THE TIMES' DAILY SERIAL STORY.

"Behind the Curtain"

By CHARLES STEPHENS

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CHAPTER I.

The Experience Of Mr. Wm. Gettys.

WHILE it is probable that the mystery of the thing behind the curtain will never be solved satisfactorily, it is, perhaps, my duty to set forth the facts as they are known to me personally and through the statements of those who were sworn by the coroner.

It is unfortunate that my own knowledge of the affair should be limited to earlier matters than those which engaged the amazed interest of the police and the public. But I am a man whose tastes are moderate, and, while I like to read of things of a certain nature, I never have had any great desire to experience them in reality. This trait was the bar between Marcus Bellair and me.

It is more than unfortunate, however, that this extraordinary man should have had no taste for literature. Not that I have it myself in any esthetic degree, although I am partial to reviews and so forth; but in Marcus Bellair it was the one art, besides piano-playing, in which he had no skill.

He had a great deal of Latin and more Greek, if I may parody the saying. He would wax unexpectedly enthusiastic over a phase of the stars, and, although he had no accomplishment among musical instruments, I have heard him, in his rare moments of gayety hum through the greater part of an opera.

Yet he either could not, or would not, write. He made no notes and wrote few letters. There are only three documents of any value written by him which I am able to bring forward. Two are letters which I believe are still in the hands of Coroner McCready. The third is a fragment, apparently, of a statement which, if he had finished it, might have saved the labor of editing these narratives and at the same time given the world a definite solution of the mystery. I offer the fragment for what it may be worth, although, perhaps, I should place it at the end of the story. However, here it is:

"At the moment of writing I know that I have overstepped the boundary line drawn by the Creator. He who made us what we are, cast me in a mold designed for one Marcus Bellair. I lived as the Creator intended I should until the love of science, and afterward curiosity and conceit, led me to touch where no human hand has right of way. Now I, Marcus Bellair, repent, knowing * * *"

And there it breaks off.

Certainly, Marcus Bellair was the queerest friend I ever had. I knew him many years ago when we were at Yale together. I remember him then as a tall young man of very expressive face and manner. Few of the students liked him; not many understood him and his varying moods of despondency and lassitude, his recklessness bordering upon madness, through which shone a sublime clearness of intellect. One moment he would be virile as his cameo-like features, and again tender and romantic.

It is probable that his unpopularity at Yale was due to a certain repellent mood which was upon him three-fifths of the time. Then no one spoke to him. His pallid face and smoldering eyes filled the beholder with a mysterious fear of the man.

He did nothing worthy of record while at Yale. When I graduated and considered my own future I chose travel as an occupation suited to my tastes. Thus, I did not see Marcus Bellair for many years, and then the meeting was accidental.

It was on Broadway one winter night, just after theaters were out. He was standing before a brightly illumined window peering at a new model of a phonograph. He was so preoccupied that he did not recognize me for some time. To put the matter strictly, I was very much changed, having lived in Germany for some years and adopted that country's fashion in hirsute adornment.

He invited me to supper at his rooms, and I accepted. I cannot say that he impressed me as a cheerful host, but there was a reserve about him which I respected. His inquiries after my own health, welfare, and movements were so worded that evasion would have been easy had one desired to keep one's counsel upon any point. His manner was still repelling, so that I found myself curious to know more about him without the desire to ask.

He volunteered the information that he had leased the brownstone house in which we supped.

"I am well to do," he said. "But I like quiet. No globe-trotter, like yourself. I can touch the heart of the world without leaving my study."

His eyes fell upon me with that old, burning repellance, as if to say: "Do not ask!"

I remember feeling the unspoken command at the moment, and I recalled the words he had just uttered.

The study to which he referred was on the floor below. The door had been locked as we ascended to the den on the top flooor, but he waved a hand to it.

"My chamber of horrors," he said.

"You must show it to me some day," I returned.

"Some day—perhaps," he stammered. "Mrs. Anselm—my housekeeper, a very estimable woman, Gettys'—has never been in there. A sort of Bluebeard's chamber!" And he laughed.

Previously he told me that he had taken up science, especially the science of "that almost omnipotent—electricity." Later in the evening he reverted to the subject with a peculiar earnestnes. One would have thought that he was speaking of a religion.

