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THE SECRET OF PAUL FARLEY

— BY —
JOHN MARCH { (AUTHOR OF "A CHILD OF MARY PRAYERS," ETC.).
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"Then if we are married and on the sea within the next fortnight, I need not feel I have bullied you into it."
"What about Agnes and Dr. Hunter, do they know?" Paul asked suddenly, sitting down on the couch, and remembering Cecilia Hay and her womanly attributes. "The doctor won't approve of this alliance."
"They haven't an inkling at present," he laughed, twisting round to look at him, "and Jack's approval is neither asked for nor wanted; the whole question consists of whether you approve of me. Agnes will stay with the Hargraves until we return, and what is more, postpone her marriage a month. I wonder what Master Jack will say to that—you look very white, friend Paul; have I tired you?"
"You are not likely to do that, Felix."

Felix rose and looked at him anxiously.
"There is an hour before we dine," he said, taking out his watch. "I shall order you a plate of soup; you will eat it to please me, I know."
He went outside to waylay Johnson, and ordered a small quantity of soup with a glass of the best port stirred in, waited for it, and brought it in himself. Paul ate it without a demur while he meekly watched Felix tidy the table, and without a single protest allowed him to collect the scattered mass of papers, dump them together in one irregular, mixed pile, and tie them around with a piece of string.
Felix placed the empty plate on the bracket in the hall and returned to make himself responsible for the invalid's general comfort. He turned Paul's feet upon the couch, arranged the cushions with exactitude under his head and shoulders, busied himself immensely, and finally came around to the front, leaned over, and looked at him.

"I should very much like to take you in my arms and kiss you, but I am afraid of upsetting your disorganized equilibrium; there is such a quantity of extraneous love pent up here, touching his chest, "and you seem so frail I am nervous about touching you; I am more than half afraid of crushing the breath from that slim, lissom body. What shall I do with you, you dainty, delicate morsel of humanity?"
"Oh, I shall be all right," Paul said with quivering lips, "now the trouble is removed. You know, Felix, I have had a good deal of worry one way and another, and you yourself have been a fruitful source of anxiety to me."
"I can return the compliment there, friend Paul," he said, kneeling beside the couch; "you've played fast and loose with my feelings, you've hacked my heart about just anyhow, and now I expect to be compensated—one kiss, my soul, to live on through the night, will you kiss me—Pauline, Paulus, Paul—I'll stick to Paul, I'm used to that,—will you? do you call that nervous flutter a kiss? Dash it all, and from a fellow, too, who has served an apprenticeship at that sort of thing. Now, I'm a novice; I've never gone courting maid, widow or wife, but, by Jove! I think I can surpass that."

Hitherto Paul had been kissed by women, principally by a woman to whom he objected, to whom he entertained an instinctive aversion, and he was naturally considerably taken aback by Felix's masterful embrace, by the enthusiasm, the verve, the passion of his kisses. The pressure of the strong arms hurt his bones, and the heavy moustache pressed tightly over his mouth stopped his breath. He was making an altogether new and startling acquaintance with Felix. Felix had suddenly burst upon him in a new light; Felix was no longer a dear friend, a good comrade, but a strong, overpowering, passionate lover. The experience was bewildering, rather alarming; he felt confused, suffocated, hysterical. He loved Felix, he could not resist him, he could not hold his life through his lips! The hysterical idea, the foolish imagery of a nervous system out of gear frightened him, and Felix was all at once brought to his senses by a feeble flood of unlooked-for tears.

"There! I knew I should frighten you," he said, remorsefully. "Forgive me, and I promise never to let myself go again. I've always bullied you, haven't I, old fellow? Don't let me in future; sit on me; pull me up sharp; just—"
"It's not you, Felix; it's my thumb," he said tearfully; "I am nervous, run down, worn out with the pain in my thumb. You must not take me seriously, because the reaction, the relief, the removing of what I anticipated to be an abiding sorrow has unnerved me. I shall be better to-morrow. I shall be able to work. I've done practically nothing to-day, and work is a splendid tonic, it always braces my nerves. I shall begin to-morrow before breakfast—"

