubled by the white-red ghost of poverty was not so minded. He could see easily, over the heads of the people standing on the edge of the pavement, so he did not press to the front among the rabble, but stood apart, with his back against a shop window. Thus, he was free to move to right or left as he chose. That was a slight thing in itself, an unconscious trick of aloofness—perhaps an inherited trait of occupying his own territory, so to speak. But it is these slight things which reveal character. They oft-times influence human lives, too; and no man ever extricated himself more promptly from the humdrum of moneyless existence in London than did Richard Royson that day by placing the width of the sidewalk between himself and the unbroken row of spectators. Of course, he knew nothing of that at the moment. His objective was an appointment at eleven' o'clock in the neighborhood of Charing Cross, and, now that he was given the excuse, he meant to march along the Mall behind the Guards. Meanwhile, he watched their advance.

Above the tall bearskins and glittering bayonets he caught the flourish of energetic drumsticks. The big drum gave forth its clamor with window-shaking insistence; it seemed to be the summons of power that all else should stand aside. On they came, these spruce Guards, each man a marching machine, trained to strut and pose exactly as his fellows. There was a sense of omnipotence in their rhythmic movement. And they all had the grand manner—from the elegant captain in command down to the smallest drummer-

boy. Although the sun was shining brightly now, the earlier rain and hint of winter in the air had clothed all ranks in dark gray great-coats and brown leggings. Hence, to the untrained glance, they were singularly alike. Officers, sergeants, privates and bandsmen might have been cast in molds, after the style of toy soldiers. There were exceptions, of course, just as the fat man achieved distinction among the unemployed. The crimson sashes of the officers, the drum-major, with his twirling staff, the white apron of the big drummer, drew the eye. A slim subaltern, carrying the regimental color, held pride of place in the picture. The rich hues of the silk lent a barbaric splendor to his sober trappings. And he took himself seriously. A good-looking lad, with smooth contours not yet hardened to the military type, his face had in it a set gravity which proclaimed that he would bear that flag whithersoever his country's need demanded. And it was good to see him so intent on the mere charge of it in transit between Chelsea Barracks and the Guard-room at St. James's Palace. That argued earnestness, an excellent thing, even in the Household Brigade.

Royson was amusing himself with the contrast between the two types of banner-bearers he had gazed at in the short space of five minutes—he was specially tickled by the fact that the Guards, also, were under police protection—when he became aware that the features of the color-lieutenant were familiar to him. A man in uniform, with forehead and chin partly hidden by warlike gear, cannot be recognized easily, if there be any initial doubt as to his identity. To determine the matter, Royson, instead of

following in the rear as he had intended, stepped out brightly and placed himself somewhat ahead of the officer. He was near the drums before he could make sure that he was actually within a few yards of a former classmate. The knowledge brought a rush of blood to his face. Though glad enough to see unexpectedly one who had been a school friend, it was not in human nature that the marked difference between their present social positions should not be bitter to him. Here was "Jack" marching down the middle of the road in the panoply of the Guards, while "Dick" his superior during six long years at Rugby, was hurrying along the pavement, perhaps nearing the brink of that gulf already reached by the Vauxhall processionists.

So Dick Royson's placid temper was again ruffled, and he might have said nasty things about Fate had not that erratic dame suddenly thought, fit to alter his fortunes. As the street narrowed between lofty buildings, so did the blaring thunder of the music increase. The mob closed in on the soldiers' heels; the whole roadway was packed with moving men. A somber flood of humanity—topped by the drumsticks, the flag, the glistening bayonets and the bearskins—it seemingly engulfed all else in its path. The sparkle of the band, intensified by the quick, measured tramp of the soldiers, aroused a furtive enthusiasm. Old men, bearded and bent, men whom one would never suspect of having borne arms, straightened themselves, stood to attention, and saluted the swaying flag. Callow youths, hooligans, round-shouldered slouchers at the best, made shift to lift their heads and keep step. And the torrent caught the human flotsam of the pavement in its onward

swirl. If Royson had not utilized that clear space lower down the street, it would have demanded the exercise of sheer force to reach the van of the dense gathering of nondescripts now following the drum.

