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THE SECRET OF PAUL FARLEY

— BY — JOHN MARCH — (AUTHOR OF "A CHILD OF MANY PRAYERS," ETC.). Supplied Exclusively in Canada by The British & Colonial Press Service, Limited.

CHAPTER V. The Masked Ball

Inside the Larches there was a stirring scene. Carriage after carriage had wound slowly along the drive and deposited their occupants before the ornamented portico. Gay chattering, harmoniously clad women stood in little groups of twos and threes on the crimson cloth spread over the flight of wide granite steps. A few paces above, just where the firelight caught and mingled with the moonbeams, two gentlemen waited, each holding a flimsy black silk mask between their white-gloved fingers. Now and again they exchanged smiling civilities, and appeared vastly entertained by watching the animation of the women below them, and listening to the curious palpitating babel of voices, mixed with peals of laughter, the grinding and crunching of wheels, the rustle of stiff brocade, and the trow-frou of silken gowns.

"There's the Hargrave carriage," the elder man said, as a plain, but elegant dark green barouche and pair came between the double row of Chinese lanterns and draw up in front of them. Miss Primrose popped her head out of the window and addressed them excitedly: "Are we late? Oh, there's a crowd now going in! Have you been here long? You must have walked quickly. We thought we should pass you on the way. We looked out for you all the way. Pity you two couldn't have squeezed in. Never mind, give me your arm, Hubert, and Mr. Farley will take Judith. I feel as excited as a girl at her first ball. Good gracious, listen! I'm sure that Dan Godfrey's orchestral band from town."

"Yes it is; came down by the same train as I did this afternoon," Hubert Graham said, tucking her arm under his. "I expect this fling will cost our charming widow a pretty penny." "Still, she's rich, isn't she, Hubert?" "Fairly so," the barrister replied, with a pressure on the plump arm under his. "I wonder what these middle-headed county magnates are thinking about to pass over such a prize. Here's a palace, Patricia," he added, as they disappeared behind a velvet portiere, "for an impecunious landowner to hang up his hat in."

Judith Hargrave put a timid hand on Paul Farley's arm. Her cheeks were flushed to a lovely carmine and excitement had shaded her violet eyes to the color of the sapphires sparkling beneath her gossamer silk mitten. "Did you see Patty Primrose?" she asked, laughing; "that's how she appropriates and treats Mr. Graham directly he comes down. Gossip says he makes her an offer of marriage every time they meet, and the pantomime has been going on for the last twenty years."

"Indeed," he said, amused. "I've heard the longer the courting the truer the love but perhaps to-night will witness the last appeal. I wonder if I may have the pleasure of this first waltz with you, Miss Judith?" "But I am an engaged girl, Mr. Farley."

"That's the reason I want to make sure of you. This will be the last time I shall dance with you as Miss Hargrave. Moreover, I promised Mr. Pelham I would look after you."

and fills one with a strange exultation, yet it makes me feel as if I were crying—crying inwardly." "Nerves," he said, soothingly, slipping an arm around her waist while she gathered the folds of her chiffon skirts into her hand. "I have much the same feeling on occasions when my beauty-loving nature has been probed and my whole being stirred to its lowest depths. But it's not wise to allow one's self to be haunted by evil forebodings, else one would be forever stitching one's own shroud. We ought to remember, Miss Hargrave, that our past is dead, but our future is not yet born. We—"

A strong, firm hand gripped his shoulder and twisted him around. "Where's your mask, Farley, and yours, Judith?" Felix demanded, towering above them, his eyes sparkling through the apertures in the concealing silk. "My friends, I can't permit you to be the only unmasked couple in the room."

"Mon Dieu! I forgot the rag," Paul said, with a laugh and a shrug. "May I see Miss Fleming's programme?" he asked, looking at her while he adjusted it. She took the little piece of pink pasteboard from the bosom of her gown, and he scribbled his initials against a host of other dances, handing it back with a graceful bow. The Squire's long intercepting arm came across his sister's shoulder, and the tiny gilt-edged card, pencils, tassels and all, were swallowed by the broad expanse of an ivy-leafed kid palm.

