

# The RECLUSE of FIFTH AVENUE

by WYNDHAM MARTYN

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"Outside here," he said, "in the world which calls itself society, Peter Milman has the name of being a sordid old grouch and a disgrace to his name. I ask you, as man to man, if you've ever run across anyone more considerate? My God, Bradney, if you knew the sort of life I've led since that trouble at Saratoga trying to keep my end up when my people had dropped me and my old pals cut me dead, you'd understand just what this means. I'm going the limit for Peter Milman. You've just seen how he saved me from another humiliation. I should have had to tell my girl her father was such an utter failure he couldn't even get her a room in a cheap hotel."

"I know how you must feel," Bradney commented. "We've got to get the money out of Raxon," Barnes went on, "even if I'm the goat and end up in Sing Sing. Frankly, Bradney, I'm not much of an original thinker. I can carry out another man's conception absolutely and add a few improvements of my own, but I look to people like you and Malet to do up the plans first."

Bradney stirred a little uneasily. He saw that the man of action was looking to him for guidance. The more ardently Bradney desired to pull down Paul Raxon, the more difficult the task seemed. This move of the financier to Great Rock had nullified most of the laborious details garnered by Peter Milman concerning the vacated home in Short Hills. In New Jersey the domestic arrangements had been on a simple plan and the servants few. In the Long Island mansion much greater style was kept up. There were extensive grounds and many outdoor servants.

"I'm afraid you must not look for much help from me," Bradney said. "Milman has assured me absolutely that it is to Raxon I owe my downfall. He has literally stolen my existence. Yours, too, and poor Malet's also. If I had accepted a bribe disguised as a usual form of commission, I should probably have been what the world terms a great man today. If you had not been afraid your aged aunt would see you in an altercation concerning a roof-garden actress, you would not have been disgraced. Had Malet possessed a less generous nature, he would have been talked in a breath with Rodin. Raxon, Raxon everywhere. Let me tell you I'm just as ready to go the limit as you are. As a matter of simple fact, we were looking to you to make the first concrete suggestion."

"That scoundrel Lippisky drove every idea from my mind," Barnes confessed, "but we have plenty of time." He stopped short as his daughter came in with Floyd Malet. What a beauty she was, he thought affectionately, and how gracefully she carried herself. Breeding in every line of her! Then the thought of his financial inadequacies came to him like a dull pain. What had he to offer? Nothing. A few months' respite and a new life would offer itself. What would that be? He did not like to think. To live for the day was a Barnes motto. He hoped Peter Milman had, indeed, some definite working plan. If it were only a matter of wading through the Raxon men servants and beating their master it would be simple. He had not in his past been noted for subtleties, and laborious, slow processes soon wearied him.

Nita slipped her arm into that of her tall, handsome father. "Don't look so glum," she chided. She was in very good spirits. The shock of the Lippisky episode had been forgotten when she entered this unique home. She could associate neither failure nor poverty with any of the men beneath its roof. She was curious to know what had brought them together here. It was difficult to conceive of her father as a successful business man. Lady Horsham had often declared few men had been offered such opportunities and made less of them than Neeland Barnes.

By adroit questioning of the four she learned their secret. They were engaged in promoting a company to operate in the Torrance oil field in south California. "How interesting!" she cried. "As it happens, I know a lot about oil companies and their way of doing business. You see, my last position in London was as secretary to Sir John Crowhurst, chairman of the Persian-Bagdad Oilfields, Limited." "You?" cried her astonished father, and then suddenly remembered the thousands of words she could take a minute.

"Yes, Me. Really it was trepan-

"It's not my secret," he returned, "and I ought not to say any more. I can only assure you that Malet and Bradney are splendid fellows, both far superior to me. Very high types. They believe that what we intend to do is the only right and logical thing. You must let it go at that."

"And because there's danger in it you think I'd better keep out of it?" "Exactly," he exclaimed, gratified at this attitude of obedience.

"Then it is dangerous," she cried. Barnes saw he had made a damaging admission. She had trapped him. "Daddy, what makes you think I'm afraid of anything that's dangerous?" "Oh, Nita," he said reproachfully, "that's scarcely playing the game to



"What Sort of a Comeback?"

drag information from me which is not mine to give. You are deliberately trying to make me betray my friends."

He had risen to his feet. She could see he was not pleased with her. "Indeed, I'm not," she said earnestly. "Daddy, I came over here because something told me you needed looking after. It isn't that I'm trying to make you betray your friends. I want to be sure that they are being honest with you."

"I have never met squarer men," he answered. "Then I'm on their side, too. My father and his friends, right or wrong." Barnes did not know what to say. But a daughter of his could not be associated with anything irregular. He shook his head.

