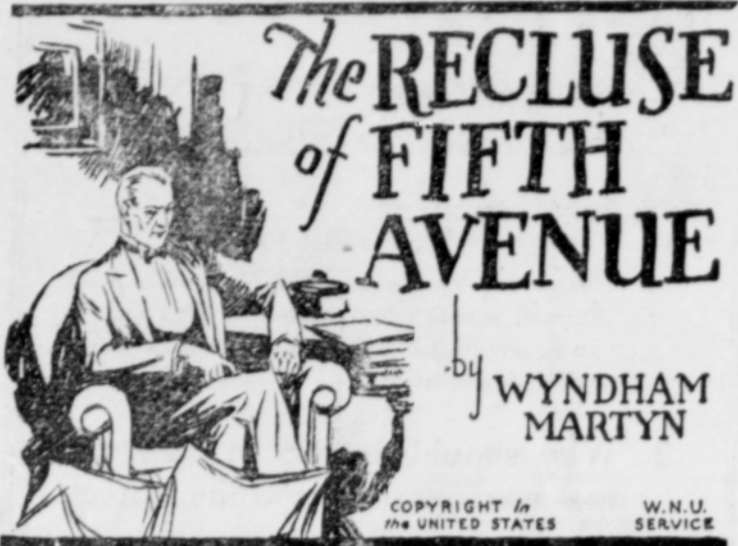

(Continued)

"I heard of that," Bradney said, "and I begged them to give his name so that I could thank him. I have often vowed if ever it were possible to do something for him I would, but that's unlikely. What could I do, who made a bare livelihood?" Bradney surveyed his garb with scorn. "No decent man-servant would admit me to his master's house. I look what I am—a failure, and yet, God knows, not a cent of that money stuck to my fingers. What on earth should I want money for except for my work?"

"This Paul Raxon," Milman continued, "is one of the ablest men in New York. No decent man has a chance when pitted against him and his accomplices. He is not of the usual contractor class. He began life as an architect, but always desired wealth, and found his profession too slow a method to gain it. Yes," Milman said in a slow, meditative way, "I know a great deal about him. I even subscribe to a clipping bureau, so that I may miss nothing. You will be surprised to hear that I had him followed for a long time by a private detective."

"May I ask why?" Bradney returned.

"I shall tell you presently. Let me speak first of the misfortunes, equally undeserved, which befell Mr. Floyd Malet."

The sculptor flushed. "I don't think anyone but myself knows what they were."

"There you are wrong," Milman corrected gently. "A dozen years ago America discovered that Mr. Malet was a genius. Some of you may have seen the heroic figure of Stonewall Jackson at Raleigh. That made him."

"I remember now," Neeland Barnes exclaimed. "There was some sort of wild studio party where a woman was killed. I don't see how that could hurt an artist." Neeland Barnes had formed his opinion of the morals of artists from the fiction writing of sentimental women. "Surely that wouldn't put him down and out?"

"It did," Malet answered bitterly. "A sculptor depends—in this country, at all events—on commissions from public bodies, many of whom have women among them. When my name was besmirched it was deemed unwise to employ me to decorate buildings consecrated to drama, literature, or the arts. Even politics had to be protected from my impure touch! I lost the award I had been definitely promised for a statehouse because my morals were—so the report ran—loose. My failure was just as complete as that of Professor Bradney. I had a little money, and that went in lawyers' fees. My friends were few and not influential.

"Like Alfred Gilbert, I destroyed what I thought was poor, and that is why there are not three of my works left in the world today. I have failed, but I could have done good work if the incredible had not happened."

"As I remember, the thing was rather—er—delicate," Barnes said.

"You shall judge. A poor girl accosted me on the street and said she was starving. To one who had lived so long in Paris, it was nothing out of the way to take a hungry gamine to my studio and give her a meal and a

I Remember It Was Late at Night.

little money. I remember it was late at night, and I first saw her on a bench in Bryant park just as the first snow of the year began to fall. I was selfish enough to think her thin, draped figure would do for one of the models of a group I had in mind which was to be called 'Winter.' She told me something of her history. It was commonplace. I had heard it before. I do not mean it was not true. I mean, rather, that it was the usual story of the ambitious girl trusting too well the man who defers to marry her."

"I know," said Neeland Barnes wisely. "I know. Waiting for the divorce."

"She shrank from going up in the elevator because she was so shabby, so I helped her up the long flights to my studio. She fainted when she got there, and I gave her brandy. She was so ill that I wanted to send for a doctor. Instead she used the telephone. I did not hear the number, but I knew it must be to the man she spoke. Very reluctantly he agreed to come and see her. I think the fact that I insisted on speaking was the cause. Perhaps he imagined I knew his name and more about him."

