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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 XVIII. Austine Hare

It was a little after ten, and the second train from East Weyburne was due at King's Cross in another five minutes. Felix Fleming and Hubert Graham were pacing the platform together. The barrister was speaking rapidly and impressively, while the squire smoked a cigar and listened with a smile on his handsome face.

"You see it came about in this way," he was saying, with his eyes on the clock, "young Hare was my office boy, did all my shorthand and typewriting, and a sharp spruce lad he was, too. After a year or so, to my infinite disgust, he developed a mania for the stage—no use trying to suppress that sort of crank once it's got a firm hold, as I very well know to my cost; it's always better to give everyone a chance of finding out for themselves whether or not they've mistaken their vocation. Hare surprised me, he stuck to the footlights like a limpet, and one fine night he sent me a pass, with a polite note begging me to drop in at the Savoy between the second and third act in time to witness his efforts as Lieutenant Jeffrey Stillchurch, an obstreperous ward in Chancery. I was rather taken back at the fellow's clever conception of his part and took him back with me to supper at my chambers. I was running on a bit, prognosticating great things for him in the future, when he quietly told me in phraseology he sometimes affected, it was not exciting enough, and his present engagement completed, he should just chuck the stage. I felt quite put out, on my word I did; I believe I swore at the boy, but as soon as I could bring myself to listen to his reasons and his arguments, I thought Hare was a long way off being a fool. It appears somehow, by accident, I think, he discovered he possessed a certain dormant power, a partial gift of ventriloquism, which he was determined to cultivate, and so with his dramatic talent, his throat business, and art of making-up, he went and offered his services at Scotland Yard, and they, my dear Fleming, they literally jumped at him. He has done well, splendidly! He is quite young—

but then, these are the days of very young men, you know—slim, dark, clean-shaven, and rather aristocratic-looking."

"You think he's the man for the part?" Felix asked. "I do, I am certain if we can get him, he'll act Farley to the life, for all he's worth—quiet, dignified, and reserved! At any rate, as soon as the train is in we will drive around to his lodgings and ascertain. Hare has not entirely severed his connection with the Scotland Yard authorities, but he takes private cases, and if he is specially wanted there—ah, here she comes!"

The train glided alongside the platform, and Paul leaned from the window of his compartment, opened the door, and sprang out where the two men stood, a small, light leather bag in his hand. A gleam of satisfaction came into the squire's eyes as he grasped his arm and marched him off to the cab standing outside the station.

"I'm content now, Farley," he said, looking at him with a brilliant smile. "and the rest may go hang! I had an attack of nerves last night for the first time in my life. I couldn't sleep for thinking you might be spirited away before I could get you safe here. By the way, I thought if I said bring your bag you would conclude you might have to stay the night, and expect you will, because if we got this chap Graham wants he will go back with me this evening, and I shall take him to Sir Thomas and explain matters. Did you arrange things before you left? I mean, did you lock up letters, money, jewellery, anything you don't desire looked over and meddled with by the man who will occupy your room? Of course, this Hare will be all right; still, it's expedient and business-like, and ought to be done under any circumstances."

"Yes, thank you, I did," he answered; "everything I consider of any value or interest to me is under lock and key."

"That's all right then, jump in!" They drove three in a hansom to a street leading out of Russell Square, and drew up before a quiet, unpretentious-looking house. Graham alighted, rang the bell, inquired for Mr. Hare, and beckoned to the others upon hearing that the gentleman in question was in and breakfasting in his room.

Austine Hare had finished his repast, and sat reading the paper in an easy chair by the fire, his slippers feet in close proximity to the ornaments on the chimney-piece. He looked up in undisguised surprise at the little party invading his sanctum with an absence of ceremony quite appalling, and then catching sight of Graham, he started up with a glad, impulsive, boyish welcome that was reassuring and refreshing.

Hubert Graham introduced his friends and ascertained whether his time for the next few days or perhaps a week, could be placed at their disposal. Receiving a ready affirmative, he proceeded as best he could to disclose the why and wherefore of their visitation, and finally handed the narrative over to the others, who were better acquainted with the facts, and better able to piece together and make the story somewhat comprehensible.

