

The RECLUSE of FIFTH AVENUE

By WYNDHAM MARTYN

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INTRODUCTORY

For many years Sneed, faithful butler to Peter Milman, in the quaint old mansion on lower Fifth avenue, had watched his employer go through all the city's daily papers and carefully clip items and news articles. Later these clippings would be arranged systematically with thousands of others held in the library in steel-lined drawers, securely locked. Sneed and Milman had grown old together. Each was dependent upon the other and apparently as much a part of a past generation as the old house in which they lived was representative of the former aristocracy of its section of the city.

Sneed wondered why his employer, who had withdrawn from the world and seemed to live only among his books, pictures and fine collection of antique objects of art, should have been so eager to keep in touch with active affairs through the newspapers. Had the butler realized the careful and thorough system of Milman's work, he would have known those clippings represented a more complete bureau of the lives, histories, crimes and other statistics of a majority of the citizens of Manhattan island than could have been found within the archives of the police department or any professional detective agency.

The fact is that Peter Milman, gentleman and scholarly recluse, was better equipped for real detective work than almost any other man in the city, so that when his closest friend was ruined and his own fortune about to suffer wreck through the machinations of a man high in the politics and financial affairs of New York, he knew just what course to pursue against the enemy. The favorableness of Milman's position was enhanced by the fact that, to the few of the modern generation who knew him, he was regarded as an eccentric, almost a hermit and about the least dangerous of any individual who could have been found in the metropolis' vast horde. His strength really existed in his apparent weakness. This is a new and very agreeable sort of mystery story.

CHAPTER I

It was characteristic of Peter Milman that he should bear the shock of the second of his life's tragedies with no visible symptom of emotion.

The first of these blows had been dealt him twenty-five years before. He had suffered it in this same richly furnished room of his house in Lower Fifth avenue. Sneed, the butler, who had just handed him the morning papers, had brought him a quarter of a century ago—the letter in which his wife told him she had gone away and would not return.

The second blow swept away his comfortable fortune. At fifty, without near relatives and long estranged from old friends, Peter Milman would be compelled to move from the house where he hoped to die—to mix with the world he had forgotten, among people he had grown to mistrust.

The three morning papers Sneed placed before him, although they varied somewhat in their telling of Hazen Brewer's failure, had substantially the same account of it.

Brewer's liabilities were fifteen million dollars. His assets were given as less than five thousand dollars. Somewhere, sandwiched among these vast debts, was Peter Milman's modest million.

The butler, sensing ill news from the hastily read captions, grew relieved when he saw his employer take out his pocket-scissors and begin to clip extracts from the papers as interested him. Later these clippings would be arranged systematically with the thousands of others which during long years Milman had gathered. In the library, steel-lined drawers, carefully locked, held the harvest of these gleanings.

At three o'clock Peter Milman came down the stairs and selected a cane. He was dressed as though he were going to pay an afternoon call. He was one of those slight, small-boned men so often seen in the dwindling families of races near extinction. His smartly cut coat, his immaculate silk hat and distinguished cane made him seem, from a rear view, a boyish figure. It was when one saw the pale, lined face, the tired eyes, and the thin supercilious mouth, that one realized this was a man to whom the world has long since seemed empty vanity. On the whole, Peter Milman presented the appearance of one to whom familiarity would be distasteful and friendship the slow growth of years.

He was on his way to see his lawyer and find out how he stood financially. He felt almost certain that he had fallen with Hazen Brewer. Not for more than twenty years had Peter Milman been so much disturbed. Ruin meant giving up his home. The idea

was intolerable. He entered the private office of Herman Loddon as one assured of his position and certain of his welcome. Assuredly Loddon, who owed so much to the Milmans, would be able to supply him with the information he desired.

The first direct intimation of the difference between a millionaire and a poor man was given him as he entered Loddon's room. Loddon remained seated. Hitherto he had risen clumsily to his feet at sight of his distinguished client and with awkward gestures motioned him to the seat of honor. And his face had been wreathed with smiles. For the first time Peter Milman saw the man Herman Loddon as he really was. Loddon hated him, and had always hated him. There could be no other explanation of his lack of courtesy and the sneering smile with which he greeted his client. For a quarter-century he had worn a disarming smile. Hazen Brewer's failure had swept away the necessity for using it any more. Things, then, were desperate.