"Then you didn't know who he was?"

Floyd Malet shook his head. "Nor do I now, but I remember him distinctly. He was a thin man with a black mustache and brown eyes with red flecks in them. I knew he was a man who had been successful with women. I met him at the entrance. He wore a fur coat whose collar concealed his face. Outside it was still snowing hard. I judged him to be one used to getting his own way. I did not like his manner. There was a snarl in it. Perhaps my studio—you know what a dirty, unluxurious place a sculptor's workshop is—did not impress him. The girl had died while I was waiting for him. He cried out that it was a trick I had played him. Then he ran out for a doctor and the police." Malet shrugged his shoulders. "I never saw him again. Sometimes I wonder if he was run over and killed, or if, when he found I did not know his name and did not find any letters in the girl's pocket, he left me to bear the blame.

"I sent for a doctor, who in turn sent for the police. When I told them the story of the man with the fur coat whose face I could not see distinctly, whose name I did not know, and of whose address I was unaware, I could see they thought me lying. And when I told them the girl had not taken the elevator, I could see they thought it was a vulgar intrigue."

"But the man with the fur coat didn't walk up," Neeland Barnes reminded him.

"But the elevator boy denied having seen him," Malet explained. "It was my word against his. The record of the telephone call could not be traced. I made a bad witness. Nobody identified the girl, and as I admitted giving her brandy, the thing was treated in the papers as a drunken debauch, and I was marked as a Parisian decadent. It was my finish."

Malet sank down in his chair. The sensitive face was marked by suffering. The stamp of realized failure seemed upon him. Bradney leaned forward and put an arm about the bowed shoulder of the smaller man. It was a protective, brotherly action born of sudden sympathy and understanding But he had nothing to say.

Malet shivered a little as a light wind swept along the little garden. He rose from his chair and held out his hand to his host.

"You have made me forget and you have made me remember," he said. "I am grateful, Mr. Milman."

"But I cannot let you go yet," said the other. "There should be some cedar logs already blazing in the drawing room." He turned to the others. "We shall find it more agreeable in the house." He put his arm in that of the sculptor. "Never think you are a failure," he said earnestly. "Your Stonewall Jackson is one of the few great things we have."

"You are saying that to hearten me," Malet answered.

"Am I?" Peter Milman laughed. "You shall judge for yourself."

Although the drawing room was a finely proportioned apartment and contained many beautiful things, Malet had eyes only for his marble group which stood near the window. He had never learned where it was, but it was this work he had believed to be his best. He approached it almost nervously. Was he to find, after all, that he was only one of the second-raters? The group had been exhibited under the name of "The Settlers," and represented one of those heroic American families of Colonial days standing at bay, facing death in the form of "King" Philip's Indian warriors.

None spoke as he gazed at it. Even Barnes felt that the emotion which he could not fathom had in it some unusual quality. There were tears in Floyd Malet's eyes as he turned to Peter Milman, and his voice was husky. "Yes," he said in a low voice, "it is good. I should have been among the great ones."

"You are among them," Milman assured him.

CHAPTER IV

When midnight was passed and the four men very comfortably seated about the fire, Neeland Barnes began to think there was to be no unmasking of his past. In a sense he was glad. These two men whom he had begun by despising seemed, after all, to have cut considerable figures once. Barnes was a shrewd judge of men. He thought that they had spoken only the truth. The big man with the eager, gray eyes was most certainly no grafter. And as to the other, Barnes recalled his case well now it was brought to his notice. He had sneered at the sculptor's odd defense and believed it with most men about town a very poor excuse. But now he believed absolutely in Floyd Malet's integrity. In comparison, Neeland Barnes, professional man-of-the-world, felt rather a poor specimen.

"We now come," said Milman, breaking in on his reflections, "to the case of Mr. Neeland Barnes."

Mr. Neeland Barnes groaned inwardly. Exteriorly he was urbane and gracious.

"Shearing the black sheep," he said. "A lesson to all young men. How not to live."

"Mr. Barnes," said Peter Milman, "is not so complex a type as his fellow-guests. He aimed at physical attributes rather than intellectual or artistic achievements. And he succeeded just as they did. I doubt if there is an American living who excelled in certain phases of sport as Mr. Barnes did.

"He was a man who might have passed a blameless life had his money lasted. There came a time when his relatives would not help and his horses could not win races. Finally, he was accused of some trickery at Saratoga and found his racing career at an end. Since then he has been living insecurely on what his few remaining relatives choose to give him."

