

THE WRONG MAN

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The room blazed with color. It seemed that the gorgeous things which the women were wearing had for this once managed to subdue the strident tones of the inevitable black and white of the men's costumes. Tonight they lent just enough of preciseness to add interest to the riotously hued scene. The place was crowded but cool, for a gentle breeze blew from the Sound through the large open windows and doors, now and then stirring some group of flowers.

Julia Romley, in spite of the smoke-colored chiffon gown (ordered specially for the occasion) which she was wearing, seemed even more flamingly clad than the rest. The pale in definite gray but increased the flaring mop of her hair; scarlet, a poet had called it. The satiny texture of her skin seemed also to reflect in her cheeks a cozy tinge of that red mass.

Julia, however, was not happy tonight. A close observer would have said that she was actively disturbed. Faint abstraction, trite remarks nervously offered, and uncontrolled restlessness marred her customary perfect composure. Her dreamy gray eyes stole frequently in the direction of Myra Redmon's party. Myra always had a lion in tow, but why that particular man? She shook a little as she wondered.

Suddenly, the orchestra blared into something wild and impressionistic, with a primitive staccato understrain of jazz. The buzz of conversation died, strangled by the savage strains of the music. The crowd stirred, broke, coalesced into twos, and became a whirling mass. A partner claimed Julia and they became part of the swaying mob.

“Some show, what?” George Hill’s drawling voice was saying, while he secretly wondered what had got into Julia; she was so quiet, not like herself at all.

Julia let her eyes wander over the moving crowd. Young men, old men, young women, older women, slim girls, fat women, thin men, stout men, glided by. The old nursery rhyme came into her mind. She repeated it to George in a singsong tone:

“Rich man, poor man,
Beggar man, thief,
Doctor, lawyer,
Indian chief.”

George nodded. “Yes, that’s it. Everybody’s here and a few more. And look, look! There’s the ‘Indian chief.’ Wonder who he is? He certainly looks the part.”

Julia didn’t look; she knew what she would see. A tall, thin man, his lean face yellowed and hardened as if by years in the tropics; a man, perhaps, a bit unused to scenes of this kind, purposely a little aloof and, one suspected, more than a little contemptuous.

She felt a flash of resentful anger against Myra. Why was she always carting about impossible people? It was disgusting. It was worse—it was dangerous. Certainly it was about to become dangerous to her, Julia Romley, erstwhile ... She let the thought die unfinished, it was too unpleasant.

She had been so happy, so secure, and now this: Ralph Tyler, risen from the past to shatter the happiness which she had grasped for herself. Must she begin all over again? She made a hasty review of her life since San Francisco days: Chicago and the art school where she had studied interior decorating with the money that Ralph Tyler had given her; New York, her studio and success; Boston, and marriage to Jim Romley. And now this envied gay life in one of Long Island’s most exclusive sets. Yes, life had been good to her at last, better than she had ever dreamed. Was she about to lose everything—love, wealth, and position? She shivered.

“Cold?” Again George’s drawling voice dragging her back to the uncertain present.

“No, not cold. Just someone walking over my grave,” she answered laughingly. “I’m rotten company tonight, George. I’m sorry; I’ll do better. It’s the crowd, I guess.”

Her husband claimed her for the next dance. A happy married pair, their obvious joy in each other after five wedded years was the subject of amused comment and mild jokes among their friends. “The everlasting lovers,” they were dubbed, and the name suited them as perfectly as they suited each other.

“What’s wrong, Julie, old girl?” asked Jim after a few minutes’ baffled scrutiny. “Tired?”

“Nothing, nothing. I just feel small, so futile in this crush; sort of trapped, you know. Why do the Arnolds have so many people to their things?” Quickly regretting her display of irritation, she added: “It’s wonderful, though—the people, the music, the color, and these lovely rooms, like a princess’s ball in a fairy tale.”

“Yes, great,” he agreed. “Lots of strangers here, too; most of them distinguished people from town.”

“Who’s the tall browned man with Myra, who looks like—well, like an Indian chief?” She laughed a little at her own pleasantry, just to show Jim that there was nothing troubling her.

“Doesn’t he, though? Sort of self-sufficient and superior and a bit indifferent, as if he owned us all and despised the whole tribe of us. I guess you can’t blame him much. He probably thinks we’re a soft, lazy, self-pampering lot. He’s Ralph Tyler, an explorer, just back from some godforsaken place on the edge of nowhere. Been head of some expedition lost somewhere in Asia for years, given up for dead. Discovered a buried city or something; great contribution to civilization and all that, you know. They say he brought back some emeralds worth a king’s ransom.”

“Do you know him, Jim?”

“Yes; knew him years ago in college. Didn’t think he’d remember me after such a long time and all those thrilling adventures, but he did. Honestly, you could have knocked me over with a feather when he came over to me and put out his hand and said, ‘Hello there, Jim Romley.’ Nice, wasn’t it?” Jim’s handsome face glowed. He was undoubtedly flattered by the great

man's remembrance. He went on enthusiastically: "I'm going to have him out to the house, Julie; that is, if I can get him. Small, handpicked dinner party. What say?"

