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THE SECRET OF PAUL FARLEY

— BY — (AUTHOR OF "A CHILD OF MANY PRAYERS," ETC.). **JOHN MARCH**

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"Anthony? No, not Anthony; it was Paul, yes. Paul said he was going to marry Mrs. Wycherly. He told me last night—we were dancing, when he said he wouldn't marry Mrs. Wycherly or Agnes, or anybody, and now—" "Hush," Lady Hargrave implored, looking round in consternation. "My dear, the servants, Mr. Far—" "Hush, indeed!" she exclaimed, her eyes ablaze with feverish excitement, her cheeks like a peony. "For my part I think it's time I spoke. I've consented to marry Anthony against my will, against my better judgment, against my inclination, to please Paul Farley; you understand, both of you, please him, and him alone. I thought I could do anything he asked me, and so I could except—"

A strong, energetic hand came through Paul's arm, gripped it firmly and marched him over the gravel, and away from the house.

"We will take a turn up to the private road and back, and go to the drawing-room by way of the conservatory and library, if it's all the same to you, Farley?" Felix said with quiet gravity, "it's poor sport listening to the unwholesome raving of a hysterical woman, more especially when you've nursed her on your knee and petted her as a sweet, innocent little child."

"I cannot help thinking that Miss Judith is very perverse," he made answer.

"Women are perverse. I sometimes think it's this aggravating perverseness, this capriciousness in a measure that attracts our sex. I believe a man is more influenced, more attracted by moods, than beauty. However, we won't discuss Judith, we won't by word or thought add one grain, one iota, to Lady Hargrave's trouble. Apropos of nothing but my own thoughts, what do you think of Cecilia Hay?"

"What do I think of her?" he asked slowly. "I think she is a good, dull, plodding, praiseworthy girl. I don't feel to have much in common with her; still, that is my loss, not hers. What are you thinking yourself, sir?" "Well, I'm thinking I never saw her to greater advantage than to-night, Farley, perhaps in contradistinction to Judith, but she seems to look at life in a serious, capable way. The Hays are poor, as I daresay you know, and Cecilia, I gather, thinks she ought to embark on some sort of career, secure a future, provision herself against the time when the paternal homestead is a thing of the past."

"What kind of career does she anticipate? What does she consider herself fitted for?" "Ah, well, there, that's the difficulty. She can fulfill her home duties to perfection, but homeless, penniless, turned adrift on her own resources, she feels there is not any one craft by which she could earn a decent livelihood."

"She wants a matrimonial career, then, I take it."

The Squire laughed a little, and slipped his hand through Paul's arm. "That is the career, the sphere, she is by nature, education and training most fitted for, no doubt. I can fancy her developing into an excellent wife and mother. She is sincere, religious, a child of God, I am sure; she is not beautiful, but she comes of a healthy, wholesome stock, which is essential, more desirable in marriage than actual beauty—the sort of a woman a husband's heart might safely trust in, and he would have the comfort and joy of a well-ordered home."

"You—you like Miss Hay?" "Well, I respect her, she is an estimable woman, the worker, the organizer, the mainspring of the Vicarage. It esteems and kindly regard could be sunned and watered sufficiently to ripen into something approaching affection, don't you think she would make me a good, sound, practical wife, Farley?"

"That is entirely a matter of taste, sir," he said, going suddenly white; "as far as I am concerned I should have a decided objection to that solid lump of flesh stamped with Cecilia Hay's individualism and identity. I have seen her type before to-day, sir. She is a dull, methodical worker, a narrow-minded zealot, always on the slow trot, always doing, never done. That career, that future, is her stock-in-trade, her sprat to catch a whale, she will ventilate it so long as she can get an eligible man to listen, so long as her youth lasts, and unless she can persuade a kindly-disposed squire or gentleman at large to offer her his home—that is to say, a strong substantial chair and a table, representing good square meals, she will end by going out into the world as an upper servant, or a lady help."

