

THE STEP ON THE STAIR

BY
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I

I had turned the corner at Thirty-fifth Street and was halfway down the block in my search for a number I had just taken from the telephone book when my attention was suddenly diverted by the quick movements and peculiar aspect of a man whom I saw plunging from the doorway of a large office-building some fifty feet or so ahead of me.

Though to all appearance in a desperate hurry to take the taxi-cab waiting for him at the curb, he was so under the influence of some other anxiety almost equally pressing that he stopped before he reached it to give one searching look down the street which, to my amazement, presently centered on myself.

The man was a stranger to me, but evidently I was not so to him, for his expression changed at once as our eyes met and, without waiting for me to advance, he stepped hastily towards me, saying as we came together:

“Mr. Bartholomew, is it not?”

I bowed. He had spoken my name.

“I have been waiting for you many interminable minutes,” he hurriedly continued. “I have had bad news from home—a child hurt—and must go at once. So, if you will pardon the informality, I will hand over to you here and now the letter about which I telephoned you, together with a key which I am assured you will find very useful. I am sorry I cannot stop for further explanations; but you will pardon me, I know. You can have nothing to ask which will not keep till to-morrow?”

“No; but—”

I got no further, something in my tone or something in my look seemed to alarm him for he took an immediate advantage of my hesitation to repeat anxiously:

“You are Mr. Bartholomew, are you not? Edgar Quenton Bartholomew?”

I smiled a polite acquiescence and, taking a card from my pocketbook, handed it to him.

He gave it one glance and passed it back. The name corresponded exactly with the one he had just uttered.

With a muttered apology and a hasty nod, he turned and fairly ran to the waiting taxi-cab. Had he looked back—

But he did not, and I had the doubtful satisfaction of seeing him ride off before I could summon my wits or pocket the articles which had been so unceremoniously thrust upon me.

For what had seemed so right to him seemed anything but right to me. I was Edgar Q. Bartholomew without question, but I was very sure that I was not the Edgar Quenton Bartholomew he thought he

was addressing. This I had more than suspected when he first accosted me. But when, after consulting my card, he handed me the letter and its accompanying parcel, all doubt vanished. He had given into my keeping articles meant for another man.

And I knew the man.

Yet I had let this stranger go without an attempt to rid him of his misapprehension. Had seen him hasten away to his injured child without uttering the one word which would have saved him from an error the consequences of which no one, not even myself, could at that moment foresee.

Why did I do this? I call myself a gentleman; moreover I believe myself to be universally considered as such. Why, then—

Let events tell. Follow my next move and look for explanations later.

The man who had accosted me was a lawyer by the name of Miller. Of that I felt assured. Also that he had been coming from his own office when he first rushed into view. Of that office I should be glad to have a momentary glimpse; also I should certainly be much more composed in mind and ready to meet the possible results of my inexcusable action if I knew whether or not the man for whom I had been taken—the other Edgar Q. Bartholomew, would come for that letter and parcel of which I had myself become the guilty possessor.

The first matter could be settled in no time. The directory just inside the building from which I had seen Mr. Miller emerge would give me the number of his office. But to determine just how I might satisfy myself on the other point was not so easy. To take

up my stand somewhere in the vicinity—in a doorway, let us say—from which I could watch all who entered the building in which I had located Mr. Miller's office seemed the natural and moreover the safest way. For the passers-by were many and I could easily slip amongst them and so disappear from view if by chance I perceived the other man of my name approaching. Whereas, if once inside, I should find it difficult to avoid him in case of an encounter.

Policy called for a watch from the street, but who listens to policy at the age of twenty-three; and after a moment or two of indecision, I hurried forward and, entering the building, was soon at a door on the third floor bearing the name of

JOHN E. MILLER

ATTORNEY AT LAW

Satisfied from the results of my short meeting with Mr. Miller in the street below that he neither knew my person nor that of the other Bartholomew (strange as this latter may seem when one considers the character of the business linking them together), I felt that I had no reason to fear being recognized by any of his clerks; and taking the knob of the door in hand, I boldly sought to enter. But I found the door locked, nor did I receive any response to my knock. Evidently Mr. Miller kept no clerks or they had all left the building when he did.

Annoyed as I was at the mischance, for I had really hoped to come upon some one there of sufficient responsibility to be of assistance to me in my perplexity, I yet derived some gratification from the

thought that when the other Bartholomew came, he would meet with the same disappointment.