Nevertheless, a clearance was made, and speedily, with the startling suddenness of a summer whirlwind. A pair of horses, attached to an open carriage, were drawn up in a by-street until the Guards had passed. So far as Royson was concerned, they were on the opposite side of the road, with their heads towards him. But he happened to be looking that way, because his old-time companion, the Hon. John Paton Seymour, was in the direct line of sight, and his unusual stature enabled him to see that both horses reared simultaneously. They took the coachman by surprise, and their downward plunge dragged him headlong from the box. Instantly there was a panic among the mob. It melted away from the clatter of frenzied hoofs as though a live shell had burst in the locality. Two staccato syllables from the officer in command stopped the music and brought the Guards to a halt. The horses dashed madly forward, barely missing the color and its escort. A ready-witted sergeant grabbed at the loose reins flapping in the air, but they eluded him with a snake-like twist. The next wild leap brought the carriage pole against a lamp-post, and both were broken. Then one of the animals stumbled, half turned, backed, and locked the front wheels. A lady, the sole occupant, was discarding some heavy wraps which impeded her movements, evidently meaning to spring into the road, but she was given no time. The near hind wheel was already off the ground. In another second the carriage must be overturned,

had not Royson, brought by chance to the right place, seized the off wheel and the back of the hood, and bodily lifted the rear part of the victoria into momentary safety. It was a fine display of physical strength, and quick judgment. He literally threw the vehicle a distance of several feet. But that was not all. He saw his opportunity, caught the reins, and took such a pull at the terrified horses that a policeman and a soldier were able to get hold of their heads. The coachman, who had fallen clear, now ran up. With him came a gentleman in a fur coat. Royson was about to turn and find out what had become of the lady, when some one said quietly:

"Well saved, King Dick!"

It was the Hon. John Seymour who spoke. Rigid as a statue, and almost as helpless, he was standing in the middle of the road, with his left hand holding the flag and a drawn sword in his right. Yet a school nickname bridged five years so rapidly that the man who had just been reviling Fate smiled at the picturesque officer of the Guards in the old, tolerant way, the way in which the hero of the eleven or fifteen permits his worshipers to applaud.

But this mutual recognition went no further. The Guards must on to St. James's. Some incomprehensible growls set them in motion again, the drum banged with new zest, and the street gradually emptied, leaving only a few curious gapers to surround the damaged victoria and the trembling horses. The fresh outburst of music brought renewed prancing, but the pair were in hand now, for Royson held the reins, and the mud-bedaubed coachman was ready to twist their heads off in his wrath.

"Don't know what took 'em," he was gasping to the policeman. "Never knew 'em be'ave like this afore. Quiet as sheep, they are, as a ryule."

"Too fat," explained the unemotional constable. "Give 'em more work an' less corn. Wot's your name an' address? There's this 'ere lamp-post to pay for. Cavalry charges in Buckingham Palace Road cost a bit."

An appreciative audience grinned at the official humor. But Royson was listening to the somewhat lively conversation taking place behind him.

"Are you injured in any way?" cried the gentleman in the far coat, obviously addressing the lady in the victoria. The too accurate cadence in his words bespoke the foreigner, the man who has what is called "a perfect command" of English.

"Not in the least, thank you," was the answer. The voice was clear, musical, well-bred, and decidedly chilling. The two concluding words really meant "no thanks to you," The lady was, however, quite self-possessed, and, as a consequence, polite.

"But why in the world did you not jump out when I shouted to you?" demanded the man.

"Because you threw your half of the rug over my feet, and thus hindered me."

"Did I? Ach, Gott! Do you think I deserted you, then?"

"No, no, I did not mean that, Baron von Kerber. The affair was an accident, and you naturally thought I would follow your example, I did try, twice, to spring clear, but I lost my balance each time. We have no cause to blame one another. My view is that Spong was caught napping. Instead of

arguing about things we might have done, we really ought to thank this gentleman, who prevented any further developments in some wonderful way not quite known to me yet."

The lady was talking herself into less caustic mood. Perhaps she had not expected the Baron to shine in an emergency. Her calmness seemed to irritate him, though he was most anxious to put himself right with her.

"My object in jumping out so quickly was to run to the horses' heads," he said. "Unfortunately, I tripped and nearly fell. But why sit there? We must take a hansom. Or perhaps you would prefer to go by train?"

"Oh, a cab, by all means."

The horses were now standing so quietly that Royson handed the reins to the coachman, who was examining the traces. Then he was able to turn and look at the lady. He saw that she was young and pretty, but the heavy furs she wore half concealed her face, and the fact that his own garments were frayed, while his hands and overcoat were plastered with mud off the wheels, did not help to dissipate a certain embarrassment that gripped him, for he was a shy man where women were concerned. She, too, faltered a little, and the reason was made plain by her words.

