THE BROAD HIGHWAY

A Tale of 19th Century England, Full of the Thrills of Adventure and Spirit of Romance

By JEFFERY FARNOL

Peter Vibart, an English scholar, dependent upon his uncle, Sir George Vibart, is bequeathed only 10 guineas ($75) by the old man. Maurice ("Buck") Vibart, a notorious prize fighter and rake, a cousin of Peter, is left 20,000 pounds ($100,000). The will also provides $500,000 for the one who marries the Lady Sophia Sefton within a year. Peter, against the protestations of his old friend with whom he lived, Sir Richard Anstruther, decides to go down "The Broad Highway" of Kent and live. He plans to work after the money is gone.

Book I tells of his exciting adventures until he reaches Sissinghurst village, where he becomes a blacksmith in the employ of "Black" George. Peter goes to live in a "haunted" house in a hollow. The principal feature in the first book is that Peter is three times mistaken for his cousin Maurice. The only difference between the two is that Peter is clean shaven and Maurice has a beard.

Peter, at the beginning of Book II, is suddenly awakened by a man's voice calling "Charm'an!" Rushing from his bedroom, he finds a strange woman about to shoot at a man entering his home. It is his cousin Maurice, whom he beats into insensibility after a fierce struggle. A postilion helps Peter remove the prostrate form.

"Black" George, whose jealousy of Peter has been growing steadily, suddenly leaves the shop. Prudence, who loves George, comes to Peter for advice, and the two decide to induce him to return. George, however, is convinced that Prudence and Peter are in love.

A few nights later Peter meets a broom vender, who tells him that "Black" George has vowed to fight "the cove" who has stolen his sweetheart's love until one or the other is dead.

One morning, while Peter is at work, the postilion who helped him remove Maurice's body looks in. The postilion tries, vainly, to bribe Peter into telling him where Charmian is.

That night Peter meets "Black" George, and, after a terrific fight, lasting until both men are nearly exhausted, the latter manages to land a tremendous blow on Peter's head. Peter falls as if dead. When he regains consciousness he is in Charmian's arms.

BOOK II.

CAPTER XIX (Continued)

"DON'T!" I said, and my voice was a whisper; "don't, Charmian!"

For a moment her clasp tightened about me, she was all tenderness and clinging warmth; then I heard a sudden gasp, her arms loosened and fell away, and so I presently raised my head, and, supporting myself upon my hand, looked at her. And then I saw that her cheeks were burning.

"Peter."

"Yes, Charmian?"

"Did you—" She paused, plucking nervously at the grass, and looking away from me.

"Well, Charmian?"

"Did you—hear—" Again she broke off, and still her head was averted.

"I heard your voice calling to me from a great way off, and so—I came, Charmian."

"Were you conscious when—when I—found you?"

"No," I answered; "I was lying in a very deep black pit." Here she looked at me again.

"I—I thought you—were—dead, Peter."

"My soul was out of my body—until you recalled it."

"You were lying upon your back by the hedge here, and—oh, Peter! your face was white and shining in the moonlight—and there was—blood upon it, and you looked like one that is—dead!" and she shivered.

"And you have brought me back to life," said I, rising; but, being upon my feet, I staggered giddily, to hide which I laughed and leaned against a tree. "Indeed," said I, "I am very much alive still and monstrously hungry—you spoke of a rabbit, I think——"

"A rabbit!" said Charmian in a whisper, and as I met her eye I would have given much to have recalled that thoughtless speech.

"I—I think you did mention a rabbit," said I, floundering deeper.

"So, then—you deceived me, you lay there and deceived me—with your eyes shut and your ears open, taking advantage of my pity——"

"No, no—indeed, no—I thought myself still dreaming; it—it all seemed so unreal, so—so beyond all belief and possibility and——" I stopped, aghast at my crass folly, for, with a cry, she sprang to her feet and hid her face in her hands, while I stood dumfounded, like the fool I was. When she looked up her eyes seemed to scorch me.