But would he come? There seemed to be the best of reasons why he should. The appointment made for him by Mr. Miller was one, which, judging from what had just taken place between that gentleman and myself, was of too great importance to be heedlessly ignored. Perhaps in another moment—at the next stop of the elevator—I should behold his gay and careless figure step into sight within twenty feet of me. Did I wish him to find me standing in hesitation before the lawyer's closed door? No, anything but that, especially as I was by no means sure what I might be led into doing if we thus came eye to eye. The letter in my pocket—the key of whose usefulness I had been assured—was it or was it not in me to hand them over without a fuller knowledge of what I might lose in doing so?

Honestly, I did not know. I should have to see his face—the far from handsome face which nevertheless won all hearts as mine had never done, good-looking though I was said to be even by those who liked me least. If that face wore a smile—I had reason to dread that smile—I might waver and succumb to its peculiar fascination. If on the contrary its expression was dubious or betrayed an undue anxiety, the temptation to leave him in ignorance of what I held would be great and I should probably pass the coming night in secret debate with my own conscience over the untoward situation in which I found myself, himself and one other thus unexpectedly involved.

It would be no more than just, or so I blindly decided as I hastily withdrew into a short hall which providentially opened just opposite the spot where I stood lingering in my indecision.

It was an unnecessary precaution. Strangers and strangers only met my eye as I gazed in anxious scrutiny at the various persons hurrying by in every direction.

Five minutes—ten went by—and still a rush of strangers, none of whom paused even for a moment at Mr. Miller's door.

Should I waste any more time on such an uncertainty, or should I linger a little while longer in the hope that the other Quenton Bartholomew would yet turn up? I was not surprised at his being late. If ever a man was a slave to his own temperament, that man was he, and what would make most of us hasten, often caused him a needless delay.

I would wait ten, fifteen minutes longer; for petty as the wish may seem to you who as yet have been given no clew to my motives or my reason for them, I felt that it would be a solace for many a bitter hour in the past if I might be the secret witness of this man's disappointment at having through some freak or a culpable indifference as to time, missed the interview which might mean everything to him.

I should not have to use my eyes to take all this in; hearing would be sufficient. But then if he should chance to turn and glance my way he would not need to see my face in order to recognize me; and the ensuing conversation would not be without its embarrassments for the one hiding the other's booty in his breast.

No, I would go, notwithstanding the uncertainty it would leave in my mind; and impetuously wheeling about, I was on the point of carrying out this purpose when I noticed for the first time that there was an opening at the extreme end of this short hall, leading to a staircase running down to the one beneath.

This offered me an advantage of which I was not slow to avail myself. Slipping from the open hall on to the platform heading this staircase, I listened without further fear of being seen for any movement which might take place at door 322.

But without results. Though I remained where I was for a full half hour, I heard nothing which betrayed the near-by presence of the man for whom I waited. If a step seemed to halt before the office-door upon which my attention was centered it went speedily on. He whom I half hoped, half dreaded to see failed to appear.

Why should I have expected anything different? Was he not always himself and no other? *He* keep an appointment?—remember that time is money to most men if not to his own easy self? Hardly, if some present whim, or promising diversion stood in the way. Yet business of this nature, involving—But there! what did it involve? That I did not know—could not know till what lay concealed in my pocket should open up its secrets. My heart jumped at the thought. I was not indifferent if he was. If I left the building now, the letter containing these secrets would have to go with me. The idea of leaving it in the hands of a third party, be he who he may, was an intolerable one. For this night at least, it must remain in my keeping. Perhaps on the morrow I should see my way to some other disposition of the same. At all events, such an opportunity to end a great perplexity seldom comes to any man. I should be a fool to let it slip without a due balancing of the pros and cons incident to all serious dilemmas.

So thinking, I left the building and in twenty minutes was closeted with my problem in a room I had taken that morning at the Marie Antoinette.

For hours I busied myself with it, in an effort to determine whether I should open the letter bearing my name but which I was certain was not intended for me, or to let it lie untampered with till I could communicate with the man who had a legal right to it.

It was not the simple question that it seems. Read on, and I think you will ultimately agree with me that I was right in giving the matter some thought before yielding to the instinctive impulse of an honest man.

II

My uncle, Edgar Quenton Bartholomew, was a man in a thousand. In everything he was remarkable. Physically little short of a giant, but handsome as few are handsome, he had a mind and heart measuring up to his other advantages.

Had fortune placed him differently—had he lived where talent is recognized and a man's faculties are given full play—he might have been numbered among the country's greatest instead of being the boast of a small town which only half appreciated the personality it so ignorantly exalted. His early life, even his middle age I leave to your imagination. It is of his latter days I would speak; days full of a quiet tragedy for which the hitherto even tenor of his life had poorly prepared him.

