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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 XXI.

"Paul Farley was married to Mrs. Wycherly early this morning, Agnes." It was Dr. Hunter who spoke, he was standing by the squire's bed, his fingers on his wrist, feeling his pulse. "Are you sure it is true?" she asked, in a faint voice.

"Positive. I was at the station this morning and saw them enter a first-class carriage of the London train. I was so surprised, dumbfounded, and taken back that I went straight to the Vicarage, saw Hay, and also inspected their signatures in the church register. — good gracious, Agnes! Are you ill?"

Agnes, feeling the strength in her knees gradually diminishing, sat down quietly on the side of the bed, and from thence slowly slid to the floor. Jack Hunter stepped lightly round the room, picked her up, and placed her in a chair away from the fire. There was no fear of her becoming unconscious, but she felt sick and giddy, terribly frightened, and looked deathly white. For a while she did not speak. She sat still, staring very hard and strangely up at the doctor until her perception became clearer and the weak languid feeling had in a measure passed.

"You are not going to upset yourself and make yourself ill about that young colt, Agnes, I should hope?"

"No, but I was surprised, startled, and coming on the top of this accident to Felix, it gave me a shock and sent me a little queer. Jack, dear, Mr. Farley never married her willingly; he has been forced into it, and that's what makes me feel ill."

"My dearest!" he said, laughing softly, and patting her hand, "It's a pity, then, you didn't see him. In all my life I never saw a fellow look so ridiculously, so absurdly, so utterly and absolutely happy, satisfied and contented."

"Then it wasn't Paul!" she said, an ineffable relief dawning in her eyes, and the pretty peach-bloom returning to her cheeks.

"It was, child," he returned gravely. "I was close to him, and should have spoken to him, but when he saw me he looked coldly unconscious of my presence, and turned away as if he wished to avoid an exchange of civilities. I raised my hat to Mrs. Farley, and she smiled and bowed most charmingly."

"I wouldn't mind staking my chance of getting married that she is not Mrs. Farley," she whispered, blushing a little, as she turned to the bed and gently touched the bruised temple.

"He smiled indulgently and tweaked her ear playfully."

"Oh, Jack, I wish Felix could be told; it's possible he could throw some light on it."

"This long sleep will do him more good than any medicine or anything in the world, and when he awakens don't question him, it will only worry him needlessly."

Felix opened his eyes as the doctor spoke, and looked anxiously at Agnes. "Where is Paul?" he asked, "is he safe?"

"Quite safe, dear," she replied, soothingly.

"And Hare—what's become of Hare?"

Agnes looked at Hunter inquiringly. "Who is Hare?" he asked softly, bending over the bed.

Felix considered a moment, frowned, and put his hand to his head.

"I don't know, ask Graham," he answered, wearily.

"I'll ask him; I'll look after Hare," Hunter returned. "Let me see this shoulder again, then get another good bout of sleep, and you will be comparatively level-headed by to-morrow."

At the end of the examination Felix sighed, closed his eyes, and appeared only too ready to comply with the doctor's suggestion.

Hunter beckoned to Agnes to follow him, and downstairs in the hall he told her he would drive round by Weyberne Hall and endeavor to see Sir Thomas or Lady Hargrave and probe for some signs of elucidation. Accordingly the most urgent cases disposed of, he reached the Hall after luncheon, and was shown into the library where Sir Thomas sat at the writing-table, his fingers thrust through his rumpled hair, a large square sheet of paper before him, filled with a mass of closely written matter interspersed with a network of small intricate figures. He looked worried, but about, and not particularly good tempered. His coat and silk hat were on a chair, an open time-table at his elbow, and Hunter, studiously observant, saw by the irritable perfunctory manner in which he glanced over the paper, that he meditated a hurried excursion somewhere soon. He looked anything but pleased at the doctor's entrance; he just nodded and pointed to a chair.

"How's Fleming?" he asked, folding the paper. "I heard he had regained consciousness."

"He is really capital; he is wonderful considering the ugly rap he gave his head. His left shoulder is dislocated, but I expect him up to-morrow for all that. It would be a superhuman business to keep Felix in bed once he was able to crawl out."