"I do not know how to thank you," she said, and he became aware that she had wonderful brown eyes. "I think —you saved my life. Indeed, I am sure you did. Will you—call—at an address that I will give you? Mr. Fenshawe will be most anxious to—to—acknowledge your services."

"Oh, pray leave that to me, Miss Fenshawe," broke in the Baron, whose fluent English had a slight lisp. "Here is my

card," he went on rapidly, looking at Royson with calm assurance. "Come and see me this evening, at seven o'clock, and I will make it worth your while."

A glance at Royson's clothes told him enough, as he thought, to appraise the value of the assistance given. And he had no idea that his fair companion had really been in such grave danger. He believed that the shattering of the pole against the lamp standard had stopped the bolting horses, and that the tall young man now surveying him with a measuring eye had merely succeeded in catching the reins.

Royson lifted his hat to the lady, who had alighted, and was daintily gathering her skirts out of the mud.

"I am glad to have been able to help you, madam," he said. He would have gone without another word had not von Kerber touched his arm.

"You have not taken my card," said the man imperiously.

Some mischievous impulse, born of the turbulent emotions momentarily quelled by the flurry of the carriage accident, conquered Royson's better instincts. Though the Baron, was tall, he towered above him. And he hardly realized the harshness, the vexed contempt, of his muttered reply:

"I don't want your charity, I want work."

At once he was conscious of his mistake. He had sunk voluntarily to the level of the Vauxhall paraders. He had even stolen their thunder. A twinge of self-denunciation drove the anger from his frowning eyes. And the Baron again thought he read his man correctly.

"Even so," he said, in a low tone, "take my card. I can find you work, of the right sort, for one who has brains and pluck, yes?"

The continental trick of ending with an implied question lent a subtle meaning to his utterance, and he helped it with covert glance and sour smile. Thus might Caesar Borgia ask some minion if he could use a dagger. But Royson was too humiliated by his blunder to pay heed to hidden meanings. He grasped the card in his muddied fingers, and looked towards Miss Fenshawe, who was now patting one of the horses. Her aristocratic aloofness was doubly galling. She, too, had heard what he said, and was ready to classify him with the common herd. And, indeed, he had deserved it. He was wholly amazed by his own churlish outburst. Not yet did he realize that Fate had taken his affairs in hand, and that each step he took, each syllable he uttered in that memorable hour, were part and parcel of the new order of events in his life.

Quite crestfallen, he hurried away. He found himself inside the gates of the park before he took note of direction. Then he went to the edge of the lake, wetted his handkerchief, and rubbed off the worst of the mud-stains. While engaged in this task he calmed down sufficiently to laugh, not with any great degree of mirth, it is true, but with a grain of comfort at the recollection of Seymour's eulogy.

"King Dick!" he growled. "Times have changed since last I heard that name. By gad, five years can work wonders."

And, indeed, so can five seconds, when wonders are working, but the crass ignorance of humanity oft prevents the operation being seen. Be that as it may, Royson

discovered that it was nearly eleven o'clock before he had cleaned his soiled clothes sufficiently to render himself presentable. As he set out once more for his rendezvous, he heard the band playing the old Guard back to quarters. The soldiers came down the Mall, but he followed the side of the lake, crossed the Horse-guards Parade, and reached the office for which he was bound at ten minutes past eleven. He had applied for a secretaryship, a post in which "a thorough knowledge of French" was essential, and he was received by a pompous, flabby little man, with side whiskers, for whom he conceived a violent dislike the moment he set eyes on him. Apparently, the feeling was mutual. Dick Royson was far too distinguished looking to suit the requirements of the podgy member for a county constituency, a legislator who hoped to score in Parliament by getting the Yellow Books of the French Chamber translated for his benefit.

"You are late, Mr. Royson," began the important one.

"Yes," said Dick.

"Punctuality—"

"Exactly, but I was mixed up in a slight mishap to a carriage."

"As I was about to remark," said the M.P., in his most impressive manner, "punctuality in business is a *sine quâ non*. I have already appointed another secretary."

"Poor devil!" said Dick.

"How dare you, sir, speak to me in that manner?"

"I was thinking of him. I don't know him, but, having seen you, I am sorry for him."

