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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.

have a good mind to tell James to keep an eye on you for the next few days, at any rate until I can get you up to town. "And when I come back?" "If I scent danger, you won't come back; you will share Graham's chambers for a day or so. We are not going to run any risks, dear boy." Paul bit his lips, flushed, turned round, and smoothed his hair in the cracked glass.

CHAPTER XVII. Mrs. Wycherly at Home. Dinner over, Paul changed his boots, and set out resolutely to pay his addresses to his beautiful fiancée. It was fine overhead, but mild and moist after the rain, and the roads were muddy. A dank, autumnal smell pervaded the air, and the brown and yellow foliage still shone with the day's downpour.

He walked slowly, his eyes on the ground, loth to hasten the dreaded interview. His heart beat high, his head burned, his hands and feet were as cold as clay. In his trepidation he noticed the commonest and most trivial objects by the wayside. The wet, red gravel heaps on the vivid green turf, the grass jewelled with raindrops, gleaming in the light of the watery moon, huge white stumps of timber blasted by lightning, black decayed trunks of trees, and when at length the grey sombre steeple of Weyberne Church came into sight, he knew he could not much longer postpone the evil moment. There was no surcease of reluctance; he looked between the larches, and felt very much inclined to show the white feather, and walk back to Weyberne Hall. But Felix wished it; on the way home Felix had again laid stress and emphasis on this particular point; Felix had forgiven him, he was putting himself out of his way to help him. Therefore, at all hazards, at all events, at any personal cost, Felix must be obeyed.

With an unwilling, trembling, fumbling hand, he pulled the iron pin from the staple of the large, white gate, and was about to pass through when a curiously-shaped bundle near the post attracted his attention, and he stooped to examine it. The thing was hard and warm, and moved at his touch, rolled over, opened, and a little figure scrambled to his feet from a woollen shawl, and stared at him.

It was not a very small boy, but a weak and emaciated one, with big, vacant, hazel eyes, and a few scant golden curls on his forehead, damp with perspiration. Forlorn and woefully altered as Paul thought he must be, still he recognized Felix's description of the little Guy Wycherly, and lifted the thin, poorly clad child in his arms.

"What are you doing here, chap?" he asked gently. The boy gazed at him, lost in wonder at the rich, low, caressing tone. "Who are you?" Guy asked, in a hoarse, broken voice, such as Paul would never have believed a child could possess.

"I am a friend of mother's; I am going to see her; you'll come with me, won't you?" "No," he said, with a wise look. "She'll hurt me like this." He put his hands to his skinny throat, and grabbed it spasmodically.

"Ah, you mustn't do that!" Paul said, pulling at the long-nailed fingers, and he was amazed at the strength of the frail bony hands. Guy laughed a weird, tuneless laugh. "I mustn't; but she may. She likes to. Wouldn't you like to? I'll let you, though I kick when she does."

"No," he said, tenderly; "I would rather kiss you." "What's that?" he asked, puzzled. "Put your face near mine, and I'll show you," he said, shocked and astonished at the question. Guy held his face close and Paul kissed his soiled, tear-stained cheek and mouth with a warmth born of the sincerest pity.

"I like that," he said, "it doesn't hurt." "I wouldn't hurt you for the world, Guy," he said, clasping him closer. "Then I'll stay with you," he decided contentedly.

"I would that it were possible, you poor little, ill-used kiddie," Paul remarked fervently, setting him on his feet and keeping hold of his hand. "Come along," he said, wrapping the shawl around him, and letting the gate swing to. "We'll go back home." "You won't let her hurt me?" "Not I," he returned stoutly, with a boldness he was far from feeling, and he shivered to find the little figure run willingly beside him in fearless perfect faith.

Stung with secret fears, and not daring to trust himself to linger, he hurried along the drive, up the flight of steps to the entrance hall, and lifted the brass knocker. There was no reply. It was not to be wondered at; he had smitten so feebly that the sound could hardly have penetrated the solid, handsome panelling. He knocked again, louder, three regular strokes, gently, but perfectly distinct, communicating some of his own terror to the summons.