"That Wycherly boy was the cause of it, wasn't he?"

"Yes; he skinned across the road right under the mare's nose. Luckily Denham and Rose Pilgrim were indulging in a little privileged recreation and recuperation at the Larches, and witnessed the whole performance, else goodness knows how long it might have been before the accident was discovered."

"I am glad Fleming is on the mend,

perhaps he will be able to see me to-morrow. I have a bone to pick with him."

"How's that, sir?" Hunter asked, smiling.

"Well, you see, doctor, Mr. Farley is my secretary; he is in my pay, and while he remains in my house, I expect the right to order and control his actions. Yesterday he asked permission to go to London, obviously to meet Fleming there on business. Of course, I concurred; the fellow is splendid, he works like a horse, and I was only too willing to oblige him. The result is, here I am with this confounded estimate sent in from the Mill Cottages to look through and check. Why, I am as incapable of deciphering this inextricable confusion of drafted figures, and finding out whether I am about to be cheated or not, as I am of flying! If Farley had not been gifted with a sense of the fitness of things and written to me, I should be at my wit's end to determine how to get at him."

"Have you had a letter from him? May I see it?" he asked eagerly.

"It came this noon, and you are welcome to read it if that will give you any gratification," the baronet responded, tossing the letter over to him.

Jack Hunter looked first at the signature, and was not altogether surprised to perceive that the bold dark and light up and down strokes did not correspond in shape and form with the cramped signature he had seen in the vestry of Weyberne Church that morning. He turned back to the front page and looked at the heading:

The Pendennis Hotel, Southampton Row, 9 a.m.

Sir Thomas Hargrave, Esq., Dear Sir—No doubt Mr. Fleming acquainted you last evening with the full cause of my absence and helped to arrange matters so that the new man's instalment will prove of the least possible inconvenience to you. My ostracism frets me more than you would guess, sir; I feel thrown somewhat uselessly on my beams ends, and have ample time in which to regret my unenviable position, and any feeling of disfavor on your part it may entail. If you can wire me instructions I shall consider it a boon, sir, to be allowed to serve your interests while I am away.

With regrets and compliments, I am, sir, yours most faithfully, Paul Farley.

"A nice lad, that!" Hunter said; "and it does not read as if he were married."

"Married!" Sir Thomas exclaimed, "married to whom?"

"To Mrs. Wycherly."

"God bless my soul! Don't make the boy out to be quite a lunatic. As if he would dare to leave my house and get married without mentioning it."

"Mrs. Wycherly was married this morning to a young man the image of Mr. Farley. Mr. Hay officiated, and assured me of the bridegroom's identity. I also saw their signatures, although I will admit the writing of Farley's name does not tally with this. Pointer, the station master, told me Mr. Farley returned last evening with Felix, and Mrs. Radler confirmed the statement by asserting that he slept at the "Popinjay" last night. What inference is an ordinary sober-minded individual to deduct from all this?"

"It's a poser! A curious conglomeration of curious unlooked-for circumstances, and that is the only confession to which I feel inclined to pledge myself. I am going to London by the 2.50 train to take this estimate to Farley. I have one or two rather important items to discuss with him, and as it's out of the question to bother your patient, Farley must come to the rescue and divulge what Fleming intended to explain."

A light brown phaeton and a pair of horses passed the library window on their way round to the front entrance. Sir Thomas plucked out his gold repeater, opened the case, and snapped it to with a muttered, "Three minutes before your time, Birch. Better than three minutes late, though, my man."

"You'll excuse me, doctor," looking in the glass to settle his hat to a nicety and to give an upward twirl to the ends of his heavy, grey moustache, "but you know I am a bit faddy over horse flesh. It's a principle of mine not to keep the beasts waiting."

"I'm going to pay my respects to the ladies. I want to see Miss Judith, and—oh, Sir Thomas, ask Mr. Farley if he knows who Hare is."

"I will if I don't forget it," he called back, half out of the room. "I've heaps of business," and Hunter could not catch the end of the sentence, "on hand."