"You impudent rascal—"

But Royson had fled. Out in the street, he looked up at the sky. "Is there a new moon?" he asked himself, gravely. "Am I cracked? Why did I pitch into that chap? If I'm not careful, I shall get myself into trouble to-day. I wonder if Jack Seymour will lend me enough to take me to South Africa? They say that war is brewing there. That is what I want—gore, bomb-shells, more gore. If I stay in London—"

Then he encountered a procession coming up Northumberland Avenue. Police, mounted and on foot, headed it. Behind marched the unemployed, thousands of them.

"If I stay in London," he continued, quite seriously, "I shall pick out a beefy policeman and fight him. Then I shall get locked up, and my name will be in the papers, and my uncle will see it, and have a fit, and die. I don't want my uncle to have a fit, and die, or I shall feel that I am responsible for his death. So I must emigrate."

Suddenly he recalled the words and manner of the Baron von Kerber. They came to him with the vividness of a new impression. He sought for the card in his pocket. "Baron Franz von Kerber, 118, Queen's Gate, W.," it read.

"Sounds like an Austrian name," he reflected. "But the girl was English, a thoroughbred, too. What was it he said? 'Work of the right sort, for a man with brains and pluck.' Well, I shall give this joker a call. If he wants me to tackle anything short of crime, I'm his man. Failing him, I shall see Jack to-morrow, when he is off duty."

A red banner was staggering up Northumberland Avenue, and he caught a glimpse of a fat man in the midst of the lean ones.

"Oh, dash those fellows, they give me the hump," he growled, and he turned his back on them a second time. But no military pomp or startled horses offered new adventure that day. He wandered about the streets, ate a slow luncheon, counted his money, seventeen shillings all told, went into the British Museum, and dawdled through its galleries until he was turned out. Then he bought a newspaper, drank some tea, and examined the shipping advertisements.

His mind was fixed on South Africa. Somehow, it never occurred to him that the fur-clothed Baron might find him suitable employment. Nevertheless, he went to 118, Queen's Gate, at seven o'clock. The footman who opened the door, seemed to be expecting him.

"Mr. King?" said the man.

This struck Royson as distinctly amusing.

"Something like that," he answered, but the footman had the face of a waxen image.

"This way, Mr. King."

And Royson followed him up a wide staircase, marveling at the aptness of the name.

CHAPTER II

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THE COMPACT

The Baron Franz von Kerber was in evening dress. He was engrossed in the examination of a faded, or discolored, document when Royson was shown into an apartment, nominally the drawing-room, which the present tenant had converted into a spacious study. An immense map of the Red Sea littoral, drawn and colored by hand, hung on one of the walls; there were several chart cases piled on a table; and a goodly number of books, mainly ancient tomes, were arranged on shelves or stacked on floor and chairs. This was the room of a worker. Von Kerber's elegant exterior was given a new element of importance by his surroundings.

That was as much as Royson could note before the Baron looked up from the letter he was reading. It demanded close scrutiny, because it was written in Persi-Arabic.

"Ah, glad to see you, Mr. King," he said affably. "Sit there," and he pointed to an empty chair. Dick knew that this seat in particular was selected because it would place him directly in front of a cluster of electric lights. He waited until the door was closed.

"By the way," he said, "why do you call me 'King'? That is not my name, but it is rather extraordinary that you should

have hit on it, because it is part of a nickname I had at school."

He was fully at ease now. Poverty and anxiety can throw even a Napoleon out of gear, but Richard Royson was hard as granite in some ways, and the mere decision to go to South Africa had driven the day's distempered broodings from his mind.

"I thought I heard the officer who spoke to you in Buckingham Palace
Road address you as King," explained von Kerber.

"Yes, that is true," admitted Royson. He felt that it would savor of the ridiculous, in his present circumstances, were he to state his nickname in full and explain the significance of it. In fact, he was resolved to accept the five-pound note which the Baron would probably offer him, and be thankful for it. Hence, the pseudonym rather soothed his pride.

Von Kerber placed the Arabic scrawl under a paperweight. He was a man who plumed himself on a gift of accurate divination. Such a belief is fatal. For the third time that day, he misunderstood the Englishman's hesitancy.

"What's in a name?" he quoted, smilingly. "Suppose I continue to call you King? It is short, and easily remembered, and your English names puzzle me more than your language, which is difficult enough, yes?"