"You want me," he said, looking up from his note-book, where he had his explanation verbatim, "to personate that gentleman," bowing to Paul, "to play the part of secretary to

Sir Thomas Hargrave, to court this Mrs. Wycherly without apparently much heart in it, keep Miss Hargrave at arm's length and suffer myself to be kidnapped, married, or murdered, just as the fates may decree; and, moreover, you want me to-night? Very well, gentlemen, you need go no further, I shall be pleased to accommodate you. There is just sufficient mystery and danger about it to make the adventure attractive, but one question, an important one—is this woman, this Mrs. Wycherly, mad?"

Paul looked at Felix, and for the first time it crossed his mind as to whether that might not be the solution to the whole gamut of Rowena Wycherly's behavior.

"I think she is perfectly sane," Felix said, in a tone that admitted of no contradiction, "but self is paramount; self is excited to such an extraordinary excess that it positively amounts to a mania. No obstacle is allowed to prevent her procuring and satisfying a desire, however illegitimate its object may be, provided her mind is seriously set upon its attainment. There is an unscrupulousness, and a daring about her that is, to my mind, brigandish in the extreme. It would not astonish me to find the strain date back to an ancestry of outlaws and true booters."

Austine Hare laughed, and his dark violet eyes, black in certain lights, went back to Paul. They seldom left him, except to glance at Felix when he spoke, in courteous assurance of his attention. He was unobtrusively watching Paul, studying every attitude and gesture, every trick of manner, speech and expression with his acute intelligence and verve of the true artist.

"Superficially, the thing strikes me as being the most tempting piece of work ever offered me," he said, in answer to the squire's sentiments respecting Mrs. Wycherly. "There is a pleasing dread in the unknown, Mr. Fleming, which has a real charm for me, and hence my profession. Figuratively speaking, a sail in a chartless sea, to wander in a maze without a clue, to walk blindfold near a precipice, gives a sort of honey-all zest to existence. Shorn of its mystery life would be a very disappointing theme to me. Do you smoke?" he asked, addressing Paul. "Are you musical? Do you sing, recite, conjure? Do you go in for any parlor tricks?"

"I can play the violin a little," he said, modestly, accepting a cigarette from Hare; "but as I don't possess an instrument, the Weyburnites have never heard me."

"Will you stand up, and perhaps Mr. Fleming will give me the difference in our height, and will you also let me see you smoke that cigarette?"

They stood back to back, and the squire acted as umpire.

"There is not much in it, Hare," he said, after some consideration, "if there is, Farley has the advantage. By Jove! your hair is several shades lighter, and so is your skin!"

"That's immaterial, you can easily be remedied; it's the eyes that trouble me, Mr. Fleming," he said anxiously. "No one, let alone a man, ought to have eyes like Mr. Farley's. In addition to the size, the beauty, the wonderful gold glint in them, there's that haunting, spiritual expression which goes to give the uncanny impression that the soul's awakening is in full progress. I hope you will excuse me," he said, smiling, when he became aware of the flush on Paul's face. "I'll try a pair of faintly smoke-tinted eye-glasses," he resumed, "and also a pair of magnifying ones, and let you judge of the effect. If Mr. Farley will step across to an old haunt of mine I will get my hair and skin touched up to the exact shade of his, and then I shall not need to trouble you gentlemen further."

The young men donned their hats and Hare let himself out, leaving Graham and Felix to a desultory conversation in the sitting-room.

"I say, Graham," the latter said, when the landlady had knocked for permission to remove the breakfast things and retired, "Farley must be put up somewhere for a night or two. I should like to leave him in your care, have you the accommodation in your chambers?"

"Not to-night, I haven't," he said, wheeling around and confronting him. "But to-morrow, if he likes, he can have my room. I shall be away. I had thought of locking the place up, but if you have a fancy for him to stop here I can hand the key over to him. He would be more comfortable at an hotel though, wouldn't he?"

"Very likely; I was thinking he would be under your practical and experienced eye," Felix returned, laughing. "but of course in your absence he might just as well be at an hotel. Are you off on business?"

