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THE SECRET OF PAUL FARLEY

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

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CHAPTER XV. The Widow's Warning

Paul sat at the writing-table in the library at Weyberne Hall. His elbows were on its polished surface, his head supported by his large thin hands. A book—a new edition of Herodotus in Greek—was face downwards on the table, a roll of manuscript, a half written sheet of foolscap, and a newspaper lay within his reach. Presently he moved his chair back in a gentle, cautious manner, rose stiffly, and walked slowly, with evident difficulty, across the soft velvet pile to the other end of the room.

He stood there a space and raised his arms carefully above his head, bringing them down again slowly, and clasped them loosely behind. He went heroically through the exercise several times, gave one or two little groans, sighed, returned to his chair, and pushed it nearer to the fire. He sank painfully into it, a few beads of moisture on his forehead, fatigued, but elated and satisfied with his physical endurance and his strenuous strength of mind.

"I'll run my eye over the letter again," he said to himself, drawing a thick, cream-crested envelope from his breast pocket and unfolding a sheet of fine, close, sharp writing, and fixing his eye-glasses more accurately, he read: "My Darling—Two days have gone, and I am starving for a glimpse of your dear face. I have lived a lifetime since you went, Paul, and yet I can still feel the tremble of your arms. It is almost midnight, and I am tired out with watching for you, but I must write, Paul, for such a swarm of clamoring love-thoughts cannot be denied. I am sitting by my window facing Weyberne Hall. The world is sleeping; there's nothing to distract me but the stars, the night-gale in the thicket, and the murmur of the distant waterfall by the Marsh Mill. My home is very beautiful to-night, Paul. There's a red, gold moon, and it's shining on the holly and on the yews, and among the briars woven in the hedge. At the end of the drive the gate is open, gaping wide for you, Paul, for its master, for my master. When you come to-morrow, my darling, I shall be kneeling here among the moon-beams in the chill night air, watching for your black shadow to cast a darker shade over the autumn's mellow tints. A little bird has flown by and whispered fairy news—hey presto! my lover went to London yesterday, and birdie told me what took him there. It was the little jewelled hable, the rivet to the links we forged so many hours ago. You will bring it to me, Paul, or—shall I come to you? No power on earth shall keep my sweetheart from me; I want him—I must have my husband soon. The sun in heaven is hot, but not so hot nor so parched, Paul, as the waiting heart you've quickened, darling!"

"There is a veiled threat in it, and I should understand it's nature if I were cute enough to read between the lines," he muttered, limping to the window.

He stared across the green lawn stretch of upland, smiling beneath the October sunshine, a far-away musing look in his eyes.

"I wish he could see it; I would give a great deal for his bold opinion," he muttered; "but, parbleu! the milk's spilt and I cannot afford to grizzle over it. I'll face the odds alone; the struggle will hearten me. She shall not ruin me. I'll stay my time, even if the tide is strong against me. I must leave the rudder to swing round, but, indifferent oarsman as I am, I'll pull or perish!"

An imperious, bold knock on the door by hard, strong knuckles, performed simultaneously with its swift opening, startled him, and Dr. Hunter stepped in with a genial "Morning, Farley."

"I went straight up to your bedroom, young man," he said, taking him unceremoniously by the shoulders and turning him to the light "I expected to find you there after my strict injunctions yesterday."

"A fellow who has his living to get can't indulge in capuan holidays, doctor," he expostulated, flushing and backing a little. "If I can by any possibility crawl I ought to be up attending to my duties."

"With those Spartan principles you ought to get on in this age of enervating ease and lazy superficial refinement. But how are you? Tell me exactly how you've been, else I shan't know what physic to send you. Sick?"

"A little last night," he owned reluctantly. "I have a headache, I'm stiff and sore, of course, and a bit chilly and seedy, but it might have been worse. I am thankful to be able to get downstairs."

"Let me see you walk," Hunter said. He limped back to the lounge by the fire, and the doctor followed him, drew up a chair, and sat down facing "Don't you think you would find some relief in abusing Fleming a bit?" he asked, laughing.

Paul shook his head and smiled a little.

