



*A Columbus
of Space*

by Garrett P. Serviss



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About Author



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A Marvelous Intention

I am a hero worshiper; an insatiable devourer of biographies; and I say that no man in all the splendid list ever equaled Edmund Stonewall. You smile because you have never heard his name, for, until now, his biography has not been written. And this is not truly a biography; it is only the story of the crowning event in Stonewall's career.

Really it humbles one's pride of race to see how ignorant the world is of its true heroes. Many a man who cuts a great figure in history is, after all, a poor specimen of humanity, slavishly following old ruts, destitute of any real originality, and remarkable only for some exaggeration of the commonplace. But in the case of Edmund Stonewall the world cannot be blamed for its ignorance, because, as I have already said, his story remains to be written, and hitherto it has been guarded as a profound secret.

I do not wish to exaggerate; yet I cannot avoid seeming to do so in simply telling the facts. If Stonewall's proceedings had become Matter of common knowledge the world would have been—I must speak plainly—revolutionized. He held in his hands the means of realizing the wildest dreams of power, wealth, and human mastery over the forces of nature, that any enthusiast ever treasured in his prophetic soul. It was a part of his originality that he never entertained the thought of employing his advantage in any such way. His character was entirely free from the ordinary forms of avidity. He cared nothing for wealth in itself, and as little for fame. All his energies were concentrated upon the attainment of ends which nobody but himself would have regarded as of any practical importance. Thus it happened that, having made an invention which would have put every human industry upon a new footing, and multiplied beyond the limits of calculation the activities and achievements of mankind, this extraordinary person turned his back upon the colossal fortune which he had but to stretch forth his hand and grasp, refused to seize the unlimited power which his genius had laid at his feet, and used his unparalleled discovery for a purpose so eccentric, so wildly unpractical, so utterly beyond the pale of waking life, that to any ordinary man he must have seemed a lunatic lost in an endless dream of bedlam. And to this day I cannot, without a nervous thrill, think how the desire of all the ages, the ideal that has been the loadstar for thousands of philosophers, savants, inventors, prophets, and dreamers, was actually realized upon the earth; and yet of all its fifteen hundred million inhabitants but a single one knew it, possessed it, controlled it—and he would not reveal it,

but hoarded and used his knowledge for the accomplishment of the craziest design that ever took shape in a human brain.

Now, to be more specific. Of Stonewall's antecedents I know very little. I only know that, in a moderate way, he was wealthy, and that he had no immediate family ties. He was somewhere near thirty years of age, and held the diploma of one of our oldest universities. But he was not, in a general way, sociable, and I never knew him to attend any of the reunions of his former classmates, or to show the slightest interest in any of the events or functions of society, although its doors were open to him through some distant relatives who were widely connected in New York, and who at times tried to draw him into their circle. He would certainly have adorned it, but it had no attraction for him. Nevertheless he was a member of the Olympus Club, where he frequently spent his evenings. But he made very few acquaintances even there, and I believe that except myself, Jack Ashton, Henry Darton, and Will Church, he had no intimates. And we knew him only at the club. There, when he was alone with us, he sometimes partly opened up his mind, and we were charmed by his variety of knowledge and the singularity of his conversation. I shall not disguise the fact that we thought him extremely eccentric, although the idea of anything in the nature of insanity never entered our heads. We knew that he was engaged in recondite researches of a scientific nature, and that he possessed a private laboratory, although none of us had ever entered it. Occasionally he would speak of some new advance of science, throwing a flood of light by his clear expositions upon things of which we should otherwise have remained profoundly ignorant. His imagination flashed like lightning

over the subject of his talk, revealing it at the most unexpected angles, and often he roused us to real enthusiasm for things the very names of which we almost forgot amidst the next day's occupations.