Milman's manner was still as loftily courteous as ever.

"I hope you have been able to find out the extent of Mr. Brewer's misfortunes," he said.

"Misfortunes!" Loddon cried. "His crimes, you mean."

"I am not asking you to prejudice my friend," Peter Milman said quietly. "I want to know if the morning papers are correct in stating that his entire fortune has disappeared."

"They are," Loddon answered with an appearance of satisfaction, "and as you wouldn't take my advice about your investments, your money has gone too. I tell you, Milman, you've only got what I prophesied a million times."

Milman! Never before had Herman Loddon presumed so much. Loddon's father had been the Milman coachman at their country place at Hastings years before. When he had been killed in a runaway accident, Peter Milman, the elder, had taken charge of the son's education and had eventually set him up in practice and given him his first case.

"Then nothing is left?" Milman asked.

"Not a cent. You're luckier than Brewer is, because you've got a valuable lot on Fifth avenue, and there are



"Have You Always Hated Me, Loddon?"

fifty men waiting to make you an offer for it and put a big building where that mausoleum of yours stands."

Milman said nothing. He allowed Loddon's sneer at his home to pass. Loddon did not know that, when Hazen Brewer incurred the enmity of great financial interests, and was so hardly pressed for money, he had come by night to Milman and begged in utter desperation for a loan. It was Hazen Brewer who had arranged the mortgage on the Milman home. It was Brewer alone who had profited by the affair. And this mortgage was shortly to fall due, and there was no money to pay it.

Peter Milman could have sold the house and lot and retired to some other place in relative comfort until the end of his life had he been less obstinately desirous of remaining where he had been born.

"You can't stay there, if that's what you are trying to figure out," Loddon said brutally. "The taxes are heavy and you have some outstanding debts.

My account, for instance. Sell it and live in Italy is my advice." He yawned rudely.

Peter Milman's question turned his red face a deeper hue.

"Have you always hated me, Loddon?"

The lawyer did not answer immediately. This hate of his was a complex thing, less the result of a deep injury than of a thousand envies. He had always resented Milman's discriminations when social functions were still a part of his life. It is true that he had dined many times in the Milman house, but his wife had never been asked there. He came to understand in the end that he was asked because Peter Milman found it a less tedious business than going to Loddon's office.

It was this fancied slight to his wife which most angered the lawyer. She was a social climber, and the magic of the Milman name was a tradition in New York. Her husband, ashamed of his obscure origin, had claimed to have been at school with Peter Milman, and Mrs. Loddon felt that, were he to insist, she could be a guest in the envied home.

Loddon hated Milman because, despite his unwise boasting, he knew he had never convinced Milman of his importance.

"Always," he said slowly, with a rush of relief at being at last able to voice his emotions. "Yes, I hated you when my father drove you to school and I couldn't get either inside with you or on the box with him. I've hated you for your friends and the way you've expected me to come when you felt like calling." Loddon laughed sneeringly. "But that's all done with. I'm on top and only pity you now."

"I think I prefer the former emotion," Milman murmured.

"In future," Loddon said majestically. "I shall have too many big things to attend to to have time for you. I'll turn your affairs over to my managing clerk."

"Thank you," Milman said, rising. "I shall not come again. Send in your bill at once. You have been loyal to our interests, and that is why we employed you." Peter Milman passed over the Loddon outburst of hate as though it had not interested him.

Herman Loddon watched him depart with the feeling that his triumph had not been as assured as he could have wished. He had won no look of fear or apprehension from the man he hated. Perhaps, after all, there was something about men like Milman different from him. Then the thought of his two millions reassured him and he lumbered to the window and watched his former client cross the road. The great limousine opposite would presently take Herman Loddon to his lavishly appointed apartment, where he would dine largely. He pictured Milman's solitary and dismal meal. There would not be many more for him in the family home on Lower Fifth avenue. The Patrician age was gone.

Peter Milman reached his home without encountering anyone who knew him. Fashionable New York with her residences and clubs had long passed on her northward way. Those few houses which, like his own, were still owned by their builders' families, were mostly unoccupied save for a few weeks in the year. With these people Milman had now nothing in common. He had rejected their overtures. They spoke of him with pity, almost with contempt. A legend of eccentricity grew up about him and presently gave way to rumors of mental deterioration.

