



The RECLUSE of FIFTH AVENUE

By WYNDHAM MARTYN

W.N.U. SERVICE

CHAPTER V

Peter Milman leaned against the corner of the Colonial mantelpiece of cream marble and looked at his guests with no undue eagerness. He might have been proposing a game of billiards or a game of bridge.

For the moment none of them could estimate with any exactness just what risks he was asking them to run. They knew only that this man of blameless life, distinguished family and assured social position was cynically proposing to engage them in a conspiracy to take from Paul Raxon some of those many dollars his unscrupulous conduct had won.

"Naturally," Milman continued, "you are too much surprised to have your answers ready. You cannot believe that I am serious. Or you may think for unguessed reasons that I am trying to trap you into damaging admissions. I repeat in all seriousness that I am ruined. I have some considerable assets which may be untouched, but all the things in this house of value—and there are many—will be sold because Paul Raxon ruined my closest friend. And he murdered him, gentlemen." Milman's voice was stern now. "Raxon has brought me to an impoverished and friendless end. Unless I struggle against it, I shall

join those unnumbered victims his career has created. My proposition is most certainly a reasonable one. Since Paul Raxon by illegal means—or, let me say, inequitable means—has brought us to what we are and driven my dear friend to a suicide's grave, I propose to pool our abilities and enthusiasms and make him pay something in return."

Milman's remarks were addressed mainly to Bradney. He was assured of Barnes, and he had seen an eagerness about Floyd Malet. It was Fleming Bradney who was frowning.

"This is too important a thing to settle offhand," said Milman. "You will, of course, spend the night here. Your rooms are ready for you. I will say only this: If you want proofs that Raxon is the cause of your troubles, I cannot give them. He is not the sort of man who can be convicted by any ordinary process. If you want my word of honor as a gentleman that I am certain he is to blame, I give it to you readily."

Milman pushed the button that summoned Achilles Luty. It was plain he wished no further discussion. Only Bradney made a protest.

"I'm in evening dress. I can't go back to the works like this tomorrow morning."

"I do not think you will ever go back there," Peter Milman said, smiling. "It may be that you think otherwise and will miss a day. If I have provided you against monetary loss. Come, gentlemen, be my guests tomorrow."

"I wonder," said Neeland Barnes, "if I could have just a little brandy? I'm a bit excited with what you have said, and I'd like to make sure of a few hours' sleep. Thank you," when Achilles had been sent for the cognac.

"Count on me tomorrow and the day after and as long as you like. If any hair-splitting, moralizing toward tries to persuade himself that he hasn't got a grievance against Paul Raxon, let him go home, set the alarm, get up at daybreak and punch the clock when the whistle blows."

At the moment Neeland Barnes felt there was nothing he would so much like as swinging his right across to the point of Bradney's jaw. Barnes considered that he stood in the light of Milman's champion. He owed a duty to so generous a host.

"Gentlemen, gentlemen," said Peter Milman. "Please do not quarrel. Professor Bradney has risen superior to personal enmities. He has forgiven Raxon. I confess that I have not."

Bradney looked coldly at Neeland Barnes.

"Mr. Barnes," he said, "has courage, and a tendency to quarrel. Most men have. It requires greater courage to estimate the risks of such an undertaking as this and then enter it without heat or rancor. I am not a coward morally or physically; and if Mr. Barnes thinks so, he is as poor a judge of man as he is of the consideration he owes a fellow-guest."

"My fault, my fault entirely," Barnes murmured. He had seen in Bradney's eyes no trace of fear. He was conscious that old New York had not performed according to traditional form. "Noblesse oblige," he added suddenly. "A little excited," he waved an arm which included the whole of the luxu-

rious room. "Sudden change from a hotel furnished by a man called Lippsky. Went to my head. Haven't been inside a decent house for years." He was relieved when Bradney smiled at him.

"It is late," said Peter Milman, "so I think we had better arrange to breakfast together at nine. You will find night-gear and dressing gowns in your rooms."

He shook them each by the hand. Bradney had the feeling of being sent to bed like a child. He did not get into bed when he had changed. He lit his pipe and flung himself into a big chair. He was no less excited in his own way than Neeland Barnes. There was something under the courteous exterior of Peter Milman which he had not yet solved. Was the veiled promise to reinstate him the result of some belief or a madman's vision of victory? He knew nothing about Peter Milman.