"I committed the offence, Mr. Fleming saw me, and some sort of correction was no doubt merited, but not the severe measure he resorted to; the punishment exceeded the crime, doctor."

"It did, Farley; it was a very cruel flogging, and Felix realizes it now." "I'm afraid I realize it more than he," Paul said, wrinkling his forehead as he moved in his chair.

Doctor Hunter laughed, and stroked his knee.

"I don't know whether I would rather be in your or Fleming's shoes," he said; "it must be worse to be men-

tally sore, and besides Felix feels he has made something of a fool of himself."

"Why; he was right in the main." "Was he? Well, I did not object; I was not inclined to take it up."

"But what had you to do with it?" "Only this, I am engaged to Agnes, and I wish the matter to drop; it's too utterly foolish to make a song about."

Paul sat up with a decided show of interest.

"You are engaged to Agnes," he exclaimed, a smile breaking over his face, "à la bonheur! That is good news; it's just a flash of brightness through all the heaviness. I am pleased."

"I believe you are, Farley, genuinely pleased. I don't think you have a spark of feeling against me." "Against you? Why, you have my warmest sympathy, my heartiest wishes and regards. It's a splendid idea; I wish you no end of luck and happiness. You couldn't have told me anything that would give me more pleasure—it's glorious news!"

"Then it's all right, Farley, I am quite satisfied. My happiness has come to me rather late in life, and I want to enjoy it to the full, without feeling I had stepped on another's heart to reach it—you understand, lad?"

"I quite understand," he answered, a dewiness in his eyes, "and all I can say is, Agnes Fleming is the luckiest woman I know."

The doctor laughed, and laid his hand on the arm of Paul's chair.

"I expect you have formed a very fair estimate of the trouble upstairs?" A distressed expression came into the dark eyes.

"I'm afraid I have come very near the lamentable truth. I have been trying to persuade myself that the weakness is only temporary. Can't you predict a short journey through the woods?"

"Yes, under favorable conditions. Constant treading has unhinged her mind, Farley, but the mischief at present is quite local; there is nothing radically wrong, nothing but what given her heart's desire, could easily be remedied. I suppose you couldn't find it in your heart to accept this overflow of affection and look upon it as a blessing in disguise?"

"No, I couldn't," he said, earnestly, "I couldn't."

"Not if the powers that be were brought to see the policy, the advisability of the step," the doctor asked, persuasively, "and the arrangement were to save Miss Judith from a particularly hard fate?"

Paul said again in the same pathetically earnest tone, "I couldn't, doctor. I am sorry, exquisitely sorry, for Sir Thomas and Lady Hargrave; they have my entire sympathy. I would do anything in reason, I would not spare myself help or comfort, but I couldn't marry their daughter. However plausibly you put it, in whatever pitiful colors you painted Miss Judith's sad situation, it would not alter my determination. It has not been my fault, doctor. I hope I have never acted in any but an honorable and courteous way."

Doctor Hunter looked away and smiled a little.

"Even where I willing," Paul resumed, "there is Mr. Pelham to consider. We know from experience how much his heart is bound up in her. It would be an unwise and cruel move. The proposed remedy would simply court another gilded disaster."

Jack Hunter knit his thick brows and contemplated Paul's clever face and small shapely head resting against the pink silk cushion.

"It's something akin to a Gordian knot," he said, "and I'm not acquainted with an Alexander shrewd to cut it in twain. Poor Judith; poor Anthony, I don't see my way to helping them."

"Get them married, Dr. Hunter," he said, bending forward eagerly. "It's the only help possible. Get them married quickly; with her parents and Mr. Pelham on your side it ought not to be a very difficult task."

"It would be easier if you were not here, Farley," he said, looking at him anxiously. "Is it absolutely imperative you should remain?"

A hard stubborn look came into his eyes; they glittered ominously.

"Imperative just so far as my own interests are concerned," he said, a little cynical smile catching his upper lip. "Do you think, Dr. Hunter, I am called upon to relinquish an excellent appointment, credentials, recommendations in certain quarters where a chance of preferment is only possible, for no fault whatever of my own? It's rather hard lines now that I am a few rungs on the ladder. It's like shifting the thing and throwing me to the ground, and recovering my senses and steadied my nerves sufficiently I can go back to the bottom, begin all over again and commence mounting from solid earth."

