The Profit

John Karter

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Extract

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Piers the Powerful, revered by men and universally desired by women, a legend in his own Armani suit, had waited fifteen long minutes outside the fifty-storey office block for the chauffeur-driven limousine that was to carry him to the meeting of the shareholders in the financial heartland of the City. As he stood outside the soaring edifice that towered over London's Isle of Dogs like some vast spaceship from the outer realms of the cosmos, and watched the sleek black limousine purring towards him through the streets teeming with traffic and office workers, he paused for a moment to consider the task that lay before him, and his heart was filled to overflowing with a singular kind of joy.

As Piers descended the steps, his diamond-encrusted Rolex glinting in the sunlight, he looked out past the sprawl of office buildings and across the vast expanses of the River Thames and a far-off look appeared in his eye. Reaching with irritation for his mobile phone, which had begun to sing out its familiar little tune as yet another well-wisher called to offer sycophantic words of encouragement, he muttered a few terse words, summarily put an end to the call, and thrust it back into the silk-lined pocket of his suit.

After stooping momentarily to wipe away a speck of dust, which had settled on one of his immaculate Gucci loafers, his gaze was caught by a pigeon pecking hungrily at a crust thrown by an elderly woman clutching a bag of stale bread to her bosom. As he watched the bird suddenly take flight and disappear into the skies, his mind began to carry him back to the days of his childhood. And as the rumble of a train passing close by shook him from his reverie, he was seized by an all-consuming feeling of sadness that momentarily eclipsed the burgeoning sense of *joie de vivre* in his soul.

As he continued to descend the steps he brushed hard against the old woman, sending her tumbling to the ground and scattering her bag of bread across the pavement like giant snowflakes. Ignoring her bitter cries of remonstration, as she attempted slowly and painfully to lift herself to her feet, he refocussed his mind on sealing the execution of his latest and greatest takeover, visualising how he would present it to the meeting with complete conviction and authority despite the opposition of those cursed few who had sworn to depose him as Chairman and Chief Executive.

For, he told himself as his limousine made painfully slow progress through the traffic towards him, whatever the personal feuds and settling of old scores underlying this monumental corporate coup, and independent of the fact that it affords me the opportunity to swell my personal fortune many times over, is it not true that I am fulfilling my duty to place before the

shareholders the very best opportunities for growth and prosperity?

And though she who read my future from the cards foretold that it would not be with a carefree heart that I will address the meeting, but with a heaviness and a prescience of trouble bubbling through my soul, I will not be swayed for one instant from my chosen path. And though I may feel the sting of bitter opposition before those of limited vision comprehend the implications of the resolution I bring before them, yet still am I at peace with myself. I, of all people, know only too well that true strength is forged in the furnace of adversity, and therefore it is a good thing that they test me in this way.

How is it that I have come this far and stand poised to become the richest man in all of the United Kingdom, featured more on the cover of *Fortune* magazine than even Rupert Murdoch or Richard Branson? Was it not by the sweat of my exquisitely-toned body and the insight of my rapier-like mind that I clawed my way from office junior to the most powerful, most commercially aware, most envied, most desired man in London?

Many were the nights when I lay fatigued to the point of desperation at my desk, knowing that I must rise to greet the challenge of a new dawn, even though my brain was aching from the knife-edge manoeuvrings of the previous day's trading. And now, as I reap the princely rewards of a business empire that increases daily and is making its presence felt in all four corners

of the globe, I know that I shall not leave the meeting today without scars from bitter rivals. Yet though I am mistrusted and misunderstood by those with infinitely less inspiration, I know also, as certainly as the Thames reaches out to the mighty ocean, that when the cut and thrust of battle is ended I will emerge infinitely more powerful and revered.

For my ways are not the ways of ordinary, pinstriped city men. My ways are the ways of Onassis, Trump and Getty, yet even more unerring and irresistible than theirs, for the inner light that guides my path towards domination of world markets on an unprecedented scale has not even begun to reach its full magnitude. Given that I have walked for a mere thirty years on this earth, and only a third of those have been given over to honing the innate skills and qualities of the ultimate entrepreneur and tycoon, I am but a weanling in relative terms. If I have accomplished this much in my commercial infancy, how much more will I achieve when my business brain has begun to maximise its potential?

And as his limousine with the personalised number plate PRO 4IT pulled up at the foot of the steps, and the chauffeur doffed his cap and opened the door for him, he berated the fawning fellow for his lateness and informed him that his job was hanging by a thread. As the chauffeur began to grovel and spewed out a series of excuses about his heart condition playing up again, about his young son being taken ill and rushed into hospital, and about the severity of the traffic, Piers harangued

him even more, telling him that he was a pathetic specimen, and that time was money, and money was the *sine qua non* of life, and that a life lived to the full was a healthy interplay between the management of time and the accumulation, investment and spending of ever greater sums of money.

As the limousine pulled away, and he settled back in his seat and poured himself a drink from the elegant walnut cocktail cabinet, he switched on the television set. And as he flicked through the channels and saw the huge rise in the price of his company's shares on the screen in front of him, he felt his senses soar like the pigeon surging skyward moments earlier. And he knew in his heart that he would find the inspiration to win over those who heard his words that afternoon and fire them up to take on the challenge of his latest and most audacious takeover bid. And he knew, just as certainly, that he would squash the efforts of his enemies, as surely as the elephant crushes the dung beetle beneath its pounding feet.

For what is failure, he asked himself, but the spineless surrender of a man who has relinquished every scintilla of pride and resigned himself to wallow in the mire of self-pity? Often have I felt the sting of Machiavellian manoeuvring and inhaled the stench of double dealing, but still have I clung to my over-riding belief that a man can be anything he wants to be, provided he believes in the very fibre of his being that he is destined for greatness.