Bradney's room was separated from that occupied by Floyd Malet by a bathroom. He rapped at the door, and was bidden to enter.

"Sorry to bother you," said Bradney, "but I'd like to discuss this thing with you. I'll admit the thing obsesses me entirely. Selfishly, I'm bound to say. My life has only one love, and that's my work. If I thought there really was a chance of being able to get control of a physical laboratory again, in dependent of outside interference and subsidized to insure continuous experimentation, there is nothing I would not do."

Floyd Malet did not speak for a little while. Very much the same thoughts had passed through his own mind. "I don't mind saying," he remarked, "that my present existence is so distasteful that prison has no horrors for me."

"Exactly," Bradney said quickly. "Will it lead to prison? You see, we should not go to prison as heroes, but as miserable little blackmailers, or something of that sort. Is this man sane? That's the thing which bothers me. I've never heard of him before. What is his family history? Is this a great delusion? Has he brooded so long that he has become abnormal? He knows about you and me and that ass Barnes; but what do we know of him?"

"Let's ask Barnes. They have common friends, as we learned at dinner. I rather like Barnes. You can see he's willing to be first or second murderer whenever called upon."

Neeland Barnes was stretched on a chaise longue. Over his pajamas was a rich lounging robe of blue silk.

"Come in," he cried genially. He had entirely forgotten his temporary annoyance at Fleming Bradney, which had sprung less from dislike of him than a desire to come to the aid of his host.

"Look here, Barnes," Bradney began earnestly, "tell me as a man of the world what you think Mr. Milman really means."

"I think he's got a plan up his sleeve to trim this Raxon and share the profits with us. The idea suits me down to the ground."

"Do you think Milman is sane?"

"Haven't a doubt of it. Why should you?"

"His amazing proposition for one thing. He doesn't belong to the criminal classes, and yet he proposes to extract enough money from Raxon to pay back his own losses and endow my laboratory and start Malet again and give you a new chance. We know very well that Raxon won't give up money unless forced to. To use force is to come under the frown of the law. In short, it is a criminal undertaking."

"Not as I look at it," said Barnes easily. "Raxon in my opinion is an outlaw."

"But the law," Bradney insisted. "The law doesn't admit that. To the rest of the world he is a great man."

"We know he's a crook, so what do we care for the world?" Barnes was evidently not to be shaken. Bradney tried another tack. "Is there any insanity in the Milman family?"

"Not that I ever heard of. The Milmans have always been shrewd, conservative men. Poor old Peter's the last of 'em, and the best. It may be there's something crazy in wanting to live down here, and yet, when I see what a beautiful home he's got and think of my shack at Peekskill, I understand why he wants to fight to keep it."

Barnes nodded a genial good night to his visitors. He did not understand why they hung back. Already he was visioning the future. He would buy a great ranch in California.

And there, with splendid horses to ride, he would pass the rest of his days. And, of course, he would have his daughter.

When the three men in evening dress were summoned to breakfast in the Japanese garden, they found their host similarly clad. Whether he had not been to bed, or whether he had dressed thus to make their own garb less singular, they did not know. They knew only that they found him free from embarrassment and as courteously considerate as he had been at dinner. Not during the meal was anything said about his proposition. Milman talked freely of his garden and the rare plants in it.

A little dial at his side attracted Bradney's notice. He saw that a wire was attached to it leading to the north wall.

"A little burglar device of my own," Milman explained. "By it I am enabled to detect the presence of anything on the iron screen which shuts this place in. For example, if I find the dial indicates five pounds in weight, and that the object is moving, I can tell almost certainly it is a wandering cat. If a hundred and sixty pounds, I can be sure of a burglar looking for an opening. Cats are frequent visitors. In the score of years this garden has existed I have had no more than seven burglars."

"What happens to them?" Barnes asked. "How do you get them?"

"I extinguish the lights here and the shades are drawn back. By illuminating the marked area, I see the intruder and have him at my mercy. I keep a loaded shotgun handy, and there is seldom any difficulty in the matter. Only one ever got through."



The Alarm Must Have Been Out of Order.

The alarm must have been out of order, for he saw his way in during dinner and broke his neck on a stone known, very amusingly, as the Stone of the Respectful Visitor. I am very well protected here. I have had time to elaborate certain devices which make me feel perfectly safe. The police assure me that my cellar is the attraction. It is stored with what was laid down many years ago and the law allows me to keep."