"How long have you been here, Farley?" "Four months, and I must stay another two. It's little enough, too little by far, and I must insist on the six months. Of course, if you succeed in gaining Sir Thomas's ear and I am dismissed with a month's salary, I am not a free agent, I take my chance, but you must not ask me of my own free will to throw up a situation like this, to cut myself adrift from all social anchorage, to fight poverty, obscurity, and starvation alone."

"Good heavens, my dear lad!" Jack Hunter expostulated, shocked. "I wouldn't turn a dog from a good home to forage for himself."

Paul smiled a nervous smile that was more touching than tears.

"I beg your pardon," he said, unsteadily, sinking back on to the cushion. "I thought perhaps you might consider it your duty to point out to Sir Thomas the wisdom of my dismissal. I know I am of use to him, and that he appreciates me, but if it came to be his daughter's welfare versus his secretary's prospects, why I should without hesitation go to the wall. The true cause of my leaving and a hundred perversions of the truth would leak out, such things always do through dependents in some way or other, and it would do me infinite harm; it would simply spell social extinction. It all sounds exceedingly selfish, I know. It's self from beginning to end; but, doctor, if you knew how I have worked, slaved, striven, merely to attain the position I am now in, you would not be surprised that I cling so tenaciously to present good."

"My dear lad," he said, sitting on the arm of Paul's chair and patting his shoulders, "you shall keep it for all of me, and if I could I would make the good better. There will be difficulties to face here, Farley, at the Larches, and elsewhere, but you may rely upon me to befriend, should the opportunity come within my province. You wouldn't object to spend a week in town while we see what can be done with Miss Judith?"

"Not at all," he said, with a sigh of content, "I should rather like it."

"Very well—ah, that reminds me, Felix went to London this morning. He is returning by the 7.30 train. I suppose when you feel up to it you'll run in there and wish my little girl joy of her old man?"

"You are young enough in all conscience, sir," he said, laughing, "but I don't think I will call at the Manor House. I'll send as pretty a message as I can compose, by you, sir."

"Now, Farley," he said, persuasively, transforming the gentle patting into a firm grip, "don't nurse it, let the resentment die a natural death. Felix would give his ears to be friends, I know he would. He admitted last night he had been hasty, and I'm very sure he would concede and condone a good deal more this morning. He said if there were anything he could do for you with reference to this misunderstanding at the Larches, he would be pleased to do it, if you ask him. The initiative, I think, must rest with you, my boy. If you can bring yourself to meet Felix in anything approaching a friendly spirit, the rest will follow smoothly as a natural consequence. You will be serving your own interests by thinking this over, Farley."

He smiled a little, and there was an expression in his eyes which baffled the doctor's usual penetrative sagacity.

"Thank you, I will bear it in mind," he said, rising as the doctor stood up. "I am much obliged to you for your attention."

"Tut!" he said brusquely, "I am backwards and forwards to see Miss Hargrave. Take care of yourself; don't go out, keep warm, and lie fallow for awhile, and, oh, I'll let you know the exact date to fix for your little holiday," and with a laugh and swinging stride he was gone from the room.

Paul crawled to the typewriter, laid a pocketbook containing his short-hand notes beside it, and reeled off a dozen letters with scarcely the easy grace that generally characterized all his movements. He put them in their several envelopes, stamped and made them into a neat pile on the writing-table.

Once again, with clenched teeth, he went bravely through a series of exercises, extremely painful and lacerating to the nerves in his bruised condition, but essential, and of the utmost importance if he desired to preserve a remnant of agility, instead of allowing his muscles and sinews to settle into a practically paralyzed state of stiffness. He sank into his chair exhausted, breathing quickly, and went carefully through Mrs. Wycherley's letter for the third time.

"I wish he could see it," he said, half aloud, "I wonder how I could manage to—"

He leaned back, closed his eyes, and clasping his hands over his throbbing temples, pondered deeply.

