# THE SECRET OF PAUL FARLEY

— BY —

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

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### CHAPTER XXXI.

#### The Wife of His Bosom

It was late in the afternoon, and snowing. Johnson, the friendly waiter who had assisted Paul to catch the mail train to Weyberne, stood in the hall of the "Pendennis," watching through the half-glass door the slow, feathery swirl of flakes. He was musing upon the winter's early advance, when a man of fine physique passed the iron palings, entered the gateway, and ascended the steps of the hotel.

The stranger was the tallest and the broadest man he had ever been called upon to behold, and Johnson looked at him with interest as he pushed open the half-glass door. He was handsome, too, he saw in a decided satisfactory way. There was no shilly-shallying about it, the first glance chronicled the undisputable fact, and the second encouraged and maintained the good impression. His features were good, remarkably good; a fair complexion had been colored and tinted to a nicety by Nature's artists—the sun and the wind; the eyes were grey, and had a look in them as if they could focus an object some distance ahead. The bronze moustache, the ends having an upward curve, was dewily damp, and glistened in the light as the door swung to behind him.

"Mr. Farley in?" he inquired, in a pleasant, slightly anxious tone.

Johnson answered in the affirmative, and hesitated when the stranger asked to be shown the way to his presence. He was unwilling to disturb Mr. Farley, he said, because the last time he peeped into the little sitting-room behind the hall the gentleman was fast asleep. The real truth of the matter was that Mr. Farley was unwell, ill, Johnson thought, really, genuinely ill. He had not ordered a mouthful of victuals that day, nor the previous one. The table was strewn from end to end with papers, all kinds of litters, and the gentleman said he had no room, and no time for meals but he had disposed of several cups of tea and innumerable cigarettes. The gentleman had been much upset by a telegram advising him of the expected death of a friend. He, Johnson, did not think the friend had died but Mr. Farley had returned to town very queer, very shaky, and, he considered, very ill, with a cut on his forehead and some of the flesh shot from his thumb, which he had himself dressed, having been in the army and an orderly in the military wards. Therefore, if the gentleman to whom he was speaking were a friend of Mr Farley's, he, Johnson, thought it would be wise to persuade Mr .Farley to see a medical man, and also to take something in the form of nourishment—he was glad to say, as luck would have it—there was soup going at six.

"I am a friend, a very great friend of Mr. Farley's, and if you will show me his room I will undertake to see after him."

The man's face brightened, and he led the way immediately, stopping outside a door at the end of the hall.

"This small sitting-room Mr. Farley engaged on his return. He said he had a quantity of work to get through and the coffee-room was not sufficiently quiet. The gas is on a little, sir; I lit it ten minutes ago; I didn't turn it up much for fear of waking Mr Farley."

"Thank you," the squire said, slipping a sovereign into his hand in return for his comity; "thank you for your kindness and attention to Mr Farley. We will make it right later on," and turning the handle noiselessly he entered and closed the door softly on Johnson.

The room was in semi-darkness and comfortably warm still, though the fire had burned low. The couch stood between the fireplace and the table, and Paul lay there asleeep, the wounded hand in a black silk sling, and the other tucked under his head. Felix tip-toed across the room and bent over the couch.

Paul awake, alert, his nerves on the stretch, looking out for danger signals, and Paul asleep, unconscious of criticism, the muscles of his face relaxed, the emaciation, the weariness the hollows beneath his eyes plainly visible, were totally different persons. Felix had no idea he was so thin, so worn, so clearly, unmistakably, ill, and awhile back, a month, sure, he was fairly plump and looked so uncommonly well. This was a revelation; Felix was gaining an insight into what Farley had suffered, what he had endured while unswervingly prosecuting the physical and mental struggle he had waged in order to attain his doubtful inglorious ends. Presently, he dropped on one knee and looked more closely at the careworn face. Paul was so still, preternaturally still, scarcely breathing, that—a wave of sickening fear swept over him—great heavens! was the prize to be snatched from him within an ace of his grasp!

The steady gaze, the soul's yearning, influenced the sleeper; he stirred, the heavy eyelids lifted, and the great dark eyes were fixed on the squire's face.

"Hello, Farley!" he said, smiling suddenly; "what cheer?"

Paul turned his feet to the floor, sat up, and stared at his visitor.

"Have you come to stop here?" he asked anxiously, a hunted expression in his eyes.

"No, not here," Felix returned quickly, now perfectly able to interpret the look that puzzled him at times; "I'm on the other side, just down the street, you know, Paul, at the Friar's Heel. I wanted to see Hare, and I wanted to see you. I just gave Austin a look, set my traps down yonder, had a brush up, and stepped over here to ask you to come back and have a bit of dinner with me. There's turtle soup, red mullet, a broiled fowl, and a bottle of Duc de Marne, '71 vintage, to wash it down—does the menu appeal to you?"