"That is the unkindest and the bitterest thing I have ever heard you say, Farley." "I feel bitter," he said, laughing unnecessarily loud. "He had had enough to make me feel so these last few days. What fellow likes to think of his friend, his dear chum, contemplating matrimony? Think of the fishing, the shooting, the driving, the hours, the happy hours in the keeping-room, it can never be the same again."

"I am not contemplating marriage, at least not yet, though some other folks are, I trust. Paul, I felt so hurt this morning when I read,—well, I did not mean to allude to that, and I won't. As I said before, you have been such a goodsend, you have made life a different thing for me, that it seems strange you should fight shy of me. Give me the least trifling annoyance from me. My time, my strength, my purse, are at your—" "Thanks, thanks," Paul said, squeezing the hand on his arm, "you are too

good, you are too kind, but—give me time to think before I speak, and I will—Felix," he said, stopping suddenly and looking at him with a sort of despair in his great eyes, "Felix, are you—are you really thinking of Cecilia Hay?"

"Only in this way, dear boy—I am thirty-five, and it's time I meditated settling if I ever intend to marry. I generally like and enjoy the society of the women I meet, but in each individual case there is something amiss with her; something lacking in her mental or physical development; she is a little too this, or not enough that; her nature is too fertile, or too arid; too something, she—you know the deterrent process, Farley—I can't catch on. Cecilia Hay seems suitable. She's not brilliant, but I think she would make me a comfortable, agreeable wife, and I would not hang back if it were not for the fear of afterwards meeting a woman I could really love. I have strong affections, strong domestic tendencies, and if later on—though married to a nice good girl like Cecilia—she came, I am afraid, terribly afraid I should—revert. Will you pass in first?"

In the conservatory they found Agnes fanning herself under a palm. She smiled and patted the vacant seat beside her, and Paul dropped suddenly into it with a sigh of relief. "I shan't stop for a clear with you, Thomas," Felix said, looking from one to the other. "I'll have the car put in. I suppose I shall find you here, Agnes, if I come back in ten minutes." "Oh, well, be here," Paul laughed, "I'm dead beat, glued to my chair. I could sit here ten hours."

"Paul," she whispered, as the Squire's tall form disappeared through the doorway, "how badly you have managed!" "Execrable management it must seem to you. I must tell you the whole ghastly story, Agnes, and then you will see how I was cornered. I never intended to ask you again, but just this once I want you to meet me in your old summer-house. I want to talk the situation over with you. I must publicly own or disown this engagement; I must do something soon, and I don't want to act entirely on my own responsibility."

"You saw Felix before you left the Larches; why didn't you tell him?" "I meant to tell him, but I was bewildered, and after a spell decided to consult you first. It's easy to be wise after the event with the result staring you in the face. You see I reckoned without my host, or rather hostess. How was I to know that fiend had sent that infernal announcement before the dance came off at all? Can you meet me to-morrow evening at eight? I am writing, as it were, on the horns of a dilemma, Agnes."

"I am going with Felix to the Horticultural show at Wylster, but we shall be home long before eight. If you come, but had you not better get straight to the fountain-head, direct to Felix?"

"I should like you to hear first. He persisted, 'perhaps you may think it best to keep back certain things.'" "I can tell Felix the same evening if you like. I'll wait till you have returned to the house and walk in as if I had come straight up from here."

"Very well," she said, rising as she saw the Squire advancing. "I'll be there at eight sharp."

CHAPTER XIII.

The Way of the Transgressors is Hard
Paul, with his cap on the back of his head, his liveries thrown open, exposing a conspicuous expanse of shirt-front, stood in the rustic doorway of the Fleming's summer-house waiting for Agnes. He looked at his watch, put it back in his fob, and was fumbling with his cigarette case, when he heard the fall of light, approaching footsteps.

Presently she stood before him dressed in a blue velvet tunic and a neat tweed coat and skirt, just as she had driven with the Squire to the Horticultural Show.

"Are you only just back?" he asked, surprised. "I heard wheels and a vehicle drive round to the front about ten minutes ago."