"Mr. Milman," Barnes said, and there was a certain dignity in his bearing, "I have been almost every sort of a fool in my day. I have thrown away fortunes and gambled and drunk like a madman, but I never pulled any dirty tricks on a race track. I was always out to win and never betted against my own horses. I'm not what you might call a reliable man, and I've done things I'm heartily ashamed of now, but I did not do what the Saratoga stewards believed of me."

"What did they believe?" Bradney demanded. He knew nothing of racing.

"My trainer gave evidence before them, that I instructed him to dope my entry for the Saratoga cup so that I might bet on another horse. Mine was the favorite. It did go to the post full of bromide, and the horse I was reputed to have bet on won at long odds. I had the trainer against me and the bookmaker, and because I was known to be in monetary difficulties, I was disbelieved. Not that I blame the stewards. They did their duty as they saw it. Somebody fixed my trainer and the jockey. I was forced out of the racing game, and found I hadn't a friend in the world. My wife would have believed me, but she was dead. I used what money I could get hold of to fight the thing, but the man, or men, who framed me had more money. I shall never know who it was."

"I know," said Peter Milman quietly. "You were not framed, as you term it, by any crooked owner of thoroughbreds. None of them was big enough to pull down a man of your sort. You had traditions and a name behind you. Your downfall came because you threw a man from the pier at Narragansett into the Atlantic ocean. Do you remember?"

"Yes," Barnes said slowly, "I think I do. There was a woman mixed up in it, but I forget her name now. She was one of those little fluffy blondes that were fashionable that season. Ah, I have it. She was a roof-garden star. A man came up and tried to make a scene. My Aunt Sarah, who was most particular, was coming toward us. The thing would have been most disastrous because I had turned over a new leaf the previous evening and a codicil was to be added to her will. Fortunately, the man struck at me, and I thought the simplest way out of it was to drop him in the sea. Aunt Sarah, being short-sighted, did not even see him disappear." Mr. Barnes mused on the thing for a few moments. "Most extraordinary. I never saw him again. There was no summons, no publicity—nothing. I was a bit uneasy at first lest he should have been drowned, but somebody saw him crawl ashore. I never knew his name, and I never saw the blonde again."

"The man you threw into the water was the man who arranged matters so that you should be compelled to give up racing." There was a trace of triumph in Mr. Milman's manner. "You will never be able to prove it, so don't try."

"And I hoped he didn't drown," said Barnes, looking about for sympathy. "What's his name?" Barnes did not doubt his host's sincerity for a moment.

"All in good time," said Milman; "first let me show you his photograph." He unlocked a drawer and took the picture from an envelope. "Is that he?"

"As I remember it, yes," said Barnes; "but it's years ago, and there might be a possibility of error."

Milman passed the photograph to Floyd Malet.

"Do you recognize him?"

There was excitement in the sculptor's voice. "It's the man with the fur coat who came to my studio that night. This is the man, I'll swear. What's his name?"

"That is the man to whom you all owe your misfortunes—Paul Raxon."

It was a thin, narrow face that stared back at them, but it was not the face of a fool. Few men without the early advantage of financial training had impressed themselves on Wall Street as he had done. The collapse of International Motors and the failure of the Hazen Brewer crowd to break him made Raxon for the moment the most spectacular figure in New York. And yet none of Milman's guests had ever before seen a photograph of him. He had a knack of outwitting the newspaper photographers. He had smashed many cameras. It had come to be understood that to attempt to photograph him was to incur the enmity of a man who never forgave or forgot.

"That he broke Professor Bradney was a precautionary measure and not born of any personal malice. No doubt his subordinates had found the professor was not rich and supposed him ripe for the fall. There is hardly a doubt that he has made enormous amounts by these methods, always covering himself with hopelessly compromised lesser men who dared say nothing. As to Mr. Malet, that was merely bad luck and not in the first design. I don't suppose Raxon had anything personal against him, but he recognized the opportunity to escape from a troublesome position. The only purely personal spite was in the case of Mr. Neeland Barnes. Raxon was intending to buy a big house at Narragansett and entertain largely."

"I don't remember the name there," said Barnes.

"He left the pier," Milman answered. "Raxon is curiously sensitive to ridicule. He could not remain to be pointed out as the man Neeland Barnes had contemptuously tossed into the ocean. It took him several years to get his revenge, but it was a complete one. He boasts that he never lets up, and ascribes Indian ancestry to this unamiable quality. His most spectacular hatred was that my poor friend Hazen Brewer incurred.