She shivered again.

"Cold?"

"No, not cold. Just someone walking over my grave." She laughed, amused at the double duty of the superstition in one evening, and glad too that Jim had not noticed that his question had passed unanswered.

Dance followed dance. She wasn't being a success tonight. She knew it, but somehow she couldn't make small talk. Her thoughts kept wandering to that tall browned man who had just come back from the world's end. One or two of her partners, after trying in vain to draw her out, looked at her quizzically, wondering if the impossible had happened. Had Julia and old Jim quarreled?

At last she escaped to a small deserted room on an upper floor, where she could be alone to think. She groped about in her mind for some way to avoid that dinner party. It spelled disaster. She must find some way to keep Ralph Tyler from finding out that she was the wife of his old schoolmate. But if he were going to be here for any length of time, and Jim seemed to think that he would, she would have to meet him. Perhaps she could go away? ... No, she dared not; anything might happen. Better to be on hand to ward off the blow when it fell. She sighed, suddenly weary and beaten. It was hopeless. And she had been so happy! Just a faint shadow of uneasiness, at first, which had gradually faded as the years slipped away.

She sat for a long time in deep thought. Her face settled into determined lines; she made up her mind. She would ask, plead if necessary, for his silence. It was the only way. It would be hard, humiliating even, but it must be done if she were to continue to be happy in Jim's love. She couldn't bear to look ahead to years without him.

She crossed the room and wrote a note to Ralph Tyler, asking him to meet her in the summerhouse in one of the gardens. She hesitated a moment over the signature, finally writing Julia Hammond, in order to prepare him a little for the meeting.

After she had given the note into the hand of a servant for delivery “to Mr. Tyler, the man with Mrs. Redmon,” she experienced a slight feeling of relief. “At least I can try,” she thought as she made her way to the summerhouse to wait. “Surely, if I tell him about myself and Jim, he’ll be merciful.”

The man looked curiously at the woman sitting so motionless in the summerhouse in the rock garden. Even in the darkness she felt his gaze upon her, though she lacked the courage to raise her eyes to look at him. She waited expectantly for him to speak.

After what seemed hours but was, she knew, only seconds, she understood that he was waiting for her to break the silence. So she began to speak in a low hesitating voice:

“I suppose you think it strange, this request of mine to meet me here alone; but I had to see you, to talk to you. I wanted to tell you about my marriage to Jim Romley. You know him?”

“Yes, I know him.”

“Well,” she went on, eagerly now, “you see, we’re so happy! Jim’s so splendid, and I’ve tried to be such a good wife. And I thought—I thought—you see, I thought—” The eager voice trailed off on a note of entreaty.

“Yes, you thought?” prompted the man in a noncommittal tone.

“Well, you see, I thought that if you knew how happy we were, and how much I love him, and that since you know Jim, that you—you—”

She stopped. She couldn’t go on, she simply couldn’t. But she must. There he stood like a long, menacing shadow between her and the future. She began again, this time with insinuating flattery:

“You have so much yourself now—honor, fame, and money—and you’ve done such splendid things! You’ve suffered too. How you must have suffered! Oh, I’m glad of your success; you deserve it. You’re a hero, a great man. A little thing like that can’t matter to you now and it means everything to me, everything. Please spare me my little happiness. Please be kind!”

“But I don’t understand.” The man’s voice was puzzled. “How ‘kind’? What is it you’re asking?”

Reading masked denial in the question, Julia began to sob softly.

“Don’t tell Jim! Please, don’t tell Jim! I’ll do anything to keep him from knowing, anything.”

“But aren’t you making a mistake? I—”

“Mistake?” She laughed bitterly. “I see; you think I should have told him. You think that even now I should tell him that I was your mistress once. You don’t know Jim. He’d never forgive that. He wouldn’t understand that, when a girl has been sick and starving on the streets, anything can happen to her; that she’s grateful for food and shelter at any price. You won’t tell him, will you?”

“But I’m sure,” stammered the tall figure, fumbling for cigarettes, “I’m sure you’ve made a mistake. I’m sorry. I’ve been trying to—”

Julia cut him off. She couldn’t bear to hear him speak the refusing words, his voice seemed so grimly final. She knew it was useless, but she made a last desperate effort:

“I was so young, so foolish, and so hungry; but Jim wouldn’t understand.” She choked over the last words.

He shook his head—impatiently, it seemed to the agonized woman.

“Mrs. Romley, I’ve been trying to tell you that you’ve made a mistake. I’m sorry. However, I can assure you that your secret is safe with me. It will never be from my lips that Jim Romley hears you have been—er—what you say you have been.”

Only the woman’s sharply drawn quivering breath indicated that she had heard. A match blazed for a moment as he lighted his cigarette with shaking hands. Julia’s frightened eyes picked out his face in the flickering light. She uttered a faint dismayed cry.

She had told the wrong man.



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