"You will do nothing of the sort; you will have your breakfast in bed, and when you come downstairs you will devote your time and attention entirely to me. I forbid you to open a book—unless it be absolutely light reading—add up a figure, or use your brain in any way for the next twelve months. Afterwards—if there isn't a cradle to rock—you shall have a career, Paul, a beautiful, flaming, rambling career! If I have a cigar," he added, rising and going to the chimney-piece, "will you want a cigarette?"
"No," Paul said, laughing, with his hand over his eyes; "I am going to abstain for three months."
"Good!" he said, drawing his hand

caressingly over the thin, dark face; "but I'll allow you one, my friend, if you have an inordinate desire that way."
"But you would rather I did not? You don't wish me to smoke, Felix?" he asked, kissing the brown hand.
Felix lighted the cigar, dragged a basket chair to the couch, and, dropping into it, slipped Paul's cigarette case into his hand.
"Of course, I would rather you did not smoke again to-day, because you've been overdoing it, my friend, and—but I don't prohibit it, I don't wish to deprive you of any solace, any nerve-soother while you are ill; but I feel satisfied that whatever my dear wife does it will be decorous, consistent, and in conformity with good taste, with the customs and usages of society."
Paul dropped the case into his waistcoat pocket, and heaved a sigh of perfect happiness and peace.
"I will begin the weaning process at once, and if there is any fretfulness and craving attached to the denial I shall have surmounted a greater part of the evil before you take me in hand."
"I want you to go out with me to-morrow morning," Felix said, after a pause. "Don't hurry up; I shall not be here till eleven. But I want you to go with me to Piccadilly Circus, Regent Street, somewhere, and help me to choose a costume for Mrs. Fleming. You have some idea of her taste and what she would like. I had thought of a heliotrope frieze, a small seal coat—I don't know which would suit you the better, a toque or—I think a large picture hat, don't you, Paulus?"
"I will wear whatever you think becoming," he said laughing, "but you won't like me so well in petticoats, Felix."

"I think I shall like you ten thousand times better, because the change of apparel will ensure my happiness. I couldn't get a parson to marry me to a long, clean-shaven chap like you. By the way, love, there's a summons for you to attend the inquest the day after to-morrow. I couldn't manage to get you off that. You may appear as you are, Paul, and we will get a ready-made costume for you to return in. Agnes and you must stay at the Friar's heel—you can't come back here—until I can make arrangements for our marriage. I say 'must,' he said, bending over her. "You see, I take it for granted that you are going to do all this, give up your cherished schemes and aims for my sake, for love of me. I think you love me; nay, I am sure. I am not a coxcomb. That afternoon in my bedroom was an eye-opener, my friend. You lost control of yourself, Paulus, and I had a peep beneath the surface of that cold indifference, that quiet boredom; I—well, never mind, I wondered what I was going to do with a fellow who loved me to that unnatural extent. What on earth induced it? Fancy an individual of your mental diameter and circumference choosing to live a lifetime with a man like me. I hope you won't regret it, sweetheart."
"You are more likely to regret it than I, Felix. I am going to confess to Judith; I must make what reparation I can. Things must be made right with Anthony, and ultimately, Felix, it may leak out. The world, your world, may get to know of this little history, and, Felix, I would endure the most grievous misery, I would suffer anything rather than bring discredit upon—"
Felix laid his hand tenderly over the quivering lips.

"I know you would," he said humbly. "We have been excellent comrades; we have lived shoulder to shoulder, and I am bound to have learned something of your forceful character. I know, if you thought your dear love harmful, how you would leave me to face the blank outlook, how, with those eyes like a stricken stag's, you would plod on through the unrewarded struggle. I know you better than you know yourself, Paul. I have seen you with the mask on and with the mask off; I have seen you in happy circumstances and in trying ones. I know what charms me in reality; it does not spring from the imagination. A sense of duty where I am concerned, a mistaken sense, and you would welcome a life of purgatory. I believe you would forego your chance of happiness in the next world to promote my welfare in this. Do you you think, after petitioning heaven year in and year out to deal with me kindly, to send me a heart that could commune with my own, after imploring heaven to see that this dear wife—if she came—loved me well, I should be such an arrant fool as not to perceive that heaven had answered me, sent me over and above what I had asked?"
He rose, pushed back the creaking chair, and threw the end of his cigar into the fire.
"If you are satisfied that my heart, my life, is bound up in yours," he said more lightly, holding out his hand; "if I have given you some faint idea of my feelings about you, we will go and have some dinner, friend Paulus."
Paul grasped the hand, and was wistfully raised by it, but hesitated a moment before looking up into the