"I cannot accept your assistance," he told her.

"Very well. I shall tell Mr. Milman I am leaving after luncheon tomorrow. I came over here equipped, specially equipped, for a certain sort of position, and I'm going to get it."

"Skilled secretarial workers and stenographers are drugs in the market," he assured her. "I am not going to be a stenographer," she retorted. "I did that to earn money to come here. I shall take the other position, so you won't have to live on a stranger's charity."

"That is a hard thing to say," he answered, flushing; "and it's not altogether true. Mr. Milman sought me out because he thought I was able to help him. I am not living on charity."

"What is it you are trying to do?" she asked.

"You must not expect me to tell you. My dear, don't be hasty and leave us yet. Promise me that?" She kissed him good night. "I won't go yet," she said. "I can't lose you as quickly as that."

When she was alone her face took on a worried aspect. She had suffered many things in order to be with him, and she determined to find out what the mystery was that enveloped this strange household. Although she was not yet twenty-two, she had traveled widely and met innumerable people. In Milman and his associates she recognized men of charm and culture who had made her father their firm admirer. And they were all holding back from her any mention of their real venture. In order to deceive her they had clumsily invented and acted a falsehood. It could only be because they were plotting something of an illegal nature.

They had played on her father's emotions and earned his gratitude and co-operation by a few hundred dollars. For so small a thing it had been possible to enlist his sympathy and aid. They had been clever enough to create the illusion that she was welcome when in truth they might be embarrassed by her presence and already planning to get rid of her. She decided she would not be driven out. Her father needed his daughter even if he did not yet know it. The thought that three dangerous men might be plotting some crime for which Neeland Barnes would ultimately bear the blame drove her to action.

Her room was at the rear of the house. Four iron bars protected its windows. Almost five feet below she could see the iron grating which roofed in the Japanese garden. When she leaned down from her open window she could hear, faintly, the sound of voices.

It was about her they were speaking. Barnes had come from her room with the disquieting information that their talk on oil had assuaged her very

much. The news had been a blow. "Miss Barnes gives me the impression of being a very shrewd young lady," Malet said, "and one not easily deceived. You all know that, when once we start, it will be almost impossible to keep one who is already a little suspicious in ignorance."

"Yes," said Bradney. "I am afraid she cannot stay here."

"Her godmother lives in Philadelphia," said Barnes. "She can't refuse to take her in for a month or two. She said something about earning her living, but I should prefer her to go to Philadelphia."

"I am afraid she would be a source of danger if she remained," Peter Milman agreed. "Also, it would never do to compromise her in an affair which might end disastrously."

"We've been too busy with theories," said Fleming Bradney when the problem of Nita had been settled. What we are after should be original disassociations of ideas."

"I can't get that very clearly," said Neeland Barnes. "As I see it, all we want from Raxon is a cold million. Half of that goes to Milman and we split the rest."

"Exactly," Bradney returned. "That's the very point. How are we to make him give up a million? I don't know. You don't either. None of us knows. Obviously the thing is to get close to him, into the house for choice."

"He doesn't know me," Milman declared. "But I cannot be seen, because Lodon, who has told me so much under the influence of my port and the belief that I never stir abroad and know nothing of outside affairs, is a frequent guest. The question is, would he recognize Barnes?" "Certain to," Barnes said gloomily. "I haven't altered much since that day I threw him from the pier. What about Malet?"

"Probably not," said the sculptor. "In those days I was twenty pounds heavier, wore a moustache, and had a general air of bien-etre."

"I am the man," Bradney declared. "I doubt if he has ever seen me. We know he talked to Malet for some time. It is I who must contrive to get into his house."

"In what capacity?" Milman asked. "There you have me," the scientist admitted. "We are safe to start by assuming," Milman cut in, "that Paul Raxon is always cautious. From the outside his house is impregnable."

"You mean," Bradney remarked, "that to get in one would have to be vouched for?"

"Undoubtedly," said Peter Milman. "If someone socially prominent took you there, it might be all right. There was one curiously disquieting thing Lodon told me about Raxon. When he has injured a man he expects some retaliation, and takes the precaution of having the injured one watched. We know he dogged Barnes for years. Even now there may be those who know for what purpose we four are gathered here. I am not certain but that Achille speaks English as well as he does French."

The listeners were startled at the sudden change they saw on their host's face. Where he had been merely thoughtful and slightly worried he was now actively alarmed. He was leaning forward examining something on the table before him. They remembered it was the electric dial, that ingenious device for the protection of his home against invaders.

The face of the dial was divided into six parts. These numbered sections would tell Milman on what part of the roof the intruder was. The three, pressing about him, saw that a red light suddenly illuminated the square marked 1. A hand moved very slowly to the square numbered 6.