Though I was one of the only two male relatives left to him, I had grown to manhood before Fate brought us face to face and his troubles as well as mine began. I was the son of his next younger brother and had been brought up abroad where my father had married. I was given my uncle's name but this led to little beyond

an acknowledgment of our relationship in the shape of a generous gift each year on my birthday, until by the death of my mother who had outlived my father twenty years, I was left free to follow my natural spirit of adventure and to make the acquaintance of one whom I had been brought up to consider as a man of unbounded wealth and decided consequence.

That in doing this I was to quit a safe and quiet life, and enter upon personal hazard and many a disturbing problem, I little realized. But had it been given me to foresee this I probably would have taken passage just the same and perhaps with even more youthful gusto. Have I not said that my temperament was naturally adventurous?

I arrived in New York, had my three weeks of pleasure in town, then started north for the small city from which my uncle's letters had invariably been post-marked. I had not advised him of my coming. With the unconscious egotism of youth I wanted to surprise him and his lovely young daughter about whom I had had many a dream.

Edgar Quenton Bartholomew sending up his card to Edgar Quenton Bartholomew tickled my fancy. I had forgotten or rather ignored the fact that there was still another of our name, the son of a yet younger brother whom I had not seen and of whom I had heard so little that he was really a negligible factor in the plans I had laid out for myself.

This third Edgar was still a negligible factor when on reaching C— — I stepped from the train and made my way into the station where I proposed to get some information as to the location of my uncle's home. It was while thus engaged that I was startled and

almost thrown off my balance by seeing in the hand of a liveried chauffeur awaiting his turn at the ticket office, a large gripsack bearing the initials E. Q. B.—which you will remember were not only mine but those of my unknown cousin.

There was but one conclusion to be drawn from this circumstance. My uncle's second namesake—the nephew who possibly lived with him—was on the point of leaving town; and whether I welcomed the fact or not, must at that very moment be somewhere in the crowd surrounding me or on the platform outside.

More startled than gratified by this discovery, I impulsively reversed the bag I was carrying so as to effectively conceal from view the initials which gave away my own identity.

Why? Most any other man in my position would have rejoiced at such an opportunity to make himself known to one so closely allied to himself before the fast coming train had carried him away. But I had my own conception of how and where my introduction to my American relatives should take place. It had been my dream for weeks, and I was in no mood to see it changed simply because my uncle's second namesake chose to take a journey just as I was entering the town. He was young and I was young; we could both afford to wait. It was not about his image that my fancies lingered.

Here the crowd of outgoing passengers caught me up and I was soon on the outside platform looking about, though with a feeling of inner revulsion of which I should have been ashamed and was not, for the face and figure of a young man answering to my preconceived idea of what my famous uncle's nephew should be. But I saw no one near or far with whom I could associate in any way the initials I have mentioned, and relieved in mind that the

hurrying minutes left me no time for further effort in this direction, I was searching for some one to whom I might properly address my inquiries, when I heard a deep voice from somewhere over my head remark to the chauffeur whom I now saw standing directly in front of me, "Is everything all right? Train on time?" and turned, realizing in an instant upon whom my gaze would fall. Tones so deliberate and so rich with the mellowness of years never could have come from a young man's throat. It was my uncle, and not my cousin, who stood at my back awaiting the coming train. One glance at his face and figure made any other conclusion impossible.

Here then, in the hurry of departure from town where I had foolishly looked upon him as a fixture, our meeting was to come off. The surprise I had planned had turned into an embarrassment for myself. Instead of a fit setting such as I had often imagined (how the dream came back to me at that incongruous moment! The grand old parlor, of the elegance of which strange stories had come to my ears—my waiting figure, expectant, with eyes on the door opening to admit uncle and cousin, he stately but kind, she curious but shy)—instead of all this, with its glamour of hope and uncertainty, a station platform, with but three minutes in which to state my claim and receive his welcome.

Could any circumstances have been more prejudicial to my high hopes? Yet must I make my attempt. If I let this opportunity slip, I might never have another. Who knows! He might be going away for weeks, perhaps for months. Danger lurks in long delays. I dared not remain silent.

Meantime, I had been taking in his imposing personality. Though anticipating much, I found myself in no wise disappointed. He was all and more than my fancy had painted. If the grandeur of his

proportions aroused a feeling of awe, the geniality of his expression softened that feeling into one of a more pleasing nature. He was gifted with the power to win as well as to command; and as I noted this and yielded to an influence such as never before had entered my life, the hardihood with which I had contemplated this meeting received a shock; and a warmth to which my breast was more or less a stranger took the place of the pretense with which I had expected to carry off a situation I was hardly experienced enough in social amenities to handle with suitable propriety.