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"I was thinking this morning about Guy," he said anxiously. "Felix, what is to become of Guy?"
"Hare will take him. He told me he felt that the boy belonged to him, and he would endeavor to make something of him. And he will do it,—he is just the man to have charge of an intellect like that. We won't lose sight of him, love; we will have him at the Manor before long, when we come back home—poor little chap!"
The two men strolled into the hall where Johnson was apparently idling. Felix looked excited, his eyes shone, his handsome face was flushed with the happiness he could not conceal; whereas Paul was grave, and quiet.
"We have both been in the wars, Johnson," the squire remarked; "I can't assist Mr. Farley with his coat, nor he with mine. I have a shoulder in pickle and he a hand; we're a precious maimed pair."
"Have you seen Mr. Farley's wound, sir?"
"No; best not to disturb it unnecessarily. Mr. Farley is dining with me to-night, and after dinner we shall hunt up the most skillful surgeon in town, and have it properly dressed."
"Mr. Farley looks better already," Johnson said, standing behind the squire struggling with his coat.
"I have seen an old friend, Johnson," Paul returned pleasantly, "and that has chipped me up."
He was contemplating Felix's beaming face as he spoke, and, catching the quizzing expression in the sparkling grey eyes, instantly lowered his heavy white lids over a very demure smile.
"It's snowing, sir; will you have an umbrella?"
"No thanks; it's only a step to my place, just across the street."
Felix looked critically at Paul, went behind him and turned up his collar; then slipping an arm through his, they went out into the white starlit night.

Epilogue
A small crowd had assembled on Weyberne platform to await the incoming train which had been signalled some three minutes previously.
Strange rumors had been afloat in the village, following closely upon the squire's quiet wedding in town, nor had these dark sayings in any wise dwindled during his protracted honeymoon. On the contrary, as the spring crept on they grew to the most alarming proportions, their herculean growth being suddenly arrested by an urgent cablegram from Jack Hunter to a certain hotel in San Francisco, setting forth the wisdom and necessity of Mr. and Mrs. Fleming's immediate return.
Felix laughed, he was so happy, he did not trouble whether folks said he had married "the young man up at the Hall," or the sphinx, or a baboon from the Zoo. Nevertheless, in twelve hours' time, dating from the receipt of the cable, they had left San Francisco and were en route for the old Manor House at Weyberne.
They were due in two minutes, so Pointer said, who was looking proudly round upon the ever-increasing throng. It was a red-letter day in the annals of his officialdom, because never before in his knowledge had a couple of hundred people collected at one time in the vicinity of Weyberne Station. Moreover, he had been standing for the past five minutes between Sir Thomas and Lady Hargrave—an honor in itself—and had heard from the lips of that good dame how Mrs. Fleming, whose maiden name was Jervois, had been at school in Belgium with Miss Agnes for more than a year and a half. This was news indeed, and more in keeping with common sense and common possibilities than the silly stuff disseminated from the Radies' bar, which they made no attempt to check, but rather encouraged, as it brought grist to the Popinjay's mill.
A knot of chosen friends stood apart from the motley gathering of eager well-wishers. Agnes and Jack Hunter kept well to the front, as also did the Hargrave boys, whose main idea was to be conspicuously in evidence. But Judith hid behind Agnes, shrinking from Anthony's possessive touch lest it should be seen he had his hand upon her shoulder, and a report of their engagement circulated before it was quite an hour old.
She had come to the station with the rest of the family; it would have been impolite, besides excessively absurd, to stay away. Yet it was something in the nature of an ordeal this public reception of the whilom "Paul Farley," who was so soon to take up her duties as mistress of the Manor. The nervous dread of the meeting had painted a bright red spot, no bigger than a shilling, beneath the hollows of her violet eyes, the trepidation so long drawn out was moistening her forehead, leaving her hands and feet stone cold.
"Here they are!" someone shouted.
She saw Pointer approach a first-class carriage from where a lady was leaning, her dark interesting face and glorious eyes, made darker by contrast with the squire's fairness. Mrs. Fleming was eagerly scanning the upturned faces, a wistful smile greeting the bitter-sweet memories the sight of Weyberne brought to her mind. Her roving eyes soon singled out the object of their search. She turned to the squire and whispered quickly. He nodded with a happy sympathetic smile, and stretched out his arm to assist Pointer, who was making a havoc of opening the door. The foremost group pressed forward, but Pauline Fleming, with one object in view, eluded what she realized would be a substantial as well as a very joyous welcome.
She walked straight to where Judith Hargrave was endeavoring to escape observation, took her in her arms, and kissed her tenderly for the first time since they met. A little buzz of satisfaction at their punctual arrival was factored at their awkward pause, in which Lady Hargrave, appreciating the motive prompting the happy wife, surreptitiously brushed aside a trickling tear.
From this dreaded meeting rose the structure of a friendship, lasting for grey hairs and comely enough for either world. No words of explanation were needed to lay its foundation stone. It seemed rather to rise from the fragrance of two souls who had

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