Sneed, who concerned himself greatly with the sudden change in his employer's habits, saw him return with obvious relief. Sneed had read the papers and realized the extent of Hazen Brewer's troubles. He wished he dared ask Mr. Milman if he, too, were badly hit. Peter Milman's face told him nothing. Nor was his customary manner changed.

"I am going over the upper rooms after luncheon," said Milman. "Please see that they are in order."

The upper rooms. It was in these spacious chambers that the old furniture was stored about which experts raved. The six rooms were arranged as a museum. Milman moved from piece to piece. Everything had its definite association. He stopped before an eighteenth century card table covered with sealskin. On this table, in 1745, a Peter Milman had lost a thousand pounds on a cut of cards with a blue-blood of South Carolina.

Those six chairs, called "banister-backed by their creator. Heppelwhite, had been made to order for a Milman.

There was one room devoted to the Dutch furniture that had come to the Milmans from a marriage with a Van Slyter heiress. Peter Milman bent down to look at a Dutch church stool which a Van Slyter servant had carried to a place of worship two hundred years before. It was black in color, and on one side bore a picture of the Last Judgment and some appropriate verses.

"I don't read Dutch," Milman observed, "but I remembered the translation. Listen, Sneed, it may do you good."

"Certainly, sir," said Sneed respectfully.

"The Judgment of God is now prepared; there is still time, leave unwise dom. The pious will be separated from the wicked, God's wisdom circulates the Universe."

"Very true, Mr. Peter, sir," said Sneed. There was a look on his employer's face that he did not understand, something hard and ruthless.

"There are some of the wicked I should very much like to separate from the pious without waiting for post-mortem judgments. I am not sure that such an act would not be a logical way of acquiring merit. I take it, Sneed, that in your essence you are law-abiding?"

"Always," said Sneed with conscious rectitude. "In that respect, Mr. Peter, I'm like you."

"A very admirable frame of mind," said Milman.

Sneed had rarely known him comment on any of the exhibits before. To day it seemed he had a word for everything.

"On this settle with folding candlestick," he observed. "Benjamin Milman fell asleep in the Revolutionary war and was captured by a red-coat major, who gave him liberty owing to his pretty skill on a six-string bass viol. The viol is in the next room. These three mahogany pieces," he said, pausing before a six-legged high case of drawers, "once belonged to the man whom Aaron Burr speaks of as my friend Hamilton whom I killed."

"It was my intention to bequeath them to the Metropolitan," Milman frowned a little. "It will seem like breaking faith with the dead."

Sneed did not yet know that the man he served was insolvent and that all these relics which told so much of the Milman history must come under the hammer. "You can leave me," Milman said, after a pause. "I want to remain here some time."

At six o'clock Sneed ventured to disturb Peter Milman. During the hours he had passed downstairs Sneed thought he understood what his employer meant. He had put things together. He believed Peter Milman was cataloguing his treasures. Hazen Brewer's failure had been as complete as the evening papers proclaimed.

Peter Milman's manner vaguely disturbed his butler. There was a smile where usually mild cynicism reigned. Almost it seemed as if the sword which Milman held had imbued him with swashbuckling courage of that hard-drinking, roystering Oliver Milman who had been a notable figure in the Colonial wars.

"I am not sure," Peter Milman observed, "that man made a good exchange when he put aside the sword and depended upon law and its chicaneries."

"So I've heard, Mr. Peter, sir," Sneed returned, understanding nothing.

"I was not aware the view was so generally accepted," said his employer. "The man who owned this literally carved his way to fortune. He had fought in Europe before he came here. His God-fearing brother, my own ancestor, disowned him publicly in church on Christmas Sunday and lost all his estate and barns by lightning the next summer. I have always had a sneaking fondness for Captain Olliver."

Sneed followed his master down the broad stairs. The butler regarded himself as a built-in feature of the mansion. He knew that to seek work in the bustling world outside would be repellent and bewildering. He realized that Peter Milman and he were two lonely, friendless men. And they had lost their home because one of them had trusted implicitly in Hazen Brewer. What a price to pay for friendship! Sneed mused unhappily.