There was one subject on which he was particularly eloquent—radioactivity; that most strange property of matter whose discovery had been the crowning glory of science in the closing decade of the nineteenth century. None of us really knew anything about it except what Stonewall taught us. If some new incomprehensible announcement appeared in the newspapers we skipped it, being sure that Edmund would make it all clear at the club in the evening. He made us understand, in a dim way, that some vast, tremendous secret lay behind it all. I recall his saying, on one occasion, not long before the blow fell:

“Listen to this! Here's Professor Thomson declaring that a single grain of radium contains in its padlocked atoms energy enough to lift a million tons three hundred yards high. Professor Thomson is too modest in his estimates, and he hasn't the ghost of an idea how to get at that energy. Neither has Professor Rutherford, nor Lord Kelvin; *but somebody will get at it, just the same.*”

He positively thrilled us when he spoke thus, for there was a look in his eyes which seemed to penetrate depths unfathomable to our intelligence. Yet we had not the faintest conception of what was really passing in his mind. If we had understood it, if we had caught a single clear glimpse of the workings of his intellect, we should have been appalled. And if we had known how close we stood to the verge of an abyss of mystery about to be lighted by such a gleam as

had never before been emitted from the human spirit, I believe that we would have started from our chairs and fled in dismay.

But we understood nothing, except that Edmund was indulging in one of his eccentric dreams, and Jack, in his large, careless, good-natured way broke in with:

“Well, Edmund, suppose *you* could ‘get at it,’ as you say; what would you do with it?”

Stonewall’s eyes gleamed for a moment, and then he replied, with a curious emphasis:

“I might do what Archimedes dreamed of.”

None of us happened to remember what it was that Archimedes had dreamed, and the subject was dropped.

For a considerable time afterwards we saw nothing of Stonewall. He did not come to the club, and we were beginning to think of looking him up, when one evening, quite unexpectedly, he dropped in, wearing an unusually cheerful expression. We had greatly missed him, and we now greeted him with effusion. His animation impressed us all, and he had no sooner shaken hands than he said, with suppressed excitement in his voice:

“Well, I’ve ‘got at it.’”

“Got at what?” drawled Jack.

“The inter-atomic energy. I’ve got it under control.”

“The deuce you have!” said Jack.

“Yes, I’ve arrived where a certain professor dreamed of being when he averred that ‘when man knows that every breath of air he draws has contained within itself force enough to drive the

workshops of the world he will find out some day, somehow, some way of tapping that energy.' The thing is done, for I've tapped it!"

We stared at one another, not knowing what to say, except Jack, who, inspired by the spirit of mischief, drawled out:

"Ah, yes, I remember. Well then, Edmund, as I asked you before, what are you going to do with it?"

There was not really any thought among us of poking fun at Edmund; we respected and admired him far too much for that; nevertheless, catching the infection of banter from Jack, we united in demanding, in a manner which I can now see must have appeared most provoking:

"Why, yes, Edmund, tell us what you are going to do with it."

And then Jack added fuel by mockingly, though with perfectly good-natured intention, taking Edmund by the hand and swinging him in front of us with:

"Gentlemen, Archimedes junior."

Stonewall's eyes flashed and his cheek darkened, but for a moment he said nothing. Presently, with a return of his former affability, he said:

"I wish you would come over to the laboratory and let me show you what I am going to do."

Of course we instantly assented. Nothing could have pleased us better than this invitation, for we had long been dying to see the inside of Edmund's laboratory. We all got our hats and started out with him. We knew where he lived, occupying a whole house though he was a bachelor, but none of us had ever seen the inside of it, and our curiosity was on the *qui vive*. He led us through a handsome

hallway and a rear apartment directly into the back yard, half of which we were surprised to find inclosed and roofed over, forming a huge shanty, like a workshop. Edmund opened the door of the shanty and ushered us in.

A remarkable object at once concentrated our attention. In the center of the place was the queerest-looking thing that you can well imagine. I can hardly describe it. It was round and elongated like a boiler, with bulging ends, and seemed to be made of polished steel. Its total length was about eighteen feet, and its width ten feet. Edmund approached it and opened a door in the end, which was wide and high enough for us to enter without stooping or crowding.

“Step in, gentlemen,” he said, and unhesitatingly we obeyed him, all except Church, who for some unknown reason remained outside, and when we looked for him had disappeared.

Edmund turned on a bright light, and we found ourselves in an oblong chamber, beautifully fitted up with polished woodwork, and leather-cushioned seats running round the sides. Many metallic knobs and handles shone on the walls.

“Sit down,” said Edmund, “and I will tell you what I have got here.”