"And I thought Mr. Vibart a man of honor—like a knight of his old-time romances, high and chivalrous—oh! I thought him a—gentleman!"

"Instead of which," said I, speaking (as it were), despite myself, "instead of which you find me only a blacksmith—a low, despicable fellow eager to take advantage of your unprotected womanhood." She did not speak, standing tall and straight, her head thrown back; wherefore, reading her scorn of me in her eyes, seeing the proud contempt of her mouth, a very demon seemed suddenly to possess me, for certainly the laugh that rang from my lips proceeded from no volition of mine.

"And yet, madam," my voice went on, "this despicable blacksmith fellow refused 100 guineas for you today."

"Peter!" she cried, and shrank away from me as if I had threatened to strike her.

"Ah!—you start at that—your proud lip trembles—do not fear, madam—the sum did not tempt him—though a large one."

"Peter!" she cried again, and now there was a note of appeal in her voice.

"Indeed, madam, even so degraded a fellow as this blacksmith could not very well sell that which he does not possess—could he? And so the hundred guineas go a-begging and you are still unsold!" Long before I had done she had covered her face again, and, coming near, I saw the tears running out between her fingers and sparkling as they fell. And once again the devil within me laughed loud and harsh. But while it still echoed I had flung myself down at her feet.

"Charmian," I cried, "forgive me—you will, you must!" and, kneeling before her, I strove to catch her gown and kiss its hem, but she drew it close about her and, turning, fled from me through the shadows.

Heedless of all else but that she was leaving me, I stumbled to my feet and followed. The trees seemed to beset me as I ran and bushes to reach out arms to stay me, but I burst from them, running wildly, blunderingly, for she was going—Charmian was leaving me. And so, spent and panting, I reached the cottage and met Charmian at the door. She was clad in the long cloak she had worn when she came, and the hood was drawn close about her face.

I stood panting in the doorway, barring her exit.

"Let me pass, Peter."

"By God—no!" I cried, and, entering, closed the door, and leaned my back against it.

And, after we had stood thus awhile, each looking upon the other, I reached out my hands to her, and my hands were red and bloody.

"Don't go, Charmian," I mumbled, "don't go! Oh, Charmian—I'm hurt—I don't want you to know, but you mustn't leave me—I am not—well; it is my head, I think. I met Black George, and he was too strong for me. I'm deaf, Charmian, and half blinded—oh, don't leave me—I'm afraid, Charmian!" Her figure grew more blurred and indistinct, and I sank down upon my knees; but in the dimness I reached out and found her hands, and clasped them, and bowed my head upon them, and remained thus a great while, it seemed to me.

And presently, through the mist, her voice reached me.

"Oh, Peter! I will not leave you—lean on me—there—there!" And, little by little, those strong, gentle hands drew me once more to fight and life. And she led me to a chair, and brought water, and washed the blood and dust from me, as she had once before.

only now my hurts were deeper, for my head grew beyond my strength to support, and hung upon my breast, and my brain throbbed with fire, and the mist was ever before my eyes.

"Are you in much pain, Peter?"

"My head—only my head, Charmian—there is a bell ringing there, no—it is a hammer, beating." And indeed I remembered little for a while, save the touch of her hands and the soothing murmur of her voice, until I found she was kneeling beside me, feeding me with broth from a spoon. Wherefore I presently took the basin from her and emptied it at a gulp, and, finding myself greatly revived thereby, made some shift to eat of the supper she set before me.

So she presently came and sat beside me and ate also, watching me at each morsel.

"Your poor hands!" said she, and, looking down at them, I saw that my knuckles were torn and broken, and the fingers much swelled. "And yet," said Charmian, "except for the cut in your head, you are quite unmarked, Peter."