"Pleasurable business, I imagine," he said, a trifle sheepishly.

He looked out of the window and watched an altercation between a hansom cabman and his fare, and after they had settled the dispute amicably, he twisted around with a heightened color, and took hold of the squire by the lapel of his coat.

"I never intended to let the cat out of the bag until the performance was over," he remarked, smiling, "but here's an open confession. Fleming,

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my boy, I'm going to be married early in the morning, and by to-morrow night my wife and I shall be in Edinburgh."

"By Jove," Felix exclaimed, admiringly. "You are making up for the time, Graham, you wasted in courting!"

"That is how I put it to Patricia. I told her we ought to have been married twenty years ago, and, as neither of us was girl or boy, we did not want the regulation ceremony, the usual finery, tomfoolery, and paraphernalia. A quiet, solemn service in a city church without a gaping crowd of disparaging friends, is more in keeping with my feelings on such a sacred occasion, and I am glad to say Patricia feels the same. We shall amuse ourselves to-morrow evening sending cards and cake, and if any one feels inclined to send a wedding present they're welcome, if not, we shall be none the worse. With the wedding-ring on Patricia's finger, I don't mind inviting a little spiteful animosity; a few snubs or adverse opinions will fall very flat and wide of the mark, once we are honey-mooning."

"I wish you joy, Graham," Felix said, "and I won't anticipate the papers, they shall tell their own tale."

"I should like to return the wish," he said, beaming. "Don't put it off too long, Fleming," he added, growing suddenly sad, "the years pass so quickly, and presently we become aware there's nothing but grey hairs and furrows, a dim veil of decay and loneliness betwixt us and the next world. Mankind instinctively pines after a home, and it's a delusion, a waste of substance and warmth to spend one's days alone. I've lived a quarter of a century alone in chambers, so I ought to know something of its proud pathos. I feel, Felix," he said, smiling again, and stretching out his arms, "like a long silent harp that the magic of the musician's fingers has brought into the full sound of harmonious life!"

The Squire knocked the ashes from his cigar with his little finger.

"I've had a decade of loneliness, Graham, and it seems, thanks to Jack Hunter, I am in for another spell. Still, it doesn't do to croak, because by nature my habits are not gregarious, and when once that sound gets into a man's throat, it is as ineradicable as sin. Shall I ever meet my affinity, my kindred spirit, my wife that is to be, or not, until I discard my fleshy tabernacle? I often wonder where she is. She must be somewhere, Graham. If I am going to have a wife at all while I am still youthful, she must now be living somewhere on the earth. I often think of her when I'm alone, and I—" he dropped his voice, and a light gleamed over his face—"I pray for her night and morning, though I've never seen her! It can't do her any harm, maybe it's a sympathetic link, a spirit clasp; it may, for all we know, act as an antidote to some of the evils, dangers and temptations of life, it—"

The door opened, and two young men of the same height and build entered, as like as two peas. Hubert Graham clapped Hare on the back, walked round, looked closely at his dark glossy hair and clear olive skin, with its faint blue tracery about the temples, its shadows under the eyes, and deeper tinge upon the upper lip and jaw, and ejaculated, "Contucious!"

"A suit like Mr. Farley's, an Inverness, a low-crowned hat, and a pinneze, sufficiently magnifying to give the correct size to the eyes will complete the likeness eh?" he asked, smiling.

"You are progressing, Hare," Felix remarked cautiously, "but I'll tell you what I think of your artistic artifice when we meet to-night."

"Which train, Mr. Fleming?" he asked. "The five-fifteen, I think. That will land us there in time for the Hall dinner, and allow a good margin for your toilet, Hare."

"Right you are, sir," he exclaimed, gaily, "I'll be there a good quarter of an hour before time so you can haul me over and point out any defects that may strike you. What about the ring? Shall I, or will you, purchase it?"

"I will," Felix said, laughing, "I'll buy the ring!"