He stepped to the door and called again for Church but there was no answer. We concluded that, thinking the thing would be too deep to be interesting, he had gone back to the club. That was not what he had done, as you will learn later, but he never regretted what he did do. Getting no response from Church, Edmund finally sat down with us on one of the leather-covered benches, and began his explanation.

“As I was telling you at the club,” he said, “I’ve solved the mystery of the atoms. I’m sure you’ll excuse me from explaining my method” (there was a little raillery in his manner), “but at least you can understand the plain statement that I’ve got unlimited power at my command. These knobs and handles that you see are my keys for turning it on and off, and controlling it as I wish. Mark you, this power comes right out of the heart of what we call matter; the world is chock full of it. We have known that it was there at least ever since radioactivity was discovered, but it looked as though human intelligence would never be able to set it free from its prison. Nevertheless I have not only set it free, but I am able to control it as perfectly as if it were steam from a boiler, or an electric current from a dynamo.”

Jack, who was as unscientific a person as ever lived, yawned, and Edmund noticed it. But he showed no irritation, merely smiling, and saying, with a wink at me and Henry:

“Even this seems to be rather too deep, so perhaps I had better show you, instead of telling you, what I mean. Excuse me a moment.”

He stepped out of the door, and we remained seated. We heard a noise outside like the opening of a barn door, and immediately Edmund reappeared and closed the door of the chamber in which we were. We watched him with growing curiosity. With a singular smile he pressed a knob on the wall, and instantly we felt that the chamber was rising in the air. It rocked a little like a boat in wavy water. We were startled, of course, but not alarmed.

“Hello!” exclaimed Jack. “What kind of a balloon is this?”

“It’s something more than a balloon,” was Edmund’s reply, and as he spoke he touched another knob, and we felt the car, as I must now call it, come to rest. Then Edmund opened a shutter at one side, and we all sprang up to look out. Below us we saw roofs and the tops of two trees standing at the side of the street.

“We’re about a hundred feet up,” said Edmund quietly. “What do you think of it now?”

“Wonderful! wonderful!” we exclaimed in a breath. And I continued:

“And do you say that it is inter-atomic energy that does this?”

“Nothing else in the world,” returned Edmund.

But bantering Jack must have his quip:

“By the way, Edmund,” he demanded, “what was it that Archimedes dreamed? But no matter; you’ve knocked him silly. Now, what are you going to do with your atomic balloon?”

Edmund’s eyes flashed:

“You’ll see in a minute.”

The scene out of the window was beautiful, and for a moment we all remained watching it. The city lights were nearly all below our level, and away off over the New Jersey horizon I noticed the planet Venus, near to setting, but as brilliant as a diamond. I am fond of star-gazing, and I called Edmund’s attention to the planet as he happened to be standing next to me.

“Lovely, isn’t she?” he said with enthusiasm. “The finest world in the solar system, and what a strange thing that she should have one side always day and the other always night.”

I was surprised by his exhibition of astronomic lore, for I had never known that he had given any attention to the subject, but a minute

later the incident was forgotten as Edmund suddenly pushed us back from the window and closed the shutter.

“Going down again so soon?” asked Jack.

Edmund smiled. “Going,” he said simply, and put his hand to one of the knobs. Immediately we felt ourselves moving very slowly.

“That’s right, Edmund,” put in Jack again, “let us down easy; I don’t like bumps.”

We expected at each instant to feel the car touch the cradle in which it had evidently rested, but never were three mortals so mistaken. What really did happen can better be described in the words of Will Church, who, you will remember, had disappeared at the beginning of our singular adventure. I got the account from him long afterwards. He had written it out carefully and put it away in a safe, as a sort of historic document. Here is Church’s narrative, omitting the introduction, which read like a law paper:

“When we went over from the club to Stonewall’s house, I dropped behind the others, because the four of them took up the whole width of the sidewalk. Stonewall was talking to them, and my attention was attracted by something uncommon in his manner. He had an indefinable carriage of the head which suggested to me the suspicion that everything was not just as it should be. I don’t mean that I thought him crazy, or anything of that kind, but I felt that he had some scheme in his mind to fool us.