"Come, I say, Farley," he exclaimed, studying it with some amusement. "This kind of thing attracts comment." "Not necessarily, Mr. Fleming, when the dancers are masked."

"Perhaps not, but I imagine a ball-room reputation lies in a diversity of partners, and we'll lean to the safer side," he answered quietly, drawing a pencil through a few of the "F. P.'s" and inserting his own name on the same line. "Besides, Farley, I want you to forego a caper or two later and have a smoke outside with me."

"Oh, the abominable selfishness of men!" exclaimed a sweet, childish treble at the Squire's elbow. "It's too bad, Mr. Fleming, to entice away the younger dancing men, and after all, you see the allurements merely ends in smoke. I do believe your pipe is paramount throughout every phase of your existence."

"I am wedded to my pipe, Mrs. Wycherly," he said pleasantly, gently drawing her programme from her grasp, and writing on it, "and, of course, you understand my wife stands first."

"Your wife," she repeated, with a dainty moue; "you often quote her, Mr. Fleming, nevertheless, it's a blessed accident for Mrs. Felix that she's only a myth."

"I'm afraid you are a little hard on a helpless, inoffensive bachelor," he said, good naturedly, "but I must be content to hope the rest of your sex don't share your opinion, Mrs. Wycherly."

a familiar, or some such devilry." "You like Agnes Fleming?" "I more than like her; I—"

"Love at first sight," she said, laughing to hide the quiver of her lips. "I would rather you married Agnes than Rowena Wycherly."

"Well, between you and me, Miss Hargrave, I don't wish to marry either. I don't wish to marry anyone. I simply want the women to leave me severely alone, to boycott me, to send me to Coventry, to taboo me, to hate the sight of me, to do, in fact, anything that will serve to let me go my own way unmolested."

A sudden flush overspread her face and neck. She laughed nervously. "Living under the same roof so many weeks," he said remorsefully, "we understand one another. We are too old and intimate friends to dream of taking an unpremeditated random shot to ourselves. It's a comfort sometimes to unburden one's mind where one is sure of a sympathetic listener. Come, one more turn and then I will give that fellow over there with the monocle a chance."

She glanced up at him, and thought he was stouter, comelier, more at his ease than when he first made his appearance at Weyberne Hall. His smooth-shaven face had filled out, his wonderful eyes had lost the harassed expression which she noticed spring into them upon the slightest provocation. He was dark, handsome, clever, interesting, all that her foolish heart desired, yet fate persisted in pushing Anthony to the fore, and the world marvelled she was not more elated, more distracted, and spoilt, with so much good fortune.

She was sick at heart, tears of chagrin stood in her eyes as he led her back, bowed, and left her in the care of the Hargrave party.

Paul danced with a will. He went through a succession of square and round dances with scarcely a break between, until Felix dragged him into the conservatory for a rest, and eventually out into the beautiful grounds illuminated by thousands of fairy lamps, where a great, golden moon shone serenely through the branches of the larches, and the illusive will-o'-the-wisps glowed and vanished in the distant marshes.

The night air was chilly, but it seemed doubly pure and sweet after the heated atmosphere they had left behind. Their brisk footsteps fell silently on the dewy grass, and the cold starlight streamed across the shining turf like a split silver liquid. "What a glorious thing youth is!" Felix said, offering his cigar case. "Upon my soul, I quite envy your nimbleness."

"I can afford to be active; I've not an ounce of adipose flesh to hinder me."

"No, you are in capital condition. You look a hundred per cent better than when I first saw you. The country suits you."

"I suppose so; moreover, I am singularly happy here."

"That's good hearing," Felix said, emphatically. "At all events," he added, in a strangely moved tone, "I know that your advent has made no end of difference to me. It has considerably increased my enjoyment and love of life. I feel younger, brighter, more interested in my daily avocations, and altogether a happier man. It's been a sort of unuttered heathenish prayer with me lately, perhaps a selfish one, too, that nothing may come between us, not even a slice of roaring good luck, if it's to sever your connection with Weyberne."

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