The quartette filed out on to the pavement, and there separated to go their different ways. Austine Hare started to walk to the West End, Graham hailed a cab and was driven to his chambers, while Paul and Felix sauntered in the direction of Southampton Row to secure a bedroom at the little private hotel, and afterwards, as the squire expressed it, to poke about. They bought a pretty little pearl and coral ring at the jeweller's in Piccadilly, and lunched at a restaurant close by. In the afternoon they strolled into St James's Hall and listened to a ballad concert, though they were obliged to leave before the completion of the programme in order to reach King's Cross at Hare's appointed time. They came from a warm dazle of light outside into a misty duskiness. The street lamps were lit, the shops a blaze of brilliance and beauty, and stepping from the curb into a disengaged crawling hansom, they were driven in a low-spirited way to the station to find Austine Hare already there reading a newspaper at the bookstall.

"Well," he asked, looking at the squire and throwing back his head with a little imperious gesture common to Paul, "how now?"

Felix looked slowly from one to the other of the two Paul Farleys, and remained silent.

"You are disappointed, Mr. Fleming?" Hare said equably, "what is wrong?"

"No, I'm not," he said, "at least, it's well, it's so confoundingly good that I—I don't half like it, Hare."

"You could not have paid me a greater compliment, sir," he said, folding the paper; "but have you noticed, Mr. Fleming, that however I pitch my voice, it still remains a semitone lower than Mr. Farley's? Would a slight cold in the throat be sufficient plea? A hoarseness engendered by travelling in the early morning fog and a chilly night mist?"

"I should think so. My ear is not so true as yours, Hare. Have you any idea, Farley, whether Mrs. Wycherly is musical?"

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Mr. Hare, therefore she won't be listening to every inflection in your voice; she will take you as a whole, and be thankful to have Paul Farley back again safe."

"I don't agree with Mr. Farley," Hare said, politely; "a woman in love is like a sensitive plant, all feelers. Every tone, every breath, will find an echo in her heart, she—"

"Excuse me," Felix said laughing, "but it's blasphemy to call that woman's demonaical infatuation 'love.' Love," he went on, growing grave, "is a spiritual force breathed by the angels into our mortal hearts; it's selfless; it longs for another's happiness; it is chaste and pure; it is quiet, deep-flowing, lasting, unchangeable; it is the king of words and carved on Christ's heart."

There was a slight pause, and then Paul turned to his double.

"I don't know whether you are fond of children, Mr. Hare, but if you come across the boy you will be gentle with him?"

"Is there a boy?" he asked, taking out his note-book.

"Yes, Guy, a dear, crazed little chap; we made friends, he and I, and when he sees you he will expect a kindly greeting. A kiss, a little fussy attention—you won't disappoint him?"

"No; poor little man," he said kindly. "If I see him he shall not detect any change in his friend. Give me an account as near as you can of the conversation between you and the lady last evening; it may prove a material guide in conducting negotiations later."

Paul ran over the various and, which he considered, the most important points and items touched upon during the interview, and Hare wrote swiftly until an official order came for passengers to take their seats. The squire slipped into the compartment, followed by Hare, and the door was banged after them. Felix let down the window and leaned out, his arms folded on the frames.

"Take care of yourself, Farley," he whispered; "keep good hours; keep good company; keep straight, and your friends will love you. If I don't find time to write to-morrow, I'll send a wire. Good-bye; don't stint yourself; treat yourself well, and I'll pay the piper."

Paul laid a large white hand on his arm, and fixed his great melancholy eyes on the kind, handsome face.

"Promise to be careful, Felix," he said, earnestly, his voice shaking in unison with his hand. "If Hare fails, and the truth leaks out, she may revenge herself on you, and I should—I should never forgive myself if harm came to you through me."

"Bah!" he said, smiling into the dark, agitated face, "don't you let that idea worry you, Paul, my boy. I make no doubt the little cat will keep her paws off me."

"Promise, Felix," he reiterated, his mouth quivering, "promise to be cautious, promise—" he drew nearer and clasped the squire's brown hand, "promise me you won't drive alone at night, not for a time?"

"I'll promise it if it will be any comfort to you," the Squire said, pressing the trembling fingers. "What a fellow you are for moods? Farley, you're nervous; in a regular sweat about me, and sometimes you're that cursedly cool—"

Continued on page 7.

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