Sir Thomas made himself as happy and contented as a foot-warmer, a cigar, and a newspaper would permit, and upon alighting at King's Cross he drove straight away to the Pendennis. He was ushered into a small, comfortable, unoccupied coffee-room and was politely informed that Mr. Farley would be in directly. However, he sat there in the fast-gathering dusk three-quarters of an hour before he saw the familiar figure pass the window. A foot was heard scraping itself on the threshold, thence a light step in the

tied hair, and Paul hung up his hat, entered the room, and was midway across it before he recognized his visitor in the gloom.

"Well, young man!" Sir Thomas exclaimed pleasantly, all his good temper returning at the sight of the dark, clever, helpful face, "a nice time you have kept me, swinging my heels in this dull, dismal, solitary hole."

"I had no idea you would come up, sir," he said, touching the electric button and letting down the blinds, "otherwise I should not have been out of the way. I hope the wait has not made a serious—"

"No, it's all right, Farley. I had this estimate from Wiseman this morning, and for the life of me I can't make head or tail out of it. To begin with, I hadn't a pair of glasses strong enough to magnify these miserable dots into anything like proportionate-sized figures. One wants to be young, alert, and pretty nearly as cunning as a wagon-load of monkeys to have business dealings with folks nowadays."

"Let me see it," and Paul gently drew the long envelope from between his fingers.

He spread it out on the table, polished his glasses, and bent over it while Sir Thomas leaned back in his chair and gave vent to a sigh of relief, which, judging from its profundity, must have originated from the toes of his boots. He sat absolutely still and silent for fully ten minutes studying his secretary's well-defined profile, and watching the shimmer of his smooth hair in the light, holding down a question which persisted upon bubbling to the surface, and at last refused to be kept within bounds any longer.

"I say, Farley," he commenced with a broad smile, "where's the wife? Is she too shy to come downstairs?"

"Whose wife?" he asked, looking up with a wrinkled forehead.

"Yours. You and Mrs. Wycherly were married this morning. It's no use your denying it, my boy, because Mr. Hay swears he married you, and Hunter saw you off at the station on the first stage of the honeymoon."

"Indeed! How interesting!"

Paul removed his eye-glasses, crossed his legs, and contemplated the baronet's jovial face.

"What does it mean, sir?" he asked seriously.

"I don't know; I want you to tell me."

"I can't, sir. I came up to London yesterday morning, slept here last night, posted my letter to you this morning on my way to the British Museum. I have been there all day until the light failed, copying extracts from some old works now only extant at the Museum."

"That's all right, you were here safe enough, but the Weyberne folk have it you came down with Fleming, slept at the "Popinjay," and—"

"But Mr. Fleming knows better, it was Hare that went down with him—has he not explained matters?"

"Fleming had a spill last night, rather a bad one; he hadn't a chance of explaining anything."

"Is he much hurt?" Paul's voice shook, though he strove hard to steady it.

"I should say so; I heard he was unconscious seven or eight hours, and Hunter told me this afternoon he had dislocated his shoulder."

Paul rose, touched the bell, and remained leaning against the mantelpiece.

"Was it an accident pure and simple, or was it—? Will you have whisky or brandy, sir?" he asked, as the waiter appeared.

"What are you going to have?"

"Brandy," he said, looking ill, haggard, and ghastly white.

"Then I'll have the same," Sir Thomas returned complacently. "It was that boy Guy," he resumed, "he ran across the road slap in front of the mare, frightened her into fits, and sent her flying down the turnpike like a rocket. Either the brute stumbled or the wheel caught the root of a tree; caught something, anyway; the mare's knees are pretty badly flayed, and the dogcart—well, the cart's a wreck; it's simply in splinters. It will be so alarming news for Fleming when he is well enough to hear it. Mercy the fellow wasn't killed!"

"Have you any objection to my going back with you, sir?" Paul asked, taking a big gulp of brandy.

"Objection, Farley? I object to your being here. I don't see exactly how I am going to manage without you."

"Do you think that boy ran out of his own accord, or was he sent out, whipped out? Did she make use of that poor crazed little urchin as an apparently innocent means of procuring her pillow, her devilish ends?"