"I have it!" he muttered, starting up suddenly and collapsing immediately with a groan, "and I'll do it; it will be an accidental meeting, and—sprit! can I walk four miles?" he asked himself, looking ruefully at his strained slender legs. "It will be a trial of fortitude, but I must stretch a point and snatch this golden chance. I feel, lifting his long arms above his head and grasping the back of his chair, "I feel as if the lists were set and I must have a tilt at fate. It may give dire offence and it may do nothing of the kind. Whichever way I reckoned I might be foiled. Things may just as well be for as against me. Dice have many sides!"

CHAPTER XVI. At the Popinjay

"Where are you going, Mr. Farley?" Tom Hargrave asked, watching Paul button himself into his thickest and warmest overcoat.

"To East Weyberne, on a little personal business."

"Are you going to walk?" "I am going to ride Shank's pony."

"Because it's a long way and you haven't seemed well all day. If you can ride, sir, you may take my bicycle, the new one, free wheel, and all the latest improvements."

"Thank you, that's a bright idea, Tom!" he said, meditatively. "I've not ridden for nearly nine months; do you think I am to be trusted with a new machine?"

"If you could ride decently well when you left off, sir, you'll soon get into it again. Will you have it?"

"Yes, I think I will if you can put up the saddle to the right height for me."

"I'll put it as high as it will go, but I don't know if it will be very comfortable," he said, looking dubiously at the length of Paul's legs.

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ten Gloves, and went out to the deluged boy.

"Shall I hold it, sir, while you mount?" he asked.

"Yes, if you like," Paul laughed; "I dare say I shall make a hash of setting out, but once I'm fairly started I shall do. You'll see a fine specimen of wobbling, Tom, if you wait long enough."

Between them and without so much difficulty as he anticipated, considering his stiffness, Paul mounted and set off down the avenue in a fairly straight course. Tom followed a short distance to keep him in sight, and just before Paul turned a corner he put his fingers to his mouth, blew a shrill, weird whistle, and shouted something to the effect that he was a crack cyclist, a champion rider.

The grey afternoon fog had deepened into a dark night with scarcely a star in the moonless sky, and Paul had gone but a few hundred yards when he felt a sprinkle of fine rain. The wind was rising, and dead against him, but he comforted himself with the assurance that the rain would hold off, be little more than a misty drizzle, unless the wind dropped.

The roads were good around Weyberne, hard, even, and well tended, with scarcely sufficient dip along his route to form a hill. On both sides, either plantations or dense woods bordered the high road all the way to East Weyberne, increasing the gloom on a dark night, and instilling into the imaginative mind a wholesome dread of convenient lurking places for loafers, poachers, or any desperate ugly characters. Paul was not nervous, he had made the journey many times on foot alone, and also in the squire's company, and had never met with a sight or sound incongruous with the lovely rustic English roads and lanes. Nevertheless, he was not sorry to see the street lamps come shivering into life as he approached the small, dull, country town.

He rode into the yard of the Popinjay, jumped off the machine, and asked the hostler if Mr. Fleming's trap was in their custody. The man touched a curly forelock, nodded, and intimated that the London train was due and the squire expected at any minute, but the mare would not be put between the shafts until the gentleman arrived to give his orders. He walked into the inn and met the landlady on the threshold, buxom and smiling, and as fresh looking as the paint on the front of the house.

"Is your sitting-room disengaged, Mrs. Radler?" he asked.

"Yes," she said, pleasantly, "until Squire Fleming comes, and then he's very likely to go there and wait till the mare's put to."

"Is he sure to go in?" he asked, anxiously.

"Well, I can't be exactly sure, Mr. Farley," she returned, looking inquiringly at him; "if he was in a tremendous hurry he might not come indoors at all."

"Can't you make it a sure and certain thing, Mrs. Radler, that he does come into your sitting-room before he leaves?" he asked, slipping a sovereign into her hand, "and there won't be any necessity, you know, to say who is waiting for him."

"I'll see to it, sir," she said, looking up into his face a little startled; "I'll manage so, he does come, Mr. Farley."

Continued on page 7.

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