Paul crossed his legs, leaned back and smiled.

"You are very kind," he said, gratefully, "very kind; but I don't feel at all peckish; in fact, I am off my feed, and," nodding at the litter on the table, "I have as much as I can get through with to-night.'

"What have you had to eat to-day?" Felix asked, seating himself on the couch and ignoring the table.

"To eat? Oh, I don't know, anything Josnson likes to bring; I have no particular appetite."

"What is it you are doing?" glancing at the heterogeneous mass of papers on the table.

"Odds and ends. There are some communications from Wiseman concerning that estimate, three of Sir Thomas's speeches, some articles of my own, a greek examination paper for Tom Hargrave, and one or two more things of a similar character."

"What do you work on? You seem to eschew food."

"Tea for one thing; tea is a stimulant, it pulls one together admirably, and—well, I smoke a goodish deal. You see, when one has a craving for food and the first mouthful chokes one, a cigarette comes handy. It soothes the nervous contraction of one's throat, and pacifies the wretched sensation lower down."

"Are you trying to kill yourself?"

"Good gracious, no! I am trying for a post under Government. There's Sir Thomas's letter about it on the table close to you, if you care to look at it."

Instead of looking at the letter Felix looked at him, and while he gazed Paul rose, placed a lump of coal on the fire with a pair of brass tongs and remained lounging there, his back against the chimney-piece, toying with his cigarette case.

"Do you stand a good chance?" Felix asked.

"Medium; I have an excellent testimonial from Sir Thomas. Will you have a smoke?"

"I wonder whether you will do me a favor?" Felix hazarded, gently drawing the proffered case from his hand.

"I will if I can," he said, eagerly; "you know I will."

"If—you know what an inveterate smoker I am—if I bring my allowance down to one pipe a day will you knock off the cigarettes, give up smoking until you are in a better state of health, say for three months?"

"I will," he said, readily; "and what is more, I'll do it without the sacrifice on your part. Why should you make a martyr of yourself, Felix? It won't be the easiest thing in the world; bad habits are not easily shunned. But I will do it to oblige you, because you ask me."

"Thank you," Felix returned, snapping the box and dropping it into his waistcoat pocket. "Now, is it possible you will grant me another act of grace? Please don't huff me, because I came up to town expressly to ask you this."

Paul laughed, hitched his heel on to the fender rail and slipped his uninjured hand into his trousers pocket.

"I would do anything in the world fou asked me, provided, as I said before, it were possible."

"Well, it's this," said Felix, earnestly. "I want a holiday, and so do you. I've not been up to the mark since my accident, and I don't sleep as I did. I am out of sorts, and I want a thorough change. I think of running over to America for a couple of months, and I want you to go with me—your native air will do you tons of good."

"It's kind; it's overwhelmingly good of you,"—Paul swallowed something that made his voice husky, and resumed—"but it's out of the question; I couldn't afford it, and I haven't the time."

"I can afford it, and that is all that is necessary. You see, this shoulder is a confounded nuisance to me; I thought, perhaps, you wouldn't mind valeting me for a bit; I should not be any real trouble. There is not much beyond getting into my coats that I can't do for myself."

"It's not that, Paul, said, moving restlessly and changing his feet on the fender. "I wish I could be of use to you; I wish I could help you. You have been doing things for me from the first moment I met you until now. I would give ten years of my life, Felix, to be able to return the least of all kindnesses you have shown me. I wish I could go with you."

"Why can't you ? It won't cost you a penny."

"Beggars can't be choosers," he said, smiling; "I have my living to get."

"Get it when you return."

"This appointment would be snapped up; it's one in a thousand. I have applied for it, and I must stick to my guns. Besides, I am still in Sir Thomas's pay. I am working for him, else I could not stay here. I am sorry. When do you go?"

"Not at all; I am not going alone," he said, and a dreadful uncomfortable silence ensued.

"What about Miss Agnes?" Paul ventured nervously; "couldn't she go?"

"I daresay she could, but I don't want her. I am in quest of a companion as much as a valet."

Paul looked at his foot on the fender while Felix stared at the fire.

"Paul," he said at last, looking up into the dark troubled face, his own rather white, his grey eyes very wistful, "it's all humbug about the companion valet; I didn't know how to get it out, but I want you to go with me as my wife—as my dear wife—will you?"

The next moment Felix had sprung to his feet, caught the swaying figure by the arm, pulled a chair from under the table, and guided him into it.

"It's all right, it's all right, come—come; it's all right. You don't mnid me. You don't mind your friend Felix. You are used to me," he whispered, standing behind the chair and drawing the dark head back till it rested where Paul had often longed to lay his aching head; just where he could feel and hear the beating of that strong faithful heart.