Watching the speaker carefully, Bradney had come to the conclusion that his host was wholly sane. "I've made up my mind," he said, when Achilles had gone.

"Well!" said Milman. He felt if Bradney failed that Malet would be dissuaded. "Well?"

"I'm with you."

"I thought you would be when you had had time to reflect that what is unlawful is not always inequitable. I am very grateful. And you, Mr. Malet?"

"Count me in."

"I don't think Mr. Milman has any doubts about me," Neeland Barnes remarked.

Peter Milman smiled a little. He rather liked this big man. "I had no doubts about you. Now that we are agreed, let us discuss the thing."

"First of all," Bradney said, "what are your plans?"

"I have no plans," Milman returned. I see that you look disappointed. Evidently you expected me to have the whole thing cut and dried. That, gentlemen, seems unreasonable. What object should I have in inviting you here if I were able to accomplish the thing alone? I approach the problem with an open mind. My contribution toward it will be to entertain you for three months. If at the end of that time we are not successful, this house will no longer be my home. We shall have fallen, and if we are still at large there will be five hundred dollars each for you. All expenses will be borne by me. I hope you are not dismayed by my news. I do not think you will be. You have not been chosen idly. In Professor Bradney we have a great intellect fit to expand itself on our common problem. In Mr. Malet we have the quick mind and vivid imagination of the artist. Mr. Neeland Barnes brings to us physical prowess and an extensive knowledge of the underworld and its ways. My contribution seems small by comparison."

"First," said Fleming Bradney, "let us collate all documents that bear on the subject. I assume you have data concerning Paul Raxon, Mr. Milman."

"I have a great deal," said his host.

"I know details of his personal and business life that he cannot possibly suspect."

"But how," Bradney asked, "if you rarely go out and never receive visitors, can you get at this information, which must most surely be very difficult of access?"

"In the beginning, by design. I was determined to find out what forces had pulled you and Malet down. Later, by accident. I spoke not long ago of my cellar. My father laid down a great deal of port in 1871, when I was born. It is a wine I do not greatly care for. A lawyer named Loddon, who has acted for me for some years, is also Raxon's confidential attorney. His name never appears publicly in Raxon's affairs. He is engaged mainly in keeping his client clear of the effects of earlier indiscretions. Loddon had dined with me many times, and this port induces amazing loquacity in him. If I have doubted his assertions, he has boasted the more loudly. These dinners became at last a most interesting part of my life. I drew him on deliberately, never permitting him to see my keenness." Milman smiled. "For every bottle of my port Loddon drank, he repaid me a hundred-fold. It was when Loddon learned that Malet had made 'The Settlers' that he told me in so many words that his client was responsible. I will not weary you with details. I have a careful record of every conversation. It soothed his ego to talk, and he believed me harmless. Yes, gentlemen, I know a great deal about Paul Raxon."

"And you think he'll be easy to defeat?" Bradney asked.

"No more dangerous man lives in all New York," Peter Milman said gravely. "That is why I have been so careful in selecting my companions."

CHAPTER VI

Although Paul Raxon had always professed a great belief in his own destiny, he had never thought to be a multimillionaire. He found himself, suddenly, a national figure. It amused him to read newspaper accounts of himself. People assumed that he had newly come to New York, whereas he had been for years a power working through other men.

It was as an architect's clerk he discovered the graft which was possible in the building trade. Among the group of illiterate men who were holding up big jobs and levying blackmail from contractors in the name of Labor, he soon became a leader. He was cautious, educated and supremely cunning. The price of success was the betrayal of his benefactor, and he had not hesitated to make it.

At the age of forty-two he took his place with the living powers in Wall Street, hated by many, liked by few, but despised by none. Publicly overwhelmed him at last. Mrs. Raxon and her family returned from Europe, where for some years they had lived. At a large price he purchased Great Rock, formerly the home of Bellington of the Traction trust, and he knew he must fill it with his wife's friends and entertain in the manner of the very rich.

At this period of his life the idea of power obsessed him. He did not want to run the risk of losing what he had gained. He was not anxious for any unsavory episodes of his past to arise. There had been many, and with most women were concerned. He grew less intrigued with women as the idea of senatorial honors forced itself upon him. Senator Raxon of New York. No state honors for him. He desired to be sent to Washington. Loddon, his lawyer, licked his thick lips at the thought.