Sir Thomas stared at him. Paul's black eyebrows almost met, and the vertical line above his nose stood out with a grim distinctness. A powerful suppressed anguish moistened his forehead, and the sensitive mobile lips quivered piteously.

"God bless my soul!" Sir Thomas ejaculated, without removing his gaze from the wonderful eyes, a world of agony lurking in their dark depths. "Why should the Wycherly woman want to make mincemeat of Fleming?"

"You see, sir," he said, drawing up a chair, and seating himself close to Sir Thomas's lounge, "from what you say this fellow Hare has evidently gone and married Mrs. Wycherly. I don't understand it myself, but Mr. Fleming may have tried to stop it or threatened to do so; it's just the sort of thing he would do, regardless of consequences, and hence this cruel, deterring accident."

"If she wanted you, Farley, what did she marry this Hare for?"

"I'll tell you all about it, sir," he said, setting down the small remaining quantity of his brandy and seltzer water, and laying a thin, nervous hand on the arm of the baronet's chair. "You know better than I but I can take place in my absence, how matters stand, and what the situation admits of."

And in his clear, concise way, with carefully selected, well-turned sentences, he cleverly waded the story together, each move on the chess-board of events fitting with fastidious precision like the trenchant even sides of a rich, skilful mosaic pattern. Sir Thomas asked no questions; there was no need. With his mind's eye, he saw the long line of Mrs. Wycherly's ex-

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crable actions the past as if they were pictured from a biography. Now and again he suppressed a chuckle, and once he laughed outright, but he was grave, thoughtful, and duly impressed when Paul at length reached the end of his recital.

"So the widow has gone off honeymooning with the idea she is Mrs. Farley? Smart fellow that Hare; hope he knows how to take care of himself; it's a serious business for the young man."

"Yes, it seems a remarkably senseless thing to do. If you will excuse me, sir, I will pack my portmanteau."

Sir Thomas laid a detaining hand on his arm.

"I am disposed to think Fleming is right," he said reluctantly; "you ought to let the low until events show how the widow takes her disappointment. She is bound to find it out, and bound to vent her spleen on somebody."

"Just so; and accordingly, neither Hare nor I have any right to make Mr. Fleming the scape-goat. Why should I hide and leave Mr. Fleming in the open to fight my battles? I have attracted this untoward force of grave circumstances, and I alone must abide by the consequences. No man is justified in making himself responsible for another's action. This ill-omened accident shows me I ought, I must—it's my bounden duty to insist upon standing severely alone in this crisis. Of the three I am the culprit in the fullest and truest sense of the word, and I absolutely refuse to jeopardize the life of another so that I may escape without a scratch. You will allow me to return with you, sir?"

"With all my heart; I want you, Farley, but upon my word I don't wish to be the one to drag you into danger."

"The danger is past, the woman has gone. The idea, the suggestion of danger now, may be the softest, the silliest of delusions. My place, so long as I serve you honestly and faithfully, is at Weyberne Hall; my duty lies there, and whatever shape it takes, even though it be a cross, I ought to lift it alone. Give me a chance to exhibit a spark of bravery, sir; give me a chance to show I have the grit, the courage, the strength of character, to face a few heavy odds; don't leave me here a shivering coward."

Sir Thomas rose, paced up and down the coffee-room, his hands behind him.

"I don't know what to say, Farley," he said ruefully. "If you stop here my affairs are at a standstill; on the other hand, Fleming is laid up and the knowledge that you were back in Weyberne might vex and worry him past endurance, and after all you may be acting rightly in returning. Often when a danger is faced it dwindles into nothing, it—"

"Thank you, sir," he interposed, "I'll just run upstairs and pack my traps."

"Here, one moment, young man!" and Sir Thomas caught his sleeve.

"I'm not accountable to Fleming for this, you understand. You must see him to-morrow yourself and argue the matter out with him."

"Very well, sir, I will," he said, gently disengaging himself and moving towards the door.

"I will be down here in five minutes, sir."

He returned in less time than he stated, a light leather valise in his hand, his dark eyes sparkling, his lips pursed a little with a faint tremulous smile.

Continued on page 7.

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