

The Broad Highway Jeffery Farnol

"Which We Call Life"

(Continued from yesterday.)

Here I very mercifully awoke, and lay, for a while, blinking in the ghostly radiance of the moon, which was flooding in at the window directly upon me. Now whether it was owing to the vividness of my dream, I do not know, but as I lay, there leapt up within me a sudden conviction that somebody was indeed standing outside in the lane, staring up at my window. So firmly was I convinced of this that, moved by a sudden impulse, I rose, and cautiously approaching the window, peered out. And there, sure enough, his feet planted wide apart, his hands behind his back, stood a man staring up at my window. His head was thrown back so that I could see his face distinctly—a fleshy face with small, close-set eyes and thick lips, behind which I caught the gleam of big, white teeth. This was no tinker, but as I looked, I recognized him as the slender of the two "Corin"ians with whom I had fallen out at "The Chequers." He stood, a man star to bed, grovellingly wondering what should bring the fellow hanging about a dilapidated hedge-tavern at such an hour. But gradually his eyes closed, and in another moment I should have been asleep, when I suddenly came to my elbow, broad awake and listening, for I had heard two sounds the other side of a window opened cautiously near by, and a stealthy footstep outside my door.

CHAPTER XIX

In Which I Become a Squire of Dames

Who does not recognize the solemn majesty of Night—that season of awesome stillness when tired mankind lies supine in that strange inertia so like death; when the soul, quitting the wearied body for a space, flies hence—what whither?

What wonder is it, if, at such an hour as this, we are prone to magnify trifles, or that the most insignificant thing becomes an omen full of ghastly meaning and possibilities? The low, repressed sound of a woman's sobbing.

Once more I rose, and looking down into the lane, found it deserted; the watcher had vanished. I also noted that the casement next to mine had been opened wide, and it was from here, as it seemed, that the weeping proceeded.

After some little hesitation, I knocked softly upon the wall, at which the weeping was checked abruptly, save for an occasional sob, whereupon I presently appeared again. At this, after a moment or two, a very small, white hand appeared at the neighboring window, and next moment was looking into a lovely, flushed face framed in bright hair, with eyes wide open, and a gasp of surprise.

Before I could speak, she laid her finger upon her lip with a warning gesture.

"Help me—oh, help me!" she whispered hurriedly; "they have locked me in here, and I dare not go to bed, and—oh, what shall I do?"

"Locked you in?" I exclaimed.

"Oh, what shall I do?" she sobbed.

"I tell you I am afraid of him—his hateful, wicked eyes!" Here a tremor seemed to shake her, and she covered her face with her hands. "Tonight, when I found the key gone from the door, and remembered his look as he bade me 'Good night,' I thought I should have died. I waited here close beside the window—listening, listening. Once I thought I heard a step outside my door, and opened the casement to throw myself into the lane, but I found her here when he comes."

"No, said I, 'he shall not find you here when he comes.'"

All this she had imparted to me in broken whispers, and with her face still hidden, but, at my words, she peeped at me through her fingers.

"You mean?"

"You must run away."

"But the door is locked."

"There remains the window."

"The window!" she repeated, trembling.

"You would find it easy enough with my help."

"Wait," said I, and turned back to my room. Hereupon, having locked the door, I got into my boots, slipped on my coat and trousers, and, last of all, threw my blackthorn staff out of the window (where I was sure of finding it) and climbed out after it.

The porch I have mentioned, upon which I now stood, sloped steeply down upon two sides, so that I had no little difficulty in maintaining my foothold; on the other hand, it was no great distance from the ground, and I thought that it would be easy enough of descent.

At this moment the lady reappeared at the lattice.

"What is it?" I whispered, struck by the terror in her face.

"Quick!" she cried, forgetting all prudence in her fear, "quick—they are coming—I hear some one upon the stairs. Oh, you are too late!" and, striking upon her knees, she covered her face with her hands. Without more ado I swung myself up, and clambered over the sill into the room beside her. I was looking round for something that might serve me for a weapon, when my eye encountered a tall oak press, a heavy, cumbersome affair, but, save the bed, the only furniture the room possessed. Setting my shoulder to it, I therefore, I began to urge it towards the door. But it was soon apparent that I could not get it there in time, for the creaking footstep was already close outside, and

next moment, a key was softly inserted in the lock.

"Quick! hide yourself!" I whispered, over my shoulder, and, stepping back from the door to give myself room, I clutched my fists. There was a faint creak as the key turned, the door was opened cautiously, and a man's dim figure loomed upon the threshold.