While this new and unusual feeling lightened my heart and made it easy for my lips to smile, I touched him lightly on the arm (for he was not noticing me at all), and quietly spoke his name.

Now I am by no means a short man, but at the sound of my voice he looked down and meeting the glance of a stranger, nodded and waited for me to speak, which I did with the least circumlocution possible.

Begging him to pardon me for intruding myself upon him at such a moment, I smilingly remarked:

“From the initials I see on the bag in the hand of your chauffeur, I judge that you will not be devoid of all interest in mine, if only because they are so strangely familiar to you.” And with a repetition of my smile which sprang quite unbidden at his look of quick astonishment, I turned my own bag about and let him see the E. Q. B. hitherto hidden from view.

He gave a start, and laying his hand on my shoulder, gazed at me for a moment with an earnestness I would have found it hard to meet five minutes before, and then drew me slightly aside with the remark:

“You are James’ son?”

I nodded.

“You have crossed the ocean and found your way here to see me?”

I nodded again; words did not come with their usual alacrity.

“I do not see your father in your face.”

“No, I favor my mother.”

“She must have been a handsome woman.”

I flushed, not with displeasure, but because I had hoped that he would find something of himself or at least of his family in my personal traits.

“She was the belle of her village, when my father married her,” I nevertheless answered. “She died six weeks ago. That is why I am here; to make your acquaintance and that of my two cousins who up till now have been little more than names to me.”

“I am glad to see you,”—and though the rumble of the approaching train was every moment becoming more audible, he made no move, unless the gesture with which he summoned his chauffeur could be called one. “I was going to Albany, but that city won’t run away, while I am not so sure that you will not, if I left you thus unceremoniously at the first moment of our acquaintance. Bliss, take us back home and tell Wealthy to order the fatted calf.” Then, with a merry glance my way, “We shall have to do our celebrating in peaceful contemplation of each other’s enjoyment. Both Edgar and Orpha are away. But do not be concerned. A man of my build can do wonders in an emergency; and so, I have no doubt, can you.

Together, we should be able to make the occasion a memorable one.”

The laugh with which I replied was gay with hope. No premonition of mischief or of any deeper evil disturbed that first exhilaration. We were like boys. He sixty-seven and I twenty-three.

It is an hour I love to look back upon.

III

I had always been told that my uncle's home was one of unusual magnificence but placed in such an undesirable quarter of the city as to occasion surprise that so much money should have been lavished in embellishing a site which in itself was comparatively worthless. And yet while I was thus in a measure prepared for what I was to see, I found the magnificence of the house as well as the unattractiveness of the surroundings much greater than anything my imagination had presumed to picture.

The fact that this man of many millions lived not only in the business section but in the least prosperous portion of it was what I noted first. I could hardly believe that the street we entered was his street until I saw that its name was the one to which our letters had been uniformly addressed. Old fashioned houses, all decent but of the humbler sort, with here and there a sprinkling of shops, lined the way which led up to the huge area of park and dwelling which owned him for its master. Beyond, more street and rows of even humbler dwellings. Why, the choice of this spot for a palace? I tried to keep this question out of my countenance, as we turned

into the driveway, and the beauties of the Bartholomew home burst upon me.

I shall find it a difficult house to describe. It is so absolutely the product of a dominant mind bound by no architectural conventions that a mere observer like myself could only wonder, admire and remain silent.

It is built of stone with a curious admixture of wood at one end for which there seems to be no artistic reason. However, one forgets this when once the picturesque effect of the whole mass has seized upon the imagination. To what this effect is due I have never been able to decide. Perhaps the exact proportion of part to part may explain it, or the peculiar grouping of its many chimneys each of individual design, or more likely still, the way its separate roofs slope into each other, insuring a continuous line of beauty. Whatever the cause, the result is as pleasing as it is startling, and with this expression of delight in its general features, I will proceed to give such details of its scope and arrangement as are necessary to a full understanding of my story.

Approached by a double driveway, its great door of entrance opened into what I afterwards found to be a covered court taking the place of an ordinary hall.

Beyond this court, with its elaborate dome of glass sparkling in the sunlight, rose the main façade with its two projecting wings flanking the court on either side; the one on the right to the height of three stories and the one on the left to two, thus leaving to view in the latter case a row of mullioned windows in line with the façade already mentioned.

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