

Initials Only

by

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1. A Remarkable Man!

It was not my husband speaking, but some passerby. However, I looked up at George with a smile, and found him looking down at me with much the same humour. We had often spoken of the odd phrases one hears in the street, and how interesting it would be sometimes to hear a little more of the conversation.

"That's a case in point," he laughed, as he guided me through the crowd of theatre-goers which invariably block this part of Broadway at the hour of eight. "We shall never know whose eulogy we have just heard. 'A remarkable man!' There are not many of them."

"No," was my somewhat indifferent reply. It was a keen winter night and snow was packed upon the walks in a way to throw into sharp relief the figures of such pedestrians as happened to be walking alone. "But it seems to me that, so far as general appearance goes, the one in front answers your description most admirably."

I pointed to a man hurrying around the corner just ahead of us.

"Yes, he's remarkably well built. I noticed him when he came out of the Clermont." This was a hotel we had just passed.

"But it's not only that. It's his height, his very striking features, his expression--" I stopped suddenly, gripping George's arm convulsively in a surprise he appeared to share. We had turned the corner immediately behind the man of whom we were speaking and so had him still in full view.

"What's he doing?" I asked, in a low whisper. We were only a few feet behind. "Look! look! don't you call that curious?"

My husband stared, then uttered a low, "Rather." The man ahead of us, presenting in every respect the appearance of a gentleman, had suddenly stooped to the kerb and was washing his hands in the snow, furtively, but with a

vigour and purpose which could not fail to arouse the strangest conjectures in any chance onlooker.

"Pilate!" escaped my lips, in a sort of nervous chuckle. But George shook his head at me.

"I don't like it," he muttered, with unusual gravity. "Did you see his face?" Then as the man rose and hurried away from us down the street, "I should like to follow him. I do believe--"

But here we became aware of a quick rush and sudden clamour around the corner we had just left, and turning quickly, saw that something had occurred on Broadway which was fast causing a tumult.

"What's the matter?" I cried. "What can have happened? Let's go see, George. Perhaps it has something to do with our man."

My husband, with a final glance down the street at the fast disappearing figure, yielded to my importunity, and possibly to some new curiosity of his own.

"I'd like to stop that man first," said he. "But what excuse have I? He may be nothing but a crank, with some crack-brained idea in his head. We'll soon know; for there's certainly something wrong there on Broadway."

"He came out of the Clermont," I suggested.

"I know. If the excitement isn't there, what we've just seen is simply a coincidence." Then, as we retraced our steps to the corner "Whatever we hear or see, don't say anything about this man. It's after eight, remember, and we promised Adela that we would be at the house before nine."

"I'll be quiet."

"Remember."

It was the last word he had time to speak before we found ourselves in the midst of a crowd of men and women, jostling one another in curiosity or in the

consternation following a quick alarm. All were looking one way, and, as this was towards the entrance of the Clermont, it was evident enough to us that the alarm had indeed had its origin in the very place we had anticipated. I felt my husband's arm press me closer to his side as we worked our way towards the entrance, and presently caught a warning sound from his lips as the oaths and confused cries everywhere surrounding us were broken here and there by articulate words and we heard:

"Is it murder?"

"The beautiful Miss Challoner!"

"A millionairess in her own right!"

"Killed, they say."

"No, no! suddenly dead; that's all."

"George, what shall we do?" I managed to cry into my husband's ear.

"Get out of this. There is no chance of our reaching that door, and I can't have you standing round any longer in this icy slush."

"But--but is it right?" I urged, in an importunate whisper. "Should we go home while he--"

"Hush! My first duty is to you. We will go make our visit; but to-morrow--"

"I can't wait till to-morrow," I pleaded, wild to satisfy my curiosity in regard to an event in which I naturally felt a keen personal interest.

He drew me as near to the edge of the crowd as he could. There were new murmurs all about us.

"If it's a case of heart-failure, why send for the police?" asked one.

"It is better to have an officer or two here," grumbled another.

"Here comes a cop."

"Well, I'm going to vamoose."

"I'll tell you what I'll do," whispered George, who, for all his bluster was as curious as myself. "We will try the rear door where there are fewer persons. Possibly we can make our way in there, and if we can, Slater will tell us all we want to know."

Slater was the assistant manager of the Clermont, and one of George's oldest friends.