"Then we can leave it at that," agreed Royson.

"I thought so. Well, to come to business. What can you do?"

"It would be better, perhaps, if you told me what you want me to do."

"Can you ride?"

"Yes."

"Have you ever been to sea?"

Royson pricked up his ears at this. "The sea!" suggested undreamed-of possibilities. And von Kerber certainly had the actor's facial art of conveying much more than the mere purport of his words. The map, the charts, assumed a new meaning. Were they scenic accessories? Had this foreigner taken the whim to send him abroad on some mission? He decided to be less curt in his statements.

"If I simply answered your question I should be compelled to say 'No,'" he replied. "So far as my actual sea-going is concerned, it has consisted of trips across the Channel when I was a boy. Yet I am a fair sailor. I can handle a small yacht better than most men of my age. My experience is confined to a lake, but it is complete in that small way. And I taught myself the rudiments of navigation as a pastime."

"Ah!"

The Baron expressed both surprise and gratification by the monosyllable. Royson was weighing his companion closely now, and he came to the conclusion, that there were qualities in that tall, thin, somewhat effeminate personality which he had not detected during their brief meeting of the morning. Von Kerber was good-looking, with something of the dignity and a good deal of the aspect of a bird of prey. His slender frame was well-knit. His sinuous hands hinted at unexpected strength. Were Royson told that his possible employer was a master of the rapier he would have credited it. And the Baron, for his part, was rapidly changing the first-formed estimate of his guest.

"Pray forgive me if I seem to intrude on your personal affairs," he said; "but, taking your own words, you are—how do you say it—*schlimm—aux abois*—"

"Hard up. Yes."

"What? You speak German, or is it French?"

"German, a little. I am understandable in French."

"Ah."

Again von Kerber paused. Royson smiled. Had he striven to mislead the other man as to his character he could not have succeeded so admirably. And the Baron read the smile according to his own diagnosis. He was sure that this well-educated, gentlemanly, yet morose-mannered young Englishman was under a cloud—that he had broken his country's laws, and been broken himself in the process. And von Kerber was searching for men of that stamp. They would do things that others, who pinned their faith to testimonials, certificates, and similar vouchers of repute, might shy at.

"I think you are one to be trusted?" he went on.

"I am glad you think that."

"Yes. I soon make up my mind. And to-day you acted as one man among a thousand. Miss Fenshawe, the lady in the carriage, enlightened me afterwards. I saw only part of your fine behavior. You were quick and fearless. Those are the qualities I seek, but I demand obedience, too, and a still tongue, yes?"

"I would not betray a man who trusted me," said Dick. "If I disagreed with you I would leave you. I fell out with the son of my last employer, so I left him, a fortnight ago. Yet I have kept my reasons to myself."

The memory of that falling out was yet vivid. He had filled the position of foreign correspondence clerk to an export firm in the city. One evening, returning late to the office, he surprised the typist, a rather pretty girl, in tears. She blurted out some broken words which led him to interview the young gentleman who represented the budding talent of the house; and the result was lamentable. The senior partner dismissed him next day, telling him he was lucky he had escaped arrest for a murderous assault, and, as for the girl, she was like the rest of her class, anxious only to inveigle a rich young fool into marriage. The point of view of both father and son was novel to Royson, and their ethics were vile, but he gave the girl, who was sent away at the same time, half of the six pounds he had in his pocket, and wished he had used his fist instead of his open hand on the junior partner's face.

This, of course, had singularly little bearing on his declaration to von Kerber, who metaphorically stuck his talons into that portion of Royson's utterance which interested him. He bent across the table, leaning on his curved fingers, spread apart, like claws.

"Ah," he said slowly. "That is good. You would not betray a man who trusted you. You mean that?"

"I do."

"Very well, then. I offer you the position of second mate on my yacht, the *Aphrodite*. She is a sailing vessel, with auxiliary steam, a seaworthy craft, of two hundred and eighty tons. I pay well, but I ask good service. The salary is £20 per month, all found. The captain, two officers, and fourteen men receive ten per cent of the gross profits of a

certain undertaking—the gross profits, remember—divided in proportion to their wages. If successful, your share, small though it sounds, will be large enough to make you a comparatively rich man. Do you accept, yes?"

Dick Royson felt his heart thumping against his ribs. "Why, of course, I accept," he cried. "But your terms are so generous, to a man without a profession, that I must ask you one thing? Is the affair such as an honest man can take part in?"