"Don't speak so loud," she said, in an undertone. "Felix is just over there in the stables. The mare had two shoes come loose, and we had to walk her several miles before we came across a blacksmith. Felix is rather put out at the animal being carelessly sent that distance without proper inspection."

"I wonder how long he will stay there?" he said, rather nettled. "I'll be his given Ralph a bit of his mind, which he can do to some purpose if he finds his easy-going, god-natured rule or authority imposed upon."

"Well, come in," he said, in the tone of one who was going to make the best of a trying circumstance; "I can tell you all I want you to know in a quarter of an hour."

of her hands and holding it between his. "How warm your hands are," she said, looking at him in the semi-darkness. "I don't feel the cold a bit," he answered smiling, "and a few years ago, I used to have the most wretched chilblains. But you see, Agnes," he added seriously, "I am better housed and better fed than I've been in my life, and I drink a good deal of wine both at luncheon and dinner, and always a glass of whiskey or other spirit before I go to bed. Well-nourished blood is thick and warm, and keeps out the cold."

"I've heard, Paul, an easy conscience is the best cosmetic there is," she said, with a clinging pressure on his hand; "but in your case, you naughty thing, I think it's the good living, the creature comforts, your general well-being, that's made such an improvement in you. It's rather unfortunate, taking you, Mrs. Wycherly and Judith into consideration, but you certainly grow better looking every day!"

He dropped the hand he was rubbing, caught her round the shoulders, laid her back upon his arm, and kissed her.

A boisterous gust of wind swept across the plantation, bending the pines and bringing with it the incense from the woods. It came into the shrubbery moaning a little, and a shower of acorns fell with a rattle on the roof and sides of the summer-house. Paul lifted his head at the unfamiliar sound, and his dark, amused eyes lighted upon the Squire's tall form standing a couple of yards from them, with his hands behind him, strong, lithe, and perfect as a young tree.

The sight seemed to paralyze him. Thunderstruck, and a roaring in his ears, he remained for a moment in a stooping posture, staring fixedly at the man's white face and fearless blazing eyes. Agnes twisted herself round in his arms, lifting her face to his, wondering at his rigid stiff stiltedness. The movement snapped the tension, his arms released, gave a warning pressure as he stood her roughly on her feet and turned her so that she faced Felix.

"Go indoors, Agnes!" he commanded in a tone neither of them had ever heard before. "I have a word or two to say to Mr. Farley."

She came out with an averted face, but gave one glance at the suppressed rage and fury in his glittering eyes as she passed him, and stopped. "I am waiting for you to go in," he repeated, scarcely able to control his voice.

"What are you going to do?" she asked in a frightened way, her heart throbbing painfully.

"Go in," he shouted, "and don't dare to disobey me!" She turned and ran. His eyes followed her retreating figure; he did not withdraw them till she was wholly out of sight, and then he turned to the young man standing a step above him, framed by the rustic ruined porch. The stars shone brightly, and the high riding moon sent a pencil of light on to the lower half of Paul's face, revealing the rigid line of upper lip drawn over the small even teeth. Felix raised a beckoning forefinger, and pointed to the ground in front of him, and with one long stride he obeyed the imperious gesture, and faced him closely.

"One question, if you please, and answer it as truthfully as you know how. Are you engaged to Mrs. Wycherly, or are you not?" "Yes and no; I am not sure; but the ridiculous position I have been forced into towards her I can satisfactorily explain."

"And were you forced into the position in which I now saw you with my sister?" "Paul's great eyes opened to their widest; he was dumfounded by the suggestion of impurity thrown over his foolish though innocent aunt. He turned hot and cold, and shrank from meeting the Squire's bright, scornful eyes with the unfamiliar, knowing expression the subject under discussion had brought into them.

"Answer me instantly!" Felix shouted, taking a step towards him. "No," he said quickly, "of course, I was not forced, but I was not aware I was doing anything wrong, or treating Miss Fleming in a way that a lady—" The Squire seized him by the collar, jerked him round, and his startled eyes caught sight of the leather thong of his riding-whip.