"Mystery of mysteries, my dear Gettys," he said. "There is no study like it. Of nearly all others we may say that some one knows it all; but of this—even the greatest profess to know least. What is it? Who knows but God? He may be It and It may be He. It is sound. It is light. It is heat. It is power. It is the fall of the apple, Gettys, and who shall say that electricity is not that miraculous thing which comes and thinks a space and goes? It is everything that we know and so much more than we can conceive."

We were smoking a pipe together. He stopped and vaguely felt for his mouth with the pipestem. I am sure that we must have sat for twenty minutes in silence. Then he awoke.

"You must think me a dreadful bore," he said. "But I have been so much alone that to have received a visitor who was more of a stranger than you, Gettys, would have been a tax upon my social ingenuity. I usually carry it off with a patter of nonsense and sink into the depths the moment the visitor is gone. I'm afraid the oyster loves his shell."

"To tell the truth," I said, "I rather enjoy it. There are few people with whom I can sit down and say little and still be comfortable. You are one of the few. I mean no compliment, I am afraid. You have always been more or less of a queer chap. Sometimes I don't like you; sometimes I do; but I am always certain that I would like to know more of you."

I stopped, a little confused. He smiled at me through the smoke of his pipe.

"I like you, Gettys," said he, "because you are so utterly irresponsible. I dare say I am just as well off as you are; but you are as rich as Croesus in the sense that you can go through life without more than a normal share of curiosity. You are satisfied. I am sure your grandfather must have been an Englishman."

"A Welshman."

"Where are you living?" he asked abruptly.

I told him that since my return from Japan I had been existing in apartments in Forty-fourth street, near the avenue. He waved his hand round the den.

"Send your traps round," he said. "There's a room adjoins this, also a bathroom across the hall. It won't be duller than where you are, and it would be a pleasure and a favor to me."

It was an offer that most persons would have stopped to consider, or perhaps refused at the outset. But I was alone and without ties, and the city is a bore.

Besides, I was curious to know more of Bellair, to solve the mystery of the man and his doings. I accepted and thanked him with a readiness which was astonishing to me if it was not so to him.

Next day I sent my belongings over and took possession of the upper floor of the brownstone house.

Mrs. Anselm cooked for us, and a good cook she was. I do not like the whitewashed vulgarity called bohemian life; nor yet am I partial to the flesh-pots; but Mrs. Anselm struck a happy medium in her cookery. Everything was plain, scrupulously clean and good.

My meals were served in the den where Bellair and I had first supped. Sometimes he joined me; most often not. I remember one evening he sent Mrs. Anselm upstairs to invite me to supper in his own den downstairs. It was then that I began to see the sort of life that he was leading.

But I must describe Mrs. Anselm—"that estimable woman," as he called her. She was tall, angular and of a soured appearance. Her sharp face was cut across with a mouth which was habitually closed so tight that the lips formed a thin, almost bloodless line. Her air was that of a woman who has a grievance, but glories in it because she feels that it all comes within the duty of a good Christian. She was deeply religious, but her religion was of the self-centered kind. It seemed to me that what other people did mattered little to her so long as it did not touch her.

I remember one day when my curiosity was stirred to the talking point asking her if Mr. Bellair was very busy that morning, half hoping that she would drop a hint as to the meaning of a queer thing which I had seen the night before.

"Every man a perdition in his own way!" was Mrs. Anselm's astonishing reply.

The particular queer thing to which I refer was only one of many which I had observed.

Ever since I had been in the house I had been consumed with justifiable curiosity to know what was going on in the red room, as we playfully called Bellair's forbidden study. Several times I had seen strangers in the house. For the most part they were of the lower classes. Tramps were common, and the night before my brief interview with Mrs. Anselm, when coming in from the theater, I had been astonished to see an undertaker's wagon standing by the curb.

A few minutes after I had retired to my room I heard a sound of many feet moving on the stairs. Stepping quietly to the landing, I saw three men carrying a coffin into the red room. Mrs. Anselm's remark next morning filled me with grave apprehension of—I know not what.

Several nights after that I was sitting in my den upstairs, writing to a distant friend. The silence which accompanied my task permitted me to hear, coming from the room below me, a tinkling of notes as of some unpracticed hand wheedling a tune from a piano with one finger.

Now, I knew there was a piano in the red room; I knew it to my cost. I am not a lover of music, but I can tolerate pieces like Sousa's and other things which have a decided meaning. One thing I cannot stand, however, is the boarding-school efforts of some persons to make music out of an instrument which is a mechanical sound-box at the best of it. I put down my pen and prepared to suffer with patience.