"He fought mostly for the body," I answered, "and I managed to keep my face out of the way; but he caught me twice—once upon the chin, lightly, and once up behind the ear, heavily; had his fist landed fairly I don't think even you could have brought me back from those loathly depths, Charmian."

And in a while, supper being done, she brought my pipe, and filled it, and held the light for me. But my head throbbed woefully and for once the tobacco was flavorless; so I sighed, and laid the pipe by.

"Why, Peter!" said Charmian, regarding me with an anxious frown, "can't you smoke?"

"Not just now, Charmian," said I, and leaning my head in my hands, fell into a sort of coma, till, feeling her touch upon my shoulder, I started, and looked up.

"You must go to bed, Peter."

"No," said I.

"Yes, Peter."

"Very well, Charmian, yes—I will go to bed," and I rose.

"Do you feel better now, Peter?"

"Thank you, yes—much better."

"Then why do you hold on to the chair?"

"I am still a little giddy, but it will pass. And—Charmian—you forgive——"

"Yes—yes, don't—don't look at me like that Peter—and—oh, good night!—foolish boy!"

"I am—is, Charmian!" But as she turned away I saw that there were tears in her eyes.

Dressed as I was, I lay down upon my bed, and, burying my head in the pillow, groaned, for my pain was very sore; indeed I was to feel the effects of George's fist for many a day to come, and it seems to me now that much of the morbid imaginings, the nightly horrors and black despair that I endured in the time which immediately followed was chiefly owing to that terrible blow upon the head.

CHAPTER XX.

"PETER!—Peter!—oh, Peter, I want you!—oh, Peter!—wake! wake!" I sat up in bed, as I listened, grew suddenly sick, and a fit of trembling shook me violently, for the whisper was still in my ears, and in the whisper was an agony of fear and dread indescribable.

"Peter!—oh, Peter, I am afraid!—wake! wake!"

A cold sweat broke out upon me and I glared helplessly toward the door.

"Quick, Peter!—come to me—oh, God!"

I strove to move, but still I could not. And now, in the darkness, hands were shaking me wildly, and Charmian's voice was speaking in my ear.

"The door!" it whispered, "the door!"

Then I arose, and was in the outer room, with Charmian close beside me in the dark, and my eyes were upon the door. And then I beheld a strange thing, for a thin line of white light traversed the floor from end to end. Now, as I watched this narrow line, I saw that it was gradually widening and widening; very slowly, and with infinite caution, the door was being opened from without. In this remote place, in this still, dead hour of the night, full of the ghostly hush that ever proceeds the dawn—there was something devilish—something very like murder in its stealty motion. I heard Charmian's breath catch, and, in the dark, her hand came and crept into mine and her fingers were cold as death.

And now a great anger came upon me, and I took a quick step forward, but Charmian restrained me.

"No, Peter!" she breathed; "not yet—wait!" and wound her arms round mine.

In a corner near by stood that same trusty staff that had been the companion of my wanderings, and now I reached, and took it up, balancing it in my hand. And all the time I watched that line of light upon the floor widening and widening, growning ever broader and more broad. The minutes dragged slowly by, while the line grew into a streak, and the streak into a lane, and upon the lane came a blot that slowly resolved itself into the shadow of a hand upon the latch. Slowly, slowly, to the hand came a wrist, and to the wrist an arm—another minute, and this maddening suspense would be over. Despite Charmian's restraining clasp, I crept a long pace nearer the softly moving door.

The sharp angle of the elbow was growing obtuse as the shadowy arm straightened itself. Thirty seconds more! I began to count, and, gripping my staff, braced myself for what might be, when—with a sudden cry, Charmian sprang forward, and, hurling herself against the door, shut it with a crash.

"Quick, Peter!" she panted. I was beside her almost as she spoke, and had my hand upon the latch.

"I must see who this was," said I.

"You are mad!" she cried.

"Let me open the door, Charmian."

"No, no—I say no!"

"Whoever it was must not escape—open the door!"