He did not understand how it was the other seemed in no way depressed. Sneed was not to know that Captain Olliver's shade had whispered courage into the ear of the last of the Milmans.

CHAPTER II

At ten o'clock on the following morning, Peter Milman entered the offices of a firm of lawyers which had transacted the private business of Hazen Brewer. Henry Payne, the head of the firm, looked troubled when Milman's card was brought in. The interview would not be pleasant for either of them.

"I came," Milman began in his urbane manner, "to find out, if possible, the extent of Mr. Brewer's losses. I might have called up Hazen, but in a moment like this he has worries enough."

"I hope Mr. Brewer is not worrying now."

"Then things are not as bad as they seemed?" Milman's heart pounded as he said it.

"Worse. I've had news for you, Mr. Milman. Poor Hazen Brewer committed suicide in the early hours of this morning. I suppose when he saw there was left nothing but liabilities, his mind gave way."

Payne wished he could discover from Milman's expression how much or little this news meant to him. But Milman had too much control of himself to allow any man to see how stricken he was.

"Poor Hazen," he murmured. "He was one of my oldest and best friends."

A curious tribute, thought the lawyer, to one whose speculations had ruined him. But perhaps the other did not yet realize to what an extent his private fortune was involved.

"The mortgage on my house," Milman began. "I suppose it will be foreclosed?"

"I'm afraid so. There will be a

meeting of his creditors within a day or so. If I can act for you in any way, I shall be only too glad to do so."

"You are very kind," said Peter Milman courteously. He shook Mr. Payne's hand and left.

"A thoroughbred," murmured the lawyer, who had seen many distinguished men listen to bad news in this office. "Poor devil, wiped out absolutely!"

Before going home, Peter Milman took his way to an agency which specialized in French domestic help of the better sort.

"I want," he said to the woman at the desk, "a French butler who will do the entire work of a house in which only a few of the rooms are occupied. A woman comes in by the day to clean the place and the windows, and the furnace is attended to."

"I think I can suit you," she said, and turned to a card index.

"Wait," said the other. "There are other necessary qualifications. He must be a good plain cook and know no English."

"I have a man with very good references who could fill the bill. He came over in the last quota. If you could wait a few minutes, I could arrange to have you meet him."

Achille Lutry was forty-seven, rather terrified with the size and noise of New York, and anxious to begin to save money so that he might return to Amiens and establish a restaurant. The wages he was offered seemed marvellous. The restrictions seemed no burden to him. He had no friends to ask into the house, and the little leisure he was allowed made the saving of his wages certain. He was to report at the house on Lower Fifth avenue tomorrow at noon.

That night at dinner the estimable Sneed noted a certain unusual nervousness in his master's manner. The old butler did not dream of the ill fortune that awaited him.

"Sneed," Peter Milman began, when the coffee had been poured out, "my future household arrangements will be on a different scale from what they have been of late. You have been a faithful servant to me for many years. I am not likely to find your equal. In lieu of notice I shall give you six months' wages. I shall be glad if you will leave before luncheon tomorrow."

"Oh, Mr. Peter, sir," Sneed wailed, "what have I done to be treated like this?"

"Nothing, if I had my way, I should never let you go. You cannot understand how sorry I am. But the thing is inevitable. There are matters which you must not ask me to explain. This is one of them."

"Let me stay," Sneed begged. "I don't want wages. I can do the work we pay that woman for, and sending the furnace is good exercise. This is my home, too, sir."

"Sneed," said the other kindly, "if I tell you that by remaining here you will embarrass me and imperil certain plans I have determined on, will you still want to stay?"

"I'd do anything for you, Mr. Peter," he said brokenly.

"I knew you would. I will say this: If, by any turn of the wheel, things become better, I will have you back."

"The papers say nothing is left," Sneed returned dully.

"If the papers were always correct, this would be a direful world."

Sneed looked into the face of a Peter Milman he did not know, and he had believed he knew his employer in every mood. It seemed to the butler he had discovered a new personality, someone more ruthless, harder, bitterer.

"The man who comes tomorrow will never take your place. You may

"You May Regard Him as a Temporary Expedient."

regard him as a temporary expedient. When you go, Sneed, I shall see one of my few friends depart."

(To be continued)

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