

# KINGS OF COMMERCE

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"HEROES OF MODERN ADVENTURE"

WITH TWENTY-NINE ILLUSTRATIONS  
IN HALF-TONE

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## CHAPTER XVI

“HARD WORK THE SECRET OF SUCCESS”

### *The Story of W. R. Morris*

ONE boast which Mr W. R. Morris can truthfully make belongs to no other king of commerce whose story is related in this book, namely, that he is the son of an Indian chief. We do not mean to say that Mr Morris has Red Indian blood in his veins, for he is entirely English. The explanation is this. Many years ago, while still quite a lad, Mr Morris's father emigrated to Canada and went West, where he became driver of a stage-coach. Wild work in those days, when the only white men in the West were miners and ranchers and Indians still took the warpath. The route of his coach ran through Indian territory, and the young driver became so popular with the Red Men that at last they induced him to be recognized as their chief.

But even being chief of an Indian tribe gets tiresome after a while, and in the end Mr Morris, Senior, returned to England, and made his home in Worcester. In Worcester W. R. Morris was born, but he did not live there long, for presently his father moved to Oxford, where his son got his schooling. From his earliest years young Morris had a turn for mechanics, so it is not surprising that when he left school at the age of sixteen he entered the service of a bicycle-maker. The motor-car craze had hardly yet begun, but every one rode bicycles, and the

high roads were full of them at week-ends. Little shops were cropping up all along the roadsides, where punctured tyres could be mended and where lamps and oil and various odds and ends were kept in stock.

But a boy of the type of young Morris seldom works long for anyone but himself, and after only nine months in the shop our hero decided to start on his own account. The fact that he was only seventeen, and that his entire capital was five pounds, daunted him not at all. "Hard work is the secret of success," has always been the motto of Mr Morris. "Given the will," he said, in one of his speeches, "one can do almost anything." And by dint of working double tides he soon built up a prosperous little business. Presently he began to make a bicycle bearing his own name, which was so cheap and good that it sold well in the neighbourhood. Not content with push-bicycles, the young designer produced a motor-cycle which was years in advance of anything yet produced, for among other refinements it had a vertical engine and counter-shaft drive.

The motor-bicycle is actually older than the motor-car driven by petrol, for Gottlieb Daimler fitted his first petrol-engine to a bicycle so long ago as 1886. There were motor-bicycles on British and French roads in the very early days of the present century, but they were such crude arrangements that their owners spent more than half their running-time in roadside repairs.

This was the period when motor-cars, having got over their early troubles, were becoming really popular. In 1911 there were 47,000 private cars in use in Great Britain, and the number was rising by ten to twelve thousand yearly. But British manufacturers were still concentrating their energies on what may be called the

luxury car. There were practically no cars made of less than fifteen horse-power, and the average nominal power of English-made cars was twenty to twenty-five. Naturally these cars were costly both to buy and to run, and the consequence was an enormous import of cheap American cars, especially of the Ford. At that date there was no car introduced by British makers which gave anything like the value for money offered by the Ford. In power, in hill-climbing, and in cheapness of running there was nothing like it at the price.

Mr Morris, with that far-sightedness which seems the peculiar property of men of his type, realized that there was an immense future for a light car that would be cheap to buy and run, yet powerful enough to carry four people on their business or holidays. He set to work to design such a car, and in 1912, taking his courage in both hands, bought a small factory at Cowley and started manufacturing. There were, it must be remembered, others who were experimenting at the same date with light cars, but these were for the most part ramshackle and quite untrustworthy freaks.

No one but himself knows quite how much work young Morris put into his car. He has admitted that he sometimes worked thirty-six hours at a stretch. Remember, he was then little over twenty years old and—what is the most wonderful part of it all—had little theoretical training in engineering. All he had learned was self-taught, and therefore practical. In 1913 he produced and put on the road the first Morris-Oxford car, a vehicle of the exact size and performance for which the great middle classes were looking—the people, we mean, who could not afford the luxury cars which were being built by all the well-known firms of the time. The quality of



these early Morris cars may be judged by the fact that many of those built in 1913-14 are still running at the time of the writing of this chapter, the middle of the year 1928, and that of a consignment of six Morris cars sent to India early in 1914 five were still in active service fourteen years later.

In 1914 came the Great War, and the bottom was knocked out of private motoring. The number of private cars in use in Great Britain dropped from 92,000 to 50,000. During those years the Morris factory was engaged in War-work, and in 1919 when peace had come Mr Morris had to start all over afresh. His thoroughness in the service of his country had nearly ruined him, and when the time came for the instalment of new plant and machinery for the manufacture of his cars he hardly knew which way to turn for the necessary cash. Again it was a case of working night as well as day, and no one with less than Mr Morris's tremendous will-power and dynamic energy could have succeeded in the terrific task before him.