"One moment," he protested, struggling fruitlessly in the Squire's steel grip, "don't strike me before you know the rights of the case, or you may be sorry for it afterwards."

"Sorry!" he mimicked, with a grim laugh, "sorry for thrashing a well-behaved suitor to protect my sister's good name, safeguard her reputation, and teach you how to control your lower nature, how to treat what you may style a 'good woman,' and punish you for tampering with a woman for whom you had no other feeling than ordinary friendship, and to whom you would on no account bind yourself; also for holding embracing, and caressing my sister as you might any draggled wench on the streets."

Paul struggled round to face him as best he could. "How dare you impute such disgustingly dirty low motives to my actions?" he panted furiously, his face aflame, "I had no idea you had such a filthy mind!" "Dare!" he breathed thickly. "Take that, you impertinent beggar!"

The hard, tightly-plaited leather lash curled round his slim supple body, he quivered from head to foot and uttered a sharp astonished cry. The sound gratified the Squire and spurred him on to greater efforts. He shook him into a more convenient, get-at-able position, and applied the whip with an effect that only a strong, well-developed arm and a fierce determined will could accomplish. His unavailing struggles and protestations soon ceased, and not much beyond a low groan now and again escaped him. Presently Felix gave him another salutary shake, similar to a terrier's lusty frantic movement with a rat and whirled him around.

His eye-glasses were off, swinging to and fro like a pendulum, and the Squire's energy had burst the stud-

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holes in his collar and shirt, exposing his dark, grim young throat. Felix looked into his white agonized face, into the wide strained eyes swimming in tears, beautiful, patient, mournful, and pure as the eyes of a gazelle, and then his whip arm dropped to his side. "That's enough!" he said, in the tone of a man who had accomplished a set purpose and was satisfied with the efficient manner in which he had carried it through. "Get out of my sight, and don't stray near me or mine again;" and with a last upheaval of outraged wounded pride, he gave a sudden impetus to his left arm and sent him staggering backwards, waiting the while to watch his efforts to obtain a foothold. He witnessed him recover his equilibrium more than once, and finally fall with a crash, his head striking the hedge near a huge bush of Michaelmas daisies. "I've branded him for many a day to come," he muttered, winding the lash around the whip-handle as he strode through the shrubbery over the garden grass and into the front entrance. He slammed the keeping-room, at the back of the hall, and marched into the parlor where Agnes was shivering over the fire.

"Agnes," he said, closing the door carefully, and turning his full bright eyes on her. "It was only yesterday morning that you assured me there was nothing between you and Farley. I believed it, and if you still wish me to believe it you must tell me the reason why you laid back in that fellow's arms."

She lifted her eyes to his stern face for a moment, dropped them, and stared silently into the fire. "I am ashamed," he said at last, seeing there was no prospect of her speaking, "utterly ashamed that a sister of mine should have so little self-respect, be so lost to all sense of right and wrong, so devoid of all chaste, pure, womanly instincts. I've had my eyes opened with a shock, Agnes, that I shall not soon forget."

All trace of anger had left his voice, he spoke with a grief-stricken emotion that melted her throbbing heart, and she burst into a woman's passion of tears. "How many times have you met him there before to-night?" he asked. "Only once before, Felix," she said, between her sobs, "only once, a long time ago."

"Why did you meet him this evening?" "He asked me; he told me in the Hargraves' conservatory that he wanted to tell me about Mrs. Wycherly, how she had managed to trap him into making her an offer."

"The idea of asking you to meet him there for such nonsense. Why didn't he come straight to the house and tell me, tell us both, for that matter. It seems to me a trumpery, paltry excuse to get you there. And the love-making, that's the part I can't understand. Even if you were silly and brazen enough to consent to a secret meeting with Sir Thomas Hargrave's secretary, why in the name of all bewildering creation did you let him kiss you?" "I don't know," she said piteously. "I don't comprehend you, Agnes," he said, looking at her puzzled and doubtfully, "you are clear enough about the attitude of all other nice points, but with regard to virtuous discretion, the crowning point where a woman is

Continued on page 7.

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