"Brewer committed suicide because he had plunged into penury a man who was near and dear to him. This was a man unused to finance, who trusted Brewer with his fortune and mortgaged his home in a vain effort to save his friend. Brewer felt disgraced. I think this emotion was far more potent than the fact of his financial collapse. He did not know that his friend harbored no hard thoughts of him and would have made no complaints. After all, the friend's loss was very little compared with his downfall."

Fleming Bradney, perhaps the closest observer of Milman's guests, was becoming possessed with a vast impatience to know for what reason he had been summoned. Bradney had the analytical mind of the scientist. There were several things in Milman's narrative which needed elucidation.

"Why," he asked suddenly, "did you subscribe to a press-clipping agency and put a detective on Raxon's track?"

"Because I had learned through a source entirely confidential that it was Raxon who had ruined Mr. Malet. I was interested in Mr. Malet. I think that marble group proves it. And I have said I was interested in your work too. If it had been possible to clear you, I should like to have done so. I am not sure there was not something of childish vanity in it. I liked to sit here in my lonely, unvisited house and feel I was learning day by day, hour by hour, more about a man who believed himself above the law and building up this knowledge into a weapon against him. But I found he was so secure as to be able to boast of things that no legal evidence could charge him with. Neeland Barnes, for example. A few hundreds spent in bribery, or a few promises dropped as to future patronage, and the thing was accomplished."

"All you have done," said Bradney, who was suddenly assailed with doubts as to Milman's ultimate purpose, "is to get us here and show us what failures we are. That is not kind, unless you have a remedy. Don't you see it puts us in a very poor light? A man may fail and still have self-respect left. I decline to consider myself a black sheep. You tell me Raxon ruined my career. I shall make a point of seeing the editors of all the great New York papers and telling them what you have said. Too long a certain type of man has ruled our cities in the name of democracy."

There was no doubt now about Peter Milman's uneasiness as he listened.

"I thought you understood," he said quietly, "that this conversation was privileged. If you go to your editors you will do two things: One will be to convince them that you have brooded so long on your troubles that you are mad. The other will be to disclose the confidences a dead man gave me."

"But you want me to give up the only chance I may ever have of clearing my name," Bradney complained.

"You can never clear it that way. I don't think you can ever hope to defeat Paul Raxon that way." His tone changed a little. "Tell me this Mr. Bradney. Which counts more with you: the clearing of your name of suspicion of dishonesty—not actual conviction of it, remember, for your case never came before a court of law—or the opportunity to devote your life to your chosen science?"

"The latter, of course," Bradney cried. "It is only if I establish my innocence that I can hope to get another appointment. Such work as mine is very costly. I must have large funds at my disposal and elaborate equipment."

"And you?" Milman said, turning to the sculptor.

"If enough mud is thrown at a man, no matter how innocent he is, some of it will stick. I have long since abandoned any hope of being whitewashed

A Few Hundred Spent in Bribery.

In a sense, the equipment of the sculptor is expensive. If I were a painter, it would be a different thing. There is no institution to endow broken middle-aged men."

"It is for that reason I asked you all to come here," Milman answered. "You don't understand? Gentlemen, I am a broken middle-aged man. In Hazen Brewer's failure my entire fortune went. I mortgaged this house to help him. Out of the wreck I may save enough to live in a couple of humble rooms for the rest of my life. We are all in the same boat, all four of us victims to Paul Raxon's whims."

"You," Neeland Barnes cried. "You had all sorts of money, I thought."

"I have none now. That is hardly true. I have enough to live on in this house for three months. Then the mortgage will fall due. There will be an auction sale and an end of the New York Milmans"—he paused—unless—"

"Unless what?" Bradney demanded.

"You complained a few minutes ago, and justly, that I had listened to your confidences and given none of my own. Very well. You shall hear me now. To begin with, I am prepared to abandon the conventions and habits of a lifetime in order to keep this home of mine. I was born here, and I wish, when my eyes are to close forever, to die here. I have suffered disappointments in my earlier life that have not made me anxious to go about and be pointed out as the Peter Milman whose wife ran away from him. My life is here. I cannot face the world with equanimity after these solitary years where never an unwelcome person came to disturb me."

Of the three watching him, Neeland Barnes was conscious of the deepest depression. Milman had brought him here under false pretenses. All those dreams of future prosperity were idle ones. The man was almost as down and out as he himself. He must go back and try to persuade Lippsky to let him live rent free until something turned up. There was always Mil-

(Continued on page 5)

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