"It is. No one can cavil at its honesty. Yet we may encounter difficulties. There may be fighting, not against a government, but to defend our—our gains—from those who would rob us."

"I'm with you, heart and soul," cried Royson, stirred out of his enforced calmness. "Indeed, I am exceedingly obliged to you. I am at a loss to account for my amazing good luck."

The Baron snapped his fingers with a fine air. "Good luck!" he exclaimed. "There is no such thing. A man with intelligence and nerve grasps the opportunity when it presents itself. You took it this morning. You may say that you might not have been given the chance. Nonsense, my dear Mr. King! Missing that, you would have found another. Let me tell you that I have created a place for you on the ship's roll. You took my fancy. I had already secured my crew. They are all Englishmen—stupid fellows, some of them, but trustworthy. You are a trustworthy race, yes?"

"That is our repute. I have met exceptions."

"Oh, as for that, every man has his price. That is why I pay well. Now, I am going out to dine. The *Aphrodite* sails this week. You will sign an agreement, yes?"

"Delighted," said Dick, though bitter experience had taught him that von Kerber's last question might reveal some disagreeable feature hitherto unseen, just as the sting of the scorpion lies in its tail.

The Baron handed him a printed document.

"Read that," he said. "You need have no fear of legal quibbles. It contains nothing unreasonable, but I insist on its observance in letter and spirit."

Certainly, no unfair demand was made by the brief contract which Royson glanced at. He noticed that the *Aphrodite* was described as "owned by Hiram Fenshawe, Esq., of Chalfount Manor, Dorset, and Emperor's Gate, London, W.," while Baron Franz von Kerber figured as "controller and head of the expedition." The agreement was to hold good for six months, with an option, "vesting solely in the said Baron Franz von Kerber," to extend it, month by month, for another equal period. There were blanks for dates and figures—, and one unusual clause read:

"The undersigned hereby promises not to divulge the vessel's destination or mission, should either, or both, become known to him; not to give any information which may lead to inquiry being made by others as to her destination or mission, and not to make any statement, in any form whatsoever, as to the success or otherwise of the voyage at its conclusion, unless at the request of the said Baron Franz von Kerber. The penalty for any infringement of this clause, of which Baron Franz von Kerber shall be the judge, shall be dismissal, without any indemnity or payment of the special bonus hereinafter recited."

Then followed the salary clause, and a stipulation as to the ten per cent share of the gross profits. The Baron's promises could not have been phrased in more straightforward style.

"Give me a pen," said Royson, placing the paper on a blotting pad.

There was an unconscious masterfulness in his voice and manner which seemed to startle von Kerber. In very truth, the younger man was overjoyed at the astounding turn taken by his fortunes. The restraint he had imposed on himself earlier was gone. He wanted to wring the Baron's hand and hail him as his best friend. Perhaps the other deemed this attitude a trifle too free and easy in view of the relations that would exist between them in the near future.

"You will find a pen on the ink-stand," said he, quietly, stooping, over some papers on a corner of the table. Then he added, apparently as an afterthought:

"Don't forget your name, Mr. King."

The hint brought Royson back to earth. He signed "Richard King," dried the ink carefully, and marveled a little at his re-christening and its sequel.

"When and where shall I report myself for duty, sir?" he asked.

Von Kerber looked up. His tone grew affable again, and Dick had learnt already that it is a token of weakness when a man insists on his own predominance.

"First let me fill in a date and the amount of your salary." The Baron completed and signed a duplicate. "Get that stamped at Somerset House, in case of accident," he continued, "I might have been killed this very day, you

know. One of my servants will witness both documents. Before he comes in, put this envelope in your pocket. It contains half of your first month's salary in advance, and you will find in it a card with the address of a firm of clothiers, who will supply your outfit free of charge. Call on them early to-morrow, as the time is short, and you are pretty long, yes? Report yourself to the same people at four o'clock on Wednesday afternoon. They will have your baggage ready, and give you full directions. From that moment you are in my service. And now, the order is silence, yes?"

While the Baron was speaking he touched an electric bell. The waxen-faced man-servant appeared, laboriously wrote "William Jenkins" where he was bid, and escorted Royson to the door. The Baron merely nodded when Dick said "Good night, sir." He had picked up an opera hat and overcoat from a chair, but was bestowing a hasty farewell glance on the Persi-Arabic letter.