"Yes, I do mind," he sobbed; "I mind you above everyone else in the world! I would have given my life to prevent your knowing this vile thing. I would rather have blown my brains out than—"

"My dear, my dear; don't take it to heart like that," he implored, wiping the great drops of moisture from Paul's forehead. "I came out with it too suddenly; but if I hadn't I should never have got it out at all, and I can't get along without you—you didn't expect me to, did you? You are my sun, my light, my life; as essential to me as my breath, and without this knowledge that you grudge me I couldn't have taken possession of you, I couldn't have turned this precious friendship, this love of ours, into the most perfect of all friendships; the most perfect bond and union that God has permitted to exist on His fair earth."

Paul gave a shivering, sobbing sigh, raised his free arm, and laid it around the squire's neck.

"You know this thing, you know me as I am—vain, careless of the welfare of others, unmindful of the misery I brought to those who were kind to me. You know, you have witnessed my selfishness, you have seen to what lengths I would go, you saw death itself made a stepping-tone to fame—and yet you ask me to become your wife—I don't understand it."

"Don't try," he said, soothingly, stroking the glossy hair; "don't trouble, don't bother this dear head about anything more. I am here to see after you, to take care of you, to think for you, and no man ever knew better than I what he's about. It's a wife I'm after, a friend, a companion, a comrade. It's the dear woman I've longed for, that I've begged Heaven to send me. I once told you whoever or whatever she was, when she came I should take her to my heart, and not question the Wisdom that sent her. I am not taking note of the garb you were sent in; I am thanking Heaven you are here; that a wise, loving Providence opened a way for me to grasp the answer to my prayer when it came. I am so happy, so thankful, so blessed, I am well nigh dazed with the wonderful knowledge that the grand festival in my life has come! Now, if you cry, Paul, I shall cry, too, and it won't do for the attentive Johnson to come and catch us two fellows crying in one another's arms—eh?"

Paul smiled through his wet eyelashes as Felix turned up his chin, wiped the tears from his cheeks, and tried to erase the blue shade from his upper lip.

"Will it wash off?" he asked.

"No," Paul said; "but it will wear off."

"How long will the process take?"

"A week perhaps, but not longer," he said, kissing the hand that was exploring his face; "you must know, you must feel, you must think, I have done wrong, and you ought to punish me—if you don't, perhaps God will."

There was a silence, in which Felix held Paul's chin in the hollow of his hand, and looked deep down into the depths of his glorious eyes. Finally he laid his cheeks on the hot, damp forehead, a world of tenderness and ineffable love in the action.

"You will never hear a word of that sort, a word of reproach, from me," he whispered; "if you hadn't done what you call wrong I should have dragged out a dull, lonely existence at the Manor and died a bachelor. I haven't room to feel more on that point, and as to punishing you," his voice shook, "I tried correcting you once, Paul, and the memory of that punishment will haunt me to my dying day—it will spoil my whole life. You have no idea how it has worried me, how it teases me; I've never had a good night's rest since. Directly I close my eyes I begin that thrashing business. I can't get away from it. Last night I was in a dreadful state; it seemed I had battered you to a pulp, and—"

Paul lifted the arms about his neck, turned round, ad confronted the distress in the grey eyes with a face expressive of the liveliest astonishment.

"Why, Felix," he exclaimed, rising and standing on the hearth, while the squire subsided into the chair he vacated, "you don't mean to say you have given that—that 'rotten show,' as Tom Hargrave politely puts it, another thought? I received no more than I deserved. If you had thrashed me every day while I was at Weyberne I should only have had my deserts. I did not really mind it; it was not such pain and suffering to me as you seem to imagine. The chemistry of the thing is this. Undoubtedly where the soul heralds an attraction, mind acts on mind, the influence being intensified and increased by the heat of an excited intellect, whereby the subtle sympathies would at once be potent and plastic. I don't pretend to define or understand the process, but I'll swear that in the excitement that night your mind met mine and engendered a like heat; it radiated and kindled a corresponding passion. You were actively insensible, I was passively insensible; in the heat and mental commotion you were unconscious of striking, and in the tenacious hold of your will and mind over mine I was equally unconscious of the blows struck—the fact of my riding Tom's machine the next evening to East Weyberne proves that I was not hurt, or, laboring under some sort of influenct, I was not aware of any undue discomfort."

"You want me to believe you never felt that thrashing?" Felix asked, looking up into the dark, earnest eyes. "I am sorry I am so dense as to be unable to absorb such plain ethics; can't you go further and prove it never took place at all? The only antidote I know of for a mind poisoned like mine is marriage, Paulus. I don't say it will cure the disease, but it will allay some of the irritation. When can it be, heart of my heart?"

"When you like," he said quietly, smiling; "I am willing to sacrifice all feminine prerogatives to your peace of mind."

Continued next week.