"Never! never—I tell you—death is outside—there's murder in the very air; I feel it—and—dear God—the door has no bolt."

"They are gone now—whoever they were," said I reassuringly; "the danger is over—if danger it could be called."

"Danger!" cried Charmian. "I tell you—it was death."

"Yet, after all, it may have been only some homeless wanderer."

"Then why that deadly, silent caution?"

"True!" said I, becoming thoughtful.

"Bring the table, Peter, and set it across the door."

"Surely the table is too light to—"

"But it will give sufficient warning—not that I shall sleep again tonight. Oh, Peter, had I not been dreaming, and happened to wake—had I not chanced to look toward the door, it would have opened—wide, and then—oh, horrible!"

"You were dreaming?"

"A hateful, hateful dream, and awoke in terror, and, being afraid, glanced toward the door, and saw it opening—and now—bring the table, Peter."

Then I set the table across the door, having done which I stood looking toward where she yet stood.

"Charmian," said I.

"Yes, Peter."

"Tomorrow——"

"Yes, Peter."

"I will make a bar to hold the door."

"Yes, Peter."

"Two bars would be better, perhaps?"

"Yes, Peter."

"You would feel safe, then—safer than ever?"

"Safer than ever, Peter."

CHAPTER XXI.

I AM forging a bar for my cottage door; such a bar as might give check to an army, or resist a battering-ram; a bar that shall defy all the night-prowlers that ever prowled; a stout, solid bar, broad as my wrist and thick as my two fingers; that, looking upon it as it lies in its sockets across the door, Charmian henceforth may sleep and have no fear.

The Ancient sat perched on his stool in the corner, but for once we spoke little, for I was very busy; also my mind was plunged in a profound reverie.

And of whom should I be thinking but of Charmian?

"'Tis bewitched you be, Peter" said the old man suddenly, prodding me softly with his stick, "bewitched as ever was," and he chuckled.

"Bewitched!" said I, starting.

"Ah!—theer you stand wi' your 'ammer in your 'and—a-starin' an' a-starin' at nobody, nor nothin'—leastways not as 'uman eye can see, an' a-sighin', an' a-sighin'——"

"Did I indeed sigh, Ancient?"

"Ah—that ye did—like a cow, Peter, or a 'orse—'eavy an' tired like. An' slow you be, an' dreamy—you as was so bright an' spry; theer's some—fools, like Joel Amos, as might think as 't were the work o' ghostes, or demons, a-castin' their spells on ye, or that some vampire 'ad bit ye in the night, an' sucked your blood as ye lay asleep, but I know different—you'm just bewitched, Peter!" and he chuckled again.

"Who knows?—perhaps I am, but it will pass, whatever it is, it will pass——"

"Don't ye be too sure o' that—theer's bewitchments an' bewitchments, Peter."

Hereupon the smithy became full of the merry din of my hammer, and while I worked the Ancient smoked his pipe and watched me, informing me, between whiles, that the Jersey cow was "in calf," that the hops seemed more than usually forward, and that he had waked that morning with a "touch o' the rheumatics," but, otherwise, he was unusually silent; moreover, each time that I happened to glance up, it was to find him regarding me with a certain fixity of eye which at another time would have struck me as portentous.

"Ye be palish this marnin', Peter!" said he, dabbing at me suddenly with his pipe-stem; "shouldn't wonder if you was to tell me as your appetite was bad; come now—ye didn't eat much of a breakfus' this marnin' did ye?"

"I don't think I did, Ancient."

"A course not!" said the old man, with a nod of profound approval—"it aren't to be expected. Let's see, it be all o' four months since I found ye, bean't it?"

"Four months and a few odd days," I nodded, and fell to work upon my glowing iron bar.

"Ye'll make a tidy smith one o' these days, Peter," said the old man encouragingly, as I straightened my back and plunged the iron back into the fire.

"Thank you, Ancient."

"Ay, you've larned to use a 'ammer purty well, considerin