“I bitterly repented, after things turned out as they did, that I had not whispered a word to the others. But that would have been difficult, and, besides, I had no idea of the seriousness of the affair. Nevertheless, I determined to stay out of it, so that the laugh should

not be on me at any rate. Accordingly when the others entered the car I stayed outside, and when Stonewall called me I did not answer.

“When he came out to open the roof of the shed, he did not see me in the shadow where I stood. The opening of the roof revealed the whole scheme in a flash. I had had no suspicion that the car was any kind of a balloon, and even after he had so significantly thrown the roof open, and then entered the car and closed the door, I was fairly amazed to see the thing began to rise without the slightest noise, and as if it were enchanted. It really looked diabolical as it floated silently upward and passed through the opening, and the sight gave me a shiver.

“But I was greatly relieved when it stopped at a height of a hundred feet or so, and then I said to myself that I should have been less of a fool if I had stayed with the others, for now they would have the laugh on me alone. Suddenly, while I watched, expecting every moment to see them drop down again, for I supposed that it was merely an experiment to show that the thing would float, the car started upward, very slowly at first, but increasing its speed until it had attained an elevation of perhaps five hundred feet. There it hung for a moment, like some mail-clad monster glinting in the quavering light of the street arcs, and then, without warning, made a dart skyward. For a minute it circled like a strange bird taking its bearings, and finally rushed off westward until I lost sight of it behind some tall buildings. I ran into the house to reach the street, but found the outer door locked, and not a person visible. I called but nobody came. Returning to the yard I discovered a place where I could get over the fence, and so I escaped into the street. Immediately I

searched the sky for the mysterious car, but could see no sign of it. They were gone! I almost sank upon the pavement in a state of helpless excitement, which I could not have explained to myself if I had stopped to reason; for why, after all, should I take the thing so tragically. But something within me said that all was wrong. A policeman happened to pass.

“Officer! officer!’ I shouted, ‘have you seen it?’

“Seen what?’ asked the blue-coat, twirling his club.

“The car—the balloon,’ I stammered.

“Balloon in your head! You’re drunk. Get long out o’ here!’

“I realized the impossibility of explaining the matter to him, and running back to the place where I had got over the fence I climbed into the yard and entered the shed. Fortunately the policeman paid no further attention to my movements after I left him. I sat down on the empty cradle and stared up through the opening in the roof, hoping against hope to see them coming back. It must have been midnight before I gave up my vigil in despair, and went home, sorely puzzled, and blaming myself for having kept my suspicions unuttered. I finally got to sleep, but I had horrible dreams.

“The next day I was up early looking through all the papers in the hope of finding something about the car. But there was not a word. I watched the news columns for several days without result. Whenever the coast was clear I haunted Stonewall’s yard, but the fatal shed yawned empty, and there was not a soul about the house. I cannot describe my feelings. My friends seemed to have been snatched away by some mysterious agency, and the horror of the

thing almost drove me crazy. I felt that I was, in a manner, responsible for their disappearance.

“One day my heart sank at the sight of a cousin of Jack Ashton’s motioning to me in the street. He approached, with a troubled look. ‘Mr. Church,’ he said, ‘I think you know me; can you tell me what has become of Jack? I haven’t seen him for several days.’ What could I say? Still believing that they would soon come back, I invented, on the spur of the moment, a story that Jack, with a couple of intimate friends, had gone off on a hunting expedition. I took a little comfort in the reflection that my friends, like myself, were bachelors, and consequently at liberty to disappear if they chose.

“But when more than a week had passed with out any news of them I was thrown into despair. I had to give up all hope. Remembering how near we were to the coast, I concluded that they had drifted out over the sea and gone down. It was hard for me, after the lie I had told, to let out the truth to such of their friends as I knew, but I had to do it. Then the police took the matter in hand and ransacked Stonewall’s laboratory and the shanty without finding anything to throw light on the mystery. It was a newspaper sensation for a few days, but as nothing came of it everybody soon forgot all about it—all except me. I was left to my loneliness and my regrets.

“A year has now passed with no news from them. I write this on the anniversary of their departure. My friends, I know, are dead—somewhere! Oh, what an experience it has been! When your friends die and are buried it is hard enough but when they disappear in a flash and leave no token—! It is almost beyond endurance!”

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