In a little while, to my inexpressible relief, the tinkling of the piano ceased. Then I heard Bellair come upstairs and knock at my door.

A new whim, I reflected. Now he would like to be sociable.

"Good evening," I said, a little stiffly, perhaps, as he entered.

"Thank you," said he in a tone of the most utter melancholy.

On looking more attentively I was astonished at the peculiar aspect of his face. It was like blue-veined marble. His lips were compressed; his great, lustrous eyes appeared to have sunk deeper into his head and glowed like a moth's in a half light.

"You were busy, Gettys," he observed, the glint of the half-dried ink on the note paper catching his eye.

"I decided to stop and enjoy your music," I retorted.

"I have been busy myself," he said, with a sad smile. "Like other people, I don't like to be disturbed when I'm busy."

"You seem to work night and day," I ventured

"I think night and day," said he, turning his eyes full upon me.

Averse to asking questions, I yet could not help wondering to what his thinking night and day tended.

"As you are so busy I'll look in later," said he, turning languidly to go.

My curiosity leaped. I wondered why he should have come upstairs at all.

"No—I won't write any more," I said. "Perhaps you'll smoke a pipe?"

"Thanks," said he, his hand on the door. "I have a fine Latakia downstairs. I'm sure you'll like it."

He passed into the hallway. I heard him softly descend the stairs. Then the key turned in the lock of the red room door.

While waiting for him to return I selected a pipe from the rack. I hardly had done so when I was seized with a sensation of nervous dread and despair.

It seemed to me that in taking that pipe from the rack I had not obeyed my own will. I sickened at the thought of the pipe, and a faintness stole over me. As I reeled across the room and dropped upon a lounge I was dimly conscious that I was in a strange place.

The pictures and bric-a-brac, with which I had become familiar, were suddenly new to me. And the room? I had never been in it before!

I stared like one bereft of reason, but still retained enough memory of my affairs to know that the room was the same. But even as my eyes traveled over the personal effects about the room trying to identify them with their associations the room became clouded as with rain-mist. At the same moment the door opened and Marcus Bellair appeared. His figure also became enshrouded in the mist, but before he faded from my eyes it seemed to me that his pallid, intellectual face was illumined by a fire of enthusiasm.

Then the evil veil closed around me; but presently out of its misty whiteness there appeared, like the first high lights in a developing negative, the outlines of something vast and spangled with fire.

I had ceased to know myself and was not greatly surprised to be walking on Broadway at night with the clear impression that I was "myself" and that my name was Arthur Tremlett—whereas it is plain William Gettys—and that I was destitute, my landlady in possession of my trunk, in lieu of rent. I could still see that landlady—a Scotswoman, red-haired, with arms akimbo and a heart as bleak as her native land in November—and she lived on Eighth avenue, near Thirty-seventh street.

"And now, what am I to do?" I asked myself, staring dully at the diamonds sparkling beneath the electric light of a jeweler's window. "No hope—no money—no friends; or, if I have any, I have forgotten who they are. I am nothing but a face on the street."

I remember wandering about the street like one who, having "no hope, can have no fear." I was somebody else; that is certain; but, mixed with my vision of the present, there was a horrible dream of a past which could only have been the imagination of a half-crazed intellect. It was a dull memory of an ill-smelling place where no light penetrated, and there were blind snakes and bats in it. But while Boadway and my condition there seemed real, the horrible memory of the past was merely a troubled recollection.

I seemed to have been that unfortunate young man for hours. Yes, I was quite young. I know I suffered the pangs of hunger no less than if they had been real.

It all ended in my finding myself by the East river, hours later, deliberating, when some one laid a hand on my shoulder.

I—Arthur Tremlett—turned and looked into the face of a stranger—tall, pallid, and not unlike a picture I had seen of Edgar Allan Poe; and at the same time, I—William Gettys—recovered my own consciousness to find Marcus Bellair on the lounge beside me. His pose was like that of "The Vampire" in the Burne-Jones picture over the escritoire, and his eyes were aflame with excitement. But he spoke with a calm smile.

"Feeling better now? You have been smoking too much."

I sat up quickly and stared at him. He was in the act of lighting his pipe. I felt perfectly well, but dazed with astonishment. It was on the tip of my tongue to ask how much he had had to do with this strange occurrence, but a second thought told me how utterly idiotic the question would seem.

"I must have fainted," I said, looking straight into Bellair's eyes. "I hope it will not occur again."

"It will not," said Bellair calmly.

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