"I'm satisfied," said Raxon, "that nobody can pull me down. Jim Cuffray was dangerous, but he's in Sinz Sing for seven years."

"He'll be out in five," said Loddon. "and Jim's dangerous, because he knows a lot."

"Jim will be out in less than that," Raxon retorted. "Bright's disease. He's incurable. You look like a Bright's disease type, Loddon. Better be moderate if you want to help me to the United States senate. I've got a chance. Women are voting against the old machine type of politician, and I'm going to cultivate the women and pose as the pioneer of a new day." Raxon chuckled a little.

He was a tired-looking man, slim, and a little stooped. He had fine hands and good features. He could bring readily to his aid the salesman's forced enthusiasm, which seemed genuine to those who did not know him. He knew he would do well in politics if no old ghosts arose to confound him. For years now he had been living among men immeasurably beneath him in intelligence, a lucky turn had made him independent of them.

To go to the senate from New York would be an expensive matter, but he was prepared to pay. To that end it would be necessary to conserve his fortune. His wife, after years of living in second-rate hotels, was inclined to a reckless extravagance. Domestic life at Great Rock was strained. Yet Raxon saw that the era of great entertainments was at hand. He knew that as he was now a man in the public eye, he had better do the thing well. The life of relatively small things was over. Not again would he deal with the baser sort of men. Much of his amusement came from watching the men he controlled trying to assert

themselves. There was Loddon, for instance. At heart, of the shyster lawyer type and filled with the ideals of petty graft, a wealthy benefactor had bought him a partnership with a respectable firm and he had to guide his professional conduct accordingly. Loddon for the moment was filled with glee at his own fortune. He wished Raxon to regard him as an equal instead of snapping orders at him. He ventured to disagree with his patron.

"My success," Raxon said, stopping him with a gesture, "is due to two things. One is a total absence of pity. Another that I only use men that I can crush if they get out of hand. Jim Cuffray was one. You're another." He looked at the gross, formless creature and sneered. "When I pipe, you shall dance; and if you don't dance to my liking, what happens? The Bar association will disbar you. You may try to incriminate me, but you haven't a shred of evidence of anything crooked, not a check, letter, telegram, or a dictaphone conversation. Keep me in good humor, Loddon, and work for me and you'll go far. Try to be independent, or indiscreet, and I shall break you."

"Why, Paul," Loddon cried, "what's got into you? I'm the loyalist follower you ever had, and you know it."

Raxon smiled. "I want intelligent loyalty, and you're not overburdened with intelligence any more than Cuffray was. I'm not underestimating you. You've been useful to me in a number of ways."

"Thank you," said Loddon, almost bitterly. He thought of certain unprofessional things he had done at his patron's bidding which had, in effect, delivered him bound hand and foot to Raxon.

That Raxon aspired to a United States senatorship seemed a laudable enough ambition. But that he had a chance seemed, on reflection, almost absurd. And yet Raxon was not the kind of man to delude himself. Loddon voiced his doubts.

"McKimmer is the party's nominee," he observed. "Of course, he'll carry New York city, and they say he'll get more votes up-state than any possible candidate."

"The party will get the votes, not the man," said Raxon.

"But McKimmer's the party's choice," Loddon persisted.

"It loots that way, doesn't it?" Raxon smiled. "McKimmer's very popular."

"You're keeping something back," said Loddon.

"I always do. That's why I get on. That's why I'm going to the senate."

His hands clasped behind him, Paul Raxon stood at a window and looked over the sound. Loddon talked, but he did not listen. Raxon saw himself in a few years as the greatest money power in America. All his future was carefully planned. He was now engaged in mapping out a present. He appreciated the power of women politically and knew he must appear as a home-loving man, a man who was notoriously good to his wife and children. Fortunately, all of them were attractive physically.

He was interrupted by Mrs. Raxon. She was a handsome, dark woman who had only just discovered that while she had been living abroad her husband had become enormously wealthy. She had the sense of a personal grievance against him highly developed. He could see she was prepared for battle.

"I want a suitable allowance for myself and the children," she began. "I want a banking account and my own limousine and chauffeur." She had thrown down the gauntlet, and walked slowly from the room.

And while Marie Raxon was passing an enthralling hour discovering her many needs, and her husband was wondering how best to start to beautify Bellington's enormous building.

(Continued on page 4)

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