"Then hurry," said I. "I am being crushed here."

George did hurry, and in a few minutes we were before the rear entrance of the great hotel. There was a mob gathered here also, but it was neither so large nor so rough as the one on Broadway. Yet I doubt if we should have been able to work our way through it if Slater had not, at that very instant, shown himself in the doorway, in company with an officer to whom he was giving some final instructions. George caught his eye as soon as he was through with the man, and ventured on what I thought a rather uncalled for plea.

"Let us in, Slater," he begged. "My wife feels a little faint; she has been knocked about so by the crowd."

The manager glanced at my face, and shouted to the people around us to make room. I felt myself lifted up, and that is all I remember of this part of our adventure. For, affected more than I realised by the excitement of the event, I no sooner saw the way cleared for our entrance than I made good my husband's words by fainting away in earnest.

When I came to, it was suddenly and with perfect recognition of my surroundings. The small reception room to which I had been taken was one I had often visited, and its familiar features did not hold my attention for a moment. What I did see and welcome was my husband's face bending close over me, and to him I spoke first. My words must have sounded oddly to those about. "Have they told you anything about it?" I asked. "Did he--"

A quick pressure on my arm silenced me, and then I noticed that we were not alone. Two or three ladies stood near, watching me, and one had evidently been using some restorative, for she held a small vinaigrette in her hand. To this lady, George made haste to introduce me, and from her I presently learned the cause of the disturbance in the hotel.

It was of a somewhat different nature from what I expected, and during the recital, I could not prevent myself from casting furtive and inquiring glances at George.

Edith, the well-known daughter of Moses Challoner, had fallen suddenly dead on the floor of the mezzanine. She was not known to have been in poor health, still less in danger of a fatal attack, and the shock was consequently great to her friends, several of whom were in the building. Indeed, it was likely to prove a shock to the whole community, for she had great claims to general admiration, and her death must be regarded as a calamity to persons in all stations of life.

I realised this myself, for I had heard much of the young lady's private virtues, as well as of her great beauty and distinguished manner. A heavy loss, indeed, but--

"Was she alone when she fell?" I asked.

"Virtually alone. Some persons sat on the other side of the room, reading at the big round table. They did not even hear her fall. They say that the band was playing unusually loud in the musicians' gallery."

"Are you feeling quite well, now?"

"Quite myself," I gratefully replied as I rose slowly from the sofa. Then, as my kind informer stepped aside, I turned to George with the proposal we should go now.

He seemed as anxious as myself to leave and together we moved towards the door, while the hum of excited comment which the intrusion of a fainting woman had undoubtedly interrupted, recommenced behind us till the whole room buzzed.

In the hall we encountered Mr. Slater, whom I have before mentioned. He was trying to maintain order while himself in a state of great agitation. Seeing us, he could not refrain from whispering a few words into my husband's ear.

"The doctor has just gone up--her doctor, I mean. He's simply dumbfounded. Says that she was the healthiest woman in New York yesterday--I think--don't mention it, that he suspects something quite different from heart failure."

"What do you mean?" asked George, following the assistant manager down the broad flight of steps leading to the office. Then, as I pressed up close to Mr. Slater's other side, "She was by herself, wasn't she, in the half floor above?"

"Yes, and had been writing a letter. She fell with it still in her hand."

"Have they carried her to her room?" I eagerly inquired, glancing fearfully up at the large semi-circular openings overlooking us from the place where she had fallen.

"Not yet. Mr. Hammond insists upon waiting for the coroner." (Mr. Hammond was the proprietor of the hotel.) "She is lying on one of the big couches near which she fell. If you like, I can give you a glimpse of her. She looks beautiful. It's terrible to think that she is dead."

I don't know why we consented. We were under a spell, I think. At all events, we accepted his offer and followed him up a narrow staircase open to very few that night. At the top, he turned upon us with a warning gesture which I hardly think we needed, and led us down a narrow hall flanked by openings corresponding to those we had noted from below. At the furthest one he paused and, beckoning us to his side, pointed across the lobby into the large writing-room which occupied the better part of the mezzanine floor.

We saw people standing in various attitudes of grief and dismay about a couch, one end of which only was visible to us at the moment. The doctor had just joined them, and every head was turned towards him and every body bent forward in anxious expectation. I remember the face of one grey haired old man. I shall

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