The door was opened at last by a smart maid-servant, who looked surprised at his small companion. "Mrs. Wycherly at home?" "Yes, sir; I think you must be the gentleman madame is expecting." "Farley is my name; I think she will see me." The heavy door clanged with a dull, leaden sound, and Paul felt he was practically alone, beyond all human

aid. "Will you leave Master Guy here, and follow me?" the girl said, with an upward knowing glance. "No," he answered, clasping the little red hand closer. "I'll take him with me." "Excuse me, sir," she said gravely. "It would annoy the mistress; the child is never allowed in the drawing-room."

The stubborn unbending will-power, the strange individual force which stood him in place of nerve, suddenly asserted itself together with a blind inexplicable feeling that he was safer with than without the boy. "Nonsense," he returned coolly; "she won't object to his coming with me—will you please lead the way?"

Without further demur she turned and Paul followed her up the white enamelled staircase, carpeted with broad crimson velvet pile, held in place by massive silver-plated rods, into a well-lighted, lofty, magnificent apartment. He drew a deep breath, as with eyes and soul he drank in the perfectibility of the harmonious coloring, enhanced by a daring dash of Eastern gorgeousness. In all his life he had never felt as he did now. The beauty was all so glowing, yet so still, that it seemed as if the house stood in a desert, or must be by some spell made invisible to those who resided near or passed by it, so that any form of misfortune, accident or crime could happen in it without the possibility of attracting human aid.

A portrait of thick brocade swayed in an unexpected quarter of the room, and Rowena Wycherly advanced with outstretched hands, her lovely, bewitching face wreathed in tender smiles, her full rounded bosom heaving with pent-up passion. She stood before him in the glancing firelight, curt-sewing, beautiful beyond compare, a veritable bird of paradise, a lovely, wicked, wanton thing, utterly devoid and devastated of any corresponding comeliness of mind. She took the cold, nerveless hand, opened it, bowed over it, and kissed the palm.

"My lord, my king!" she said in soft reverential tones, curtsying low, and with her uprising, she burst into a happy, joyous, ringing laugh, throwing her arms around his neck with a fierceness that made him stagger. "I knew you would come, darling," she said childishly. "I knew—"

Her first bewildered paroxysm of love passed, she looked about her, beyond her idol, and there from the dark, voluminous folds of a curtain she saw Guy's curious peeping face. The expression in her eyes told Paul she was cognizant of the child's presence, and the sudden tightening of his arms about her might easily have been mistaken for a lover's warmth.

"Let me go," she said, struggling. "Go?" he asked in faint surprise. "Without one little kiss, Rowena?" "I can't bear it," she panted. "I can't enjoy you with that thing in the room watch me. How did he come here?"

"He came with me; I found him truanting outside. I was sure he belonged to you from the likeness, and consequently he is dear to me. If he is going to be mine as well as yours I must know him, and learn to love him."

"You shall not!" she exclaimed defiantly. "Your love is all mine, all mine." "Well, like him, then," he said, feeling he had overshot the mark, "and be kind to him. You will let me be kind to him, Rowena?"

He let her go, went to the child, caught him in his arms, walked to a low couch, and sat down with him on his knees. "You can't like him, Paul," she said, sorrowfully, going and standing close to him, her two hands crossed on his shoulder. "He's possessed! He will bite you, tear your clothes, kick you, and spit at you. He is nothing more or less than a demon; he has no business to exist."

"As he is here we will make the best of him," he said, smoothing the ruffled curls, and gazing up at her with a look that set her nerves a-trembling, and tossed her white bosom. "Poor little soul!" he breathed into the shining, spun-silk curls; "poor, forsaken little soul!"

"Now, Paul, I've been very patient," Mrs. Wycherly said, the hand on his shoulder fluttering to his neck, and anon up and down the back of his glossy head. "Let him go, the sight of him sickens me. I shall strike him if I can."

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you don't put him out of your arms; I can't bear it any longer." "Very well," he said, readily; "good-bye, Guy. Will you remember me? Will you know me when you see me again?" The boy looked at him long and steadily, a pained expression in his inflamed eyes. "Yes," he said positively, "I'll know you again, and I shan't hurt you, the goat won't come where you are!" "A la bonne heure!" he exclaimed, springing up with him in his arms; "good-bye, good-night; go to bed; dream of the angels, sweet," and he kissed him tenderly, and put him outside the door. "I am fond of children," he said, apologetically, turning to the beautiful, heartless creature, jealously watching him; "I suppose you wouldn't let me have that boy for a day or two."