A closed carriage and pair of horses were standing in front of the house, and Royson recognized the coachman. It was that same Spong who had groveled in the mud of Buckingham Palace Road nine hours ago. And the man knew him again, for he raised his whip in a deferential salute.

"Not much damage done this morning?" cried Dick.

"No, sir. I drove 'em home afterwards, broken pole an' all," said Spong.

"That's not the same pair, is it?"

"No, sir. This lot is theayter, the bays is park."

So Mr. Hiram Fenshawe, whoever he was, owned the yacht, and ran at least two fine equipages from his town

house. He must be a wealthy man. Was he the father of that patrician maid whose gratitude had not stood the strain of Royson's gruffness? Or, it might be, her brother, seeing that he was associated with von Kerber in some unusual enterprise? What was it? he wondered. "There may be fighting," said von Kerber. Dick was glad of that. He had taken a solemn vow to his dying mother that he would not become a soldier, and the dear lady died happy in the belief that she had snatched her son from the war-dragon which had bereft her of a husband. The vow lay heavy on the boy's heart daring many a year, for he was a born man-at-arms, but he had kept it, and meant to keep it, though not exactly according to the tenets of William Penn. Somehow, his mother's beautiful face, wanly exquisite in that unearthly light which foreshadows the merging of time into eternity, rose before him now as he passed from the aristocratic dimness of Prince's Gate into the glare and bustle of Knightsbridge. A newsboy rushed along, yelling at the top of his voice. The raucous cry took shape: "Kroojer's reply. Lytest from Sarth Hafricar." That day's papers had spoken of probable war, and Royson wanted to be there. He had dreamed of doing some work for the press, and was a reader and writer in his spare time, while he kept his muscles fit by gymnastics. But those past yearnings were merged in his new calling. He was a sailor now, a filibuster of sorts. The bo's'n's whistle would take the place of the bugle-call. Would that have pleased his mother? Well, poor soul, she had never imagined that her son would be compelled to chafe his life out at a city desk. The very, air of London had become oppressive; the hurrying crowd was

unsympathetic to his new-found joy of living; so, without any well-defined motive, he sought the ample solitude of the park.

Be it noted that he usually went straight from point to point without regard to obstacles. Hence, in his devious wanderings of that remarkable day, he was departing from fixed habit, and, were he a student of astrology, he would assuredly have sought to ascertain what planets were in the ascendant at a quarter-past ten in the morning, and half-past seven in the evening. For he had scarcely reached the quiet gloom of the trees when a man, who had followed him since he quitted von Kerber's house, overtook him and touched his arm.

"Beg pardon," said the stranger, "but are you the gentleman who called on Baron von Kerber half an hour ago?"

"Yes." Taken unawares, Dick was thrown off his guard for the instant.

"And you left his house just now?"

"Yes."

"To prevent a mistake, may I ask your name?"

"Certainly. It is Royson, Richard Royson."

"And address?"

A curious ring of satisfaction in the newcomer's voice carried a warning note with it. Dick was conscious, too, that he had departed from the new role assigned to him by his employer, yet it would be absurd to begin explaining that he was not known as Royson, but as King, in connection with von Kerber. The blunder annoyed him, and he faced his questioner squarely.

"Before I give you any more information I want to know who you are," he said.

His downright way of speaking appeared to carry conviction.

"Well, Mr. Royson, I don't mind telling you that I am a private inquiry agent," was the ominous answer. "I am retained by a gentleman who brings a very serious charge against von Kerber, and, as I have reason to believe that you are only slightly mixed up in this affair at present, I am commissioned to offer you a handsome reward for any valuable information you may give my client or procure for him in the future."

"Indeed!" said Dick, who was debating whether or not to knock the man down.

"Yes. We mean business, I assure you. This is no common matter. Von Kerber is an Austrian, and my client is an Italian. Perhaps you know how they hate each other as nations, and these two have a private quarrel as well."

"What does your employer want to find out?" asked Dick.

"Well, as a start, he wants to know why von Kerber is shipping a crew for a yacht called the *Aphrodite*."

"Then he has learned something already?"

"Oh, that was too easy. Any one can pump a half-drunken sailor."

The private inquiry agent spoke confidentially. He fancied he had secured the sort of aide he needed, a spy of superior intelligence.

"Suppose I give you that first item of news, what is the figure?"

"Say a fiver."