The worst of a man like Mr Morris, from the point of view of his historian, is his incurable modesty. He simply will not describe his struggles. He only smiles and says, "Well, I got through."

He did get through, for at a time when many manufacturers had become slack and casual and were turning out miserably poor cars his were so good that he found an eager public clamouring to buy them. Sales increased, output rose, and even when the great slump of 1920 brought many concerns crashing to the ground the sale of Morris cars was very little affected. Half the industry was bankrupt, and there was a gathering of the survivors to discuss to what point prices of cars could be increased.

Then Mr Morris dropped a bomb by reducing the price of all Morris models. This made him highly unpopular with the other manufacturers, but at the same time brought them into line, forcing them to set their houses in order so as to compete, and the next twelve months showed that Mr Morris alone had the true foresight. For with the reduction in price the demand rose, and whereas in 1920 the output of British cars was only 122,000, in 1921 it jumped with a huge leap to a quarter of a million.

Now the Morris concern forged ahead with a vengeance. The hours of careful thought and the unstinted energy put into the design of the Morris began to tell. Here was the range of cars for which every one had been waiting. Output increased, but the demand ran constantly ahead of the supply. New factories had to be built, and the original tiny building was lost in a huge hive of industry, spreading over more than eighty acres of ground. With the advantage of buying materials in huge quantities a further cut in price became possible without any sacrifice in quality, and for the first time in the history of motoring a soundly constructed, reliable, and economical British-made car was offered to the public at a price which put the American competitors out of the running. By the year 1926 the output had increased to over a thousand cars a week, figures hitherto unknown in the history of British motor-car manufacture, and the number of men employed in the factories rose from 3500 to 4000.

Success never means slackness to a man of Mr Morris's type. Finding that the famous old Wolseley Motor Company was in danger of passing into foreign hands, he bought the whole concern outright for the huge sum of £730,000. Most men would have shied at such a risk,

but Mr Morris was confident that his powers of organization could pilot the company safely through its bad time.

Mr Morris also owns Morris Commercial Cars, Ltd., and Morris-Leon-Bollee, one of the oldest firms in the French motor industry, which, like the Wolseley, had fallen on evil days, but has been revived by its new owner's efforts. One more of his many enterprises is the Morris Garages, Ltd., of Oxford, makers of the famous M. G. sports car. The four-cylinder M. G. is probably the fastest standard car of its comparatively small horse-power in existence. A few days before penning this chapter the writer had the offer of a lift in one of these cars from a place in Gloucestershire back to Oxford. The distance was twenty-five miles, the time evening, the road fairly good, but by no means straight. One can only hope that none of the 'speed cops'—as they call them in America—will notice this statement, but if the truth is to be told the little M. G. covered the twenty-five miles in thirty-two minutes, and that without taking any undue risks, for we 'slowed' at every corner, every cross-road, and every village.

No employer realizes more clearly than Mr Morris the need for making his men happy and comfortable. His opinion is that if you pay men well and give them sufficient hours of leisure they can amuse themselves. With money in his pocket and daylight hours at his disposal any man knows where to find health and amusement after his own fashion. This opinion does not, however, prevent the organization of a Welfare Committee, which is certainly second to none.

Although he is now one of the richest men in England Mr Morris works as hard as ever. He takes the keenest interest in the smallest details of his enormous business,

he lives and breathes motor-cars. Although he has on his pay-roll many highly paid experts in designing and the like he himself remains in absolute control of the design of his own cars, and in spite of the fact that he had no technical training has an uncanny way of putting his finger instantly on the right spot.

Money, as money, means nothing to him, and he and Mrs Morris live in the very simplest style up on the breezy heights of Huntercombe above Henley. Mr Morris is still a young man, one of the youngest whose stories are told in this volume, and there is no doubt but that he will go much farther. He believes that the time has come to develop British trade with the Dominions, and at the time of writing is busily engaged in formulating plans for the extension of his business overseas, having just carried out a personal survey of world markets in a whirlwind tour round the world, covering 37,000 miles in three months.

The accounts of Morris Motors show that for the year 1927 the Company earned more than a million and a quarter on a capital of five millions. Out of this capital Mr Morris himself owns the whole of the two million ordinary shares, yet although there was a balance of nearly a million after paying the preference shareholders Mr Morris refused to take a penny. He put the whole of the balance into the reserve fund. Is there another man in the whole business world who would have exercised such self-denial ?