He had advanced two or three paces on tiptoe before he discovered my presence, for the room was in shadow, and I heard his breath catch, suddenly, and hiss between his teeth; then, without a word, he sprang at me. But as he came, I leapt aside, and my fist took him full and squarely beneath the ear. He pitched side ways, and falling heavily, rolled over upon his back, and lay still.

As I leaned above him, however (for the blow had been a heavy one), he uttered a groaning cry, and, upon pinning him forthwith by the collar, I dragged him out into the passage, and, whipping the key from the lock, transferred it to the handle, and locked the door. Waiting for no more, I scrambled back through the casement, and reached up my hand to the latch.

"Come," said I, (and almost as quickly as it takes to set it down here) she was beside me upon the roof of the porch, clinging to my arm. Exactly how it was managed I am unable to say, but, though I could feel her being the vision of a slender foot and ankle, and an excellently shaped leg, my farther descent to the ground proved much more difficult than I had supposed, but, though I could feel her trembling, my companion obeyed my whispered instructions, and yielded herself implicitly to my guidance, so that we were soon standing side by side before the house, safe and sound except for a few rents to our garments.

"What is it?" she whispered, seeing me searching about in the grass.

"My staff," said I, "a faithful friend, I would not lose it."

"But they will be here in a minute—we shall be seen."

"I cannot lose my staff," said I.

"Oh, hurry! hurry!" she cried, wringing her hands. And in a little while, having found my staff, we turned our backs upon the tavern and began to run up the lane, side by side. As we went, came the slam of a door behind us—a sudden clamor of voices, followed, a moment later, by the sharp report of a pistol, and in that same fraction of time, I stumbled over some unseen obstacle, and my hat was whisked from my head.

"Are you hurt?" panted my companion.

"No," said I, "but it was a very excellent shot nevertheless!" For, as I picked up my hat, I saw a small round hole that pierced it through and through, midway between crown and brim.

The lane wound away between high hedges, which rendered our progress very dark, for the moon was going very low, and the light of the deep wheel-ruts; but we hurried forward notwithstanding, urged on by the noise of the chase. We had traversed some half mile thus, when my companion warned me that our pursuers were gaining upon us, and I was inwardly congratulating myself that I had stopped to find my staff, and wondering how much exertion such a weapon might reasonably be capable of, when I found that my companion was no longer at my side. As I paused, irresolute, her voice reached me from the shadows of the hedge.

"This way," she panted.

"Where?" said I.

"Here!" and, as she spoke, her hand slipped into mine, and so she led me into a broad, open meadow beyond. But to attempt crossing this would be little short of madness, for (as I pointed out) we could not go a yard without being seen.

"No, no," she returned, her breath still laboring, "wait—wait till they are past." And so, hand in hand, we stood there in the shadow, screened very effectively from the lane by the thick hedge, while the rush of our pursuers' feet drew nearer and nearer, until we could hear a voice that came out from the darkness, and saw ourselves, and everything concerned; and sound of which my companion seemed to fall into a shivering fit, her clasped hands upon her head, and she drew closer to me. Thus we remained until voices and footsteps had grown faint with distance, but, even then, I could feel that she was trembling still. Suddenly she drew her fingers from mine and covered her face with her hands.

"Oh, that man!" she exclaimed, in a whisper, "I didn't quite realize till now that I have escaped. Oh, that beast!"

"Sir Harry Mortimer?" said I.

"You know him!" she cried.

"Heaven forbid!" I answered, "but I have seen him once before at 'The Chequers' Inn at Tombridge, and I never forget names or faces—especially such as his."

"How I hate him!" she whispered.

"An unpleasant animal, to be sure," said I. "But come, it were wiser to get as far from here as possible, they will doubtless be returning soon."

So we started off again, running in the shadow of the hedge. We had thus doubled back upon our pursuers, and, leaving the tavern upon our left, soon gained the kindly shadow of those woods through which I had passed in the early evening.

Borne to us upon the gentle wind was the haunting perfume of hidden flowers, and the silken moon sent long shafts of silver light to pierce the leafy gloom, and make the shadows more mysterious.

The path we followed was very narrow, so that sometimes my companion's knee touched mine, or her long, silken hair brushed my brow or cheek, and I stooped to kiss some trailing branch that barred her way, or open a path for her through the leaves.

So we journeyed on through the mysteries of the woods together.

(Continued tomorrow.)

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