"That," Milman whispered, looking relieved, "represents the weight. Six pounds means a large and prowling cat."

They heard a sudden exclamation. The weight went up a hundred and twenty pounds. The square numbered 1 was now in darkness and another was illuminated. They could trace the path of the trespasser. He was creeping near them.

"Achille," Milman whispered. "That would be his weight. The six pounds was when he rested a foot on it before putting his whole weight on the grating."

Peter Milman betrayed no nervousness now. Noiselessly he drew the sawed-off shotgun from its place. Then with a touch of a button all lights in the garden were extinguished. In the darkness the shades rolled back. Against the sky, bright with stars, the watchers could see a figure lying above their heads. Another light was switched on which left the group below still in darkness, but showed pitilessly on the trespasser. The gun was already at Milman's shoulder when Neeland Barnes made a jump for it and pulled the barrel down.

"My God, Milman!" he cried, white-faced. "It's my girl. It's Nita."

"Ah," said Milman with a curious smile, "so I perceive. A strange position in which to find a guest, is it not?"

"Inexplicable," said Bradney. He cast a suspicious look at Barnes. "I think," Peter Milman went on, "we should like a talk with Miss Barnes."

"I'll fetch her," Barnes said eagerly. He was confused, ashamed, humiliated.

"You will be kind enough to remain here," said Milman. Barnes saw that he was menaced by that most dread-

ful of weapons at short range, the sawed-off shotgun. He remembered its load of buckshot. "I fear I must remind you that we must insist on an explanation from you, too. To allow you the opportunity of escape would be most unwise." He raised his voice a little, but he did not take his steady gaze from Barnes' face.

"Miss Barnes," he said, "will you be so kind as to come here at once?"

The girl's voice trembled as she answered. It seemed to them all there was a trace of defiance in her tone. "I won't be a minute. It's not very comfortable up here."

The shades were drawn again and the lights switched on more fully. Neeland Barnes looked from one to the other of the men whose faces had been in the shadow. It seemed incredible that they could suspect him of complicity in this eavesdropping. It was plain enough what her errand was.

"Let me explain," he began. Peter Milman stopped him with a gesture. "Wait," he commanded. "We shall hear you when your daughter comes."

Barnes sank heavily into a seat. He felt that Bradney and Malet looked upon him as a traitor.

Nita was wearing a blue silk dressing wrap when she came into the Japanese garden. Her bearing was confident and unafraid. She came quickly to her father's side and put an arm about his bowed shoulders.

"Oh, Nita, Nita," he groaned. "How could you do such a dreadful thing as this?"

Malet, watching her closely, saw that she bent upon the sitting man a look which had something of maternal tenderness in it. It seemed strange to the observers that she stood there as though to defend her father from enemies. Of shame or embarrassment there was no sign.

"So you caught me," she said. "Well, perhaps it is best you did."

"Why?" Peter Milman demanded. "Because I want to take him away from here. I came to America to look after him—he had been horribly neglected—and I find him entangled in some network of crime. I made him admit it was something with danger in it. At dinner you all tried to deceive me, and you would have succeeded if I hadn't happened to know something about oil. You want him because of his courage, and because he is strong and a good shot and boxes well. He isn't clever and scheming as you are, and I won't have him made use of."

"Nita, Nita," groaned her father, "you've got everything wrong."

"I think I have misjudged your father," Milman said. "I am very glad to find what you did was not at his suggestion. I think there is much for you to explain. You are a guest under my roof, and there are certain laws of courtesy and consideration not less binding on you than me. You have chosen to break them. You have spied upon us. You have not behaved as I should have expected a gentleman of your family to do. Why?"

"I've told you," she cried. "I know you are trying to make my father help you in something desperate, and I don't choose to have him run risks for other men."

"You are absolutely wrong," the miserably Barnes asserted.

"Prove it," she retorted. "You are silent. You dare not tell me the truth. I knew you wouldn't, so I climbed out of the window to listen to what you were talking about. I'm not going to make any silly fuss by telling the police. All I want is to take my father away. I'm going to make a success of him."

"He is free to go," said Peter Milman wearily. He looked at Malet and Bradney. "So are you. I suppose I did lure you here under false pretenses. In the beginning it seemed so simple."

Nita looked about her in amazement. She did not understand why it seemed they had forgotten her. Even her father turned from her to Peter Milman.

"I shall go only when you have no further use for me," said Bradney. "When I have done what I promised I'll go. Not before." This from Malet.

"There were no false pretenses in it," Neeland Barnes cried. "I came willingly, and I'll be damned if I go."

"What does it all mean?" the girl

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