

The RECLUSE of FIFTH AVENUE

by WYNDHAM MARTYN

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(Continued)

"At a square house on Lower Fifth avenue the young lady who had just passed as Agatha Brown burst in upon four anxious men.

"My dears," she cried, "I've got it. I move in tomorrow and take complete charge of the household arrangements. I carried her off her feet. She kissed me and called me 'Dearie.' I left before she could ask to see my testimonials. I'm afraid I lied fearfully. It's quite true, Uncle Peter, they are going to entertain largely." She showed me the list. She evidently doesn't know how to do things on a large scale. I didn't see him."

Neeland Barnes looked at her with pride. At a bound she had landed in the guarded fortress, unsuspected. The keys of the arsenal had been handed her. It was a complete triumph.

"Now you are there," said Peter Milman, "what good shall we be to you?"

"I've thought it all out. You, personally, will have to stop here, because the lawyer man knows you. I shall need daddy and my other uncles at once."

"What possible use can you have for me?" Bradney demanded eagerly.

"Or for me?" said her father.

"All in good time." She laughed.

"Uncle Peter, you made a great mistake in letting Sneed go. I am dismissing the Raxon butler tomorrow and shall want another."

"You mean you will put Sneed in?" Wonderful. I have his address."

"Won't Loddon remember him?" Bradney asked.

"Probably. Sneed will say that he left because he couldn't stand the place any longer. We shall have to let him in on part of our plan. Do you think he can be trusted?"

"Without a doubt," said Peter Milman. "Yes, I made a mistake in letting Sneed go. I should have remembered his many loyalties."

"But what am I to do?" her father persisted.

"You and Professor Bradney will be my tall, imported footmen."

Instinctively Neeland Barnes stroked his chestnut mustache.

"I've had it since I was a freshman at Yale," he said regretfully.

"And I've had this"—Bradney stroked his beard—"ever since I went



"I Could Never Do It," said Bradney in a panic.

to Göttingen for my Ph.D." Alarm spread over his face. "But I cannot possibly do what you suggest. Footmen have to wear some sort of gorgeous livery, don't they?"

"Undress livery at Great Rock," she said, "not powdered hair and knee breeches, as we had at the abbey. How long will it take you to get into the way of waiting at table, opening doors, and being loftily efficient?"

"I could never do it," said Bradney in a panic. "I should drop things. I should pass dishes on the wrong side. I should forget."

"The poor old thing has lost his nerve." Neeland Barnes laughed. "He can toy with atomic disintegration, but he shies at pouring out wine and passing plates."

"Can you do it?" Bradney retorted.

"It will be a great job. I shall enjoy every minute of it. Raxon will think us funkeys, while we are there to drag him down. Man, if you have

I am the only grown-up people in this big house. The rest of them are all enthusiastic children."

"It is very satisfying to be a child," he reminded her.

"But children never look ahead," she said wisely. "I am sitting at your feet pretending everything is going to come out right. You are looking down at me like a courteous sphinx in evening dress, certain that your plans are not to miscarry. Uncle Peter, are you a grown-up like me, or one of the children?"

"Nita, my niece, I am grown up."

"It is hard to believe," she said slowly.

"Why should it be?"

"Because, if you look ahead, you must realize that there's more than an even chance of failure. Failure won't be pleasant for any of us. It won't be merely failing as one does when one goes after a prize or a golf cup." She lowered her voice. "It may be prison, Uncle Peter."

"It will be if we fail," he returned.

"And you can keep so cheerful?"

"We shall not fail. I feel confident that I shall not lose this home. If dumb, inanimate things can radiate cheerfulness, this house with the treasures I love radiates it. I feel influences outside my own perception, perhaps on some other plane, are fighting for me. Not for years have I awakened with such cheerfulness in my heart. When I wake up I find myself smiling as though I had just left friends who had bid me cheer up because victory was in sight."

"I wish I felt that," she said.