"Tom and Harry would tuck him in somewhere, Mrs. Wycherly," he said, laughing; "they would see no end of fun in the visit. The little fellow wants a playmate, and the Hargrave boys are such jolly, wholesome, happy young pickles; to rub against them would be the best medicine in the world for Guy."

"Guy doesn't want any medicine; he is not right in his head, he is insane. At times he is raving mad. I hate him; I hated his father; I hated my marriage. I want to forget him; I want to forget the hateful past; I want only to live in your love, now and always. Paul, dearest, you do love me a little?"

"A very little," he said, with a smile which seemed to belie his words; "and, what is more, I have not brought the ring. That silly little bird was wrong, Rowena; I have not been to London, but with your kind consent I'll go to-morrow. Which shall it be?" he demanded, dropping into an inviting divan by the fire, "diamonds, pearls, or sapphires?"

She slipped gracefully to the leopard skin at his feet, laid a firm, white hand on his knee, and looked up into his dark face, her eyes sparkling, her bare neck and shoulders suffused with the rosy glow of the fire.

"None of them," she said, stroking his face. "I want you to get me two large rubies cut heart shape, the hearts fastened together by a tiny, wee, diamond arrow. There's a good jeweller's in Piccadilly. I don't remember the name, but it's near a superb fruiterer's. I think you will easily find it."

"I shall find it," he said, confidently. "but, Rowena, won't a ring like that be some long way out of a poor man's reach? Don't think me mean; I am really generously inclined; but, to tell the truth, I've not taken my salary yet, and I'm quite sure my bank deposit won't cover the price of such a ring as you describe."

"Let me give you a cheque for £200, dearest," she said coaxingly. "The ring won't cost quite that, but the surplus will pay your expenses. You are going entirely on my account, and you know I ought really to bear the brunt. Stay at the Cecil, darling; go to a theatre and enjoy yourself."

"You are most kind and considerate, Rowena," he said; "but I can't accept money from you; I can't let you buy your own engagement ring; the idea is preposterous! Choose something simpler, something more in accordance with my shallow pocket. May I bring you the prettiest and daintiest ring I am able to afford?"

"Bring what you like, anything; I have shoals of rings; I don't care what it is so long as you bring yourself safe back," she retorted, letting the crown of her head rest on his breast and tossing up her arms to clasp his neck. "Paul, when do you leave Weyberne Hall for good?"

"Christmas, I expect; why?" "Nonsense! I want to be married before then. What notice is usual to give?"

"Three months, to leave, then—"

"I won't wait," she exclaimed passionately; "I declare I'll elope with you first, Paul! I'll—darling!" she whispered, changing her tone with the sudden withdrawal of her arms, and turning her marvellous face to his. "If you do stay till Christmas it won't interfere with our marriage. It can't make any difference to Sir Thomas whether his secretary is married or single, how should it?"

"Do you mean to bring my bag and baggage, take up my residence here at the Larches, and visit the Hall in the day?"

"Yes," she said, with a gleeful laugh, "that is exactly what I do mean. Promise you will."

"I can't promise to-night, I am not my own master, so it would be foolish to pretend I am. I will speak to Sir Thomas, and if he is willing to concede, we must wait the appointed time."

"In that case I should wait until my hair is grey; my knight would blow a kiss from his finger tips, and ride bravely and gallantly away. Do you think I don't know you are temporizing, Paul? Do you think I don't know you are indifferent to me, that you would escape me if you could? Why you have more feeling for that miserable imbecile of mine than you have for me. I watched you, I saw your face quiver with pity for that wretched, puny object, and yet you can contemplate my rare beauty, my exquisite surroundings, my wealth, my absorbing love, and not move a muscle. Paul, dear love," she hid her face on his neck, "you don't love me, I know, but you will let me teach you? Will you try? Whether you love me or not I shall marry you, dearest, and I shall win your heart one day."

"I have never said that I did or do love you, Rowena, but I am willing to be taught; willing to learn. I am not naturally hard-hearted, I—"

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