"There are other crumbs of comfort for you." He smiled. Milman took from his pocketbook a page of note-paper covered with his fine, distinct writing. "This," he went on, "is a copy of a conversation with Loddon. At that time Loddon had done me the honor to consider me dead and buried, a harmless recluse ignorant of what he was talking. He was able to talk indiscreetly, confident that not a breath of what he said would ever be translated into words by his listener. I will read it to you:

"There's one big-headed, millionaire manufacturer who thinks he owns New York state above the Westchester line that has a big lot coming his way. Some day he'll go into my friend's office looking six feet high and weighing around two-fifty. When he comes out he'll look a dwarf and weigh as a bantamweight. I tell you, Mr. Milman, when a man has brains and no scruples he can get to Washington any time at all."

"You think he was talking about Raxon and McKimber?" said Nita eagerly.

"I am certain of it. Undoubtedly McKimber expects to be United States senator from New York. It is conceded he deserves this honor. If Raxon forces him out of the race, it can only be because he has some mysterious and powerful hold over him. You must not forget that for years I have been collecting all sorts of scraps of knowledge about him."

"Why?" the girl asked. "That's what is so curious to me. It seems so coincidental that just at a moment he ruined you indirectly you have all this knowledge to use against him."

"It was through Mr. Bradney," he admitted. "You guessed that I gave him the hundred thousand dollars. I believe in him. His lecture, which fired me, brought the donation. Then, suddenly, I found he had been dismissed. I had his successor interviewed, a lesser man and an envious one. He was frankly against Bradney. That's how it began. I bought Mr. Malet's wonderful group because I thought we in America had at last a sculptor worthy to rank with the world's greatest. I was interested in his eclipse. I found Raxon only when Loddon spoke of Malet."

"But my father?" she insisted.

"How did you find out about him?"

"It began at a dinner table. Someone mentioned the Saratoga affair. You know, Nita, we are distant connections, and I have a family pride that is as strong as it is illogical. Even then I did not see Raxon in the affair until Loddon, port-soldier, told me that his patron never forgave. Then came instances of this vengefulness. Among them was a mention of a society horseman who had thrown that patron of Loddon's into the sea."

"I employed investigators. Many of them. The first would get facts. I then dismissed him and engaged a second to build on this structure. I did not want any private detectives to get at my real purpose. I warned Brewer against him. But at that time Hazen seemed so immeasurably more powerful than the unknown Raxon that he laughed at my advice."

"I owe you an apology," said the girl. "I had no idea you had been so thorough. I see exactly what I'm to do. I'm to find out what hold Raxon has on McKimber."

"Yes," Milman assented. "I want to use the same weapon against Raxon as he employs against McKimber."

"It's a glorious adventure," she cried.

"There's one thing which makes me uneasy," he admitted. "It is in sending you to a house owned by a man of Raxon's sort. He has the power to create the illusion of truth and sincerity when in reality he laughs at both. Good women have loved him as well as bad."

"I'm not exactly a child, Uncle Peter," she reminded him. "In society one meets all types. I am not afraid. I can never forget the life my father might have been leading now

but for him. I shall never be ashamed of what we are going to do." She smiled at him. "Let's go into the kitchen and hear daddy laying down the whole duty of footmen."

CHAPTER VIII

Nita Barnes fitted into the life at Great Rock very quickly. She would have trouble later on, she decided, with the three Raxon girls, whose ages ranged from twelve to eighteen years. They were attractive in a rather second-rate way. The eldest girl was bitterly opposed to letting Agatha Brown mix with the guests. She saw that on her merits she had no chance against the stranger. Since Miss Brown carried the day and appeared at the dinner table, admirably gowned, the Raxon girls determined to force her out.

Paul Raxon, walking leisurely up his drive one day, was amazed to see two strapping men alight from a taxi outside the house and carry suitcases in as though they had come to stay. As they had gone to the back entrance, he supposed they were men servants hired by the social secretary. It had not, until this moment, occurred to him that to have strange men in the house might be dangerous. There was a new butler expected. That made three. Suspicious and crafty, Raxon saw that he might have three spies here, for all he knew.

Neeland Barnes, looking fifteen years younger without his big mustache, was giving his fellow footman a few last words of advice when a blase, cynical man pushed open the door of their common sitting room. Never before had Fleming Bradney seen the man who had disgraced him. In a sense the sight of Raxon was a shock. He seemed of a refined type, intelligent, and superior to what Bradney had expected.

Barnes was a better judge of mankind. He saw in Raxon a cruel and vindictive man, indomitable and not to be swayed.

"Allo, 'andsome," said Barnes genially, "your name Sneed?"

"It is not," said Raxon, frowning. "Sneed. That was Peter Milman's man. He had heard it more than once from Loddon. 'Who are you?'"

"My name is 'Zgins,'" said Barnes. "When you know me well enough you can call me 'Enry.' I'm the new footman. This"—he pointed to Bradney, whose beardless face had a certain childish wistfulness about it—"this is Alfred Budd, also a footman to the swell who owns this place. If you aren't Sneed, who are you?"

"I happen to be the swell who owns this place," said Raxon. He had no doubt about the bona fides of these men. Tall Loddon footmen by the look of them, Enry's agitation amused him. Enry was heard to say that his last employer, Lord Richester, would not so demean himself as to enter his footman's room.

"I do as I please," said Raxon coldly. He left them, as he supposed, wrapped in embarrassment.

"I have seen the footmen," he said to his wife. "They'll do. Let me be told when the new butler comes."

"He's here," said Mrs. Raxon. "I hope he's satisfactory. He has the best references. He was with Mr. Peter Milman for years."

A few minutes later Sneed bowed respectfully.

"Why did you leave Mr. Milman?" he was asked.

"There was a certain reticence about the man. It seemed he hardly liked to say."

"Mr. Milman was very good to me," he began, "but of late it got to be very hard there, sir."

"In what way?"

"I'm afraid poor Mr. Peter is losing his mind. He's had some money losses, I understand, sir, and he's acting queer. It's my belief he's dangerous. He's cut down on the food so there isn't enough to eat. He's been a good employer to me, but when a man don't get his wages or his meals, he has to look out for himself."

"Quite right. I've seen your two new footmen. One of them, Enry, he calls himself, seems inclined to be impudent. Check that."

"Impudent!" Sneed was incredulous. "Why, Mr. Raxon, they have the highest references. On duty, sir, you'll find no fault with them. I don't know what's come over house-servants of late, Mr. Raxon. When off duty they seem to think themselves as good as anyone else."

Raxon said nothing. His dismissal was a nod. He was satisfied that Miss Agatha Brown knew her job. She had brought in three excellent men, and the colony of Swedish women help seemed thoroughly capable.

He found himself wondering how it was so much intelligence, energy and beauty could be united in a girl who was now only one of his help. It had been Paul Raxon's idea to make a hit with her by his knowledge of furniture. He had flung open the door of a lofty apartment with the simple exclamation, "My Louis Seize room."

"What makes you think so?" Miss Brown returned after one brief glance. She pointed out what she declared were forgeries. She went from piece to piece criticizing here and there until his pride of possession fed.

"I know very little about French furniture," she said simply. "When I was at Horsham abbey, Viscount Raoul de Guillain often stayed there. You know, of course, that he is the supreme authority. Oddly enough, I

hear he is in New York. If you would like him to see your things, I'm sure he'd be delighted. If you've lots of people coming next week, it might be better to weed some of these out. One hates to be laughed at in that sort of thing."

"I suppose this viscount has a regular fee?"

"He would want to fight a duel with you if you even suggested it. He is quite a rich man and often gives his services to museums to detect forgeries."

"I wonder how I could get hold of him?"

"I'm almost sure he would accept an invitation to dine if I reminded him about Horsham abbey. Shall I write?"

"I'll tell you what we'll do," Raxon said. "Give me a letter of introduction and I'll call tomorrow, when I shall be in New York. Find out where he is staying and let me know."

A few hours later, Viscount Raoul de Guillain, duly warned by a telegram in French dispatched from a distant office, moved into the Ritz.

He received Paul Raxon with reserve. It was only when he learned that Agatha Brown was a guest at Great Rock that he consented to go. He was affable enough to agree to stay there a week.

When he arrived, the admirable Sneed was in the hall, and a footman immediately carried his suitcases to his room.

"The whole gang's here now," said Enry, wringing his hand. "How's good old Peter?"

"More hopeful than ever," Malet seemed a trifle nervous. He fingered his small mustache and imperial in doubt. "Do you think I can carry this through? If one is suspected, all are suspected."

"Of course you can. Even Alf is getting a firm touch. He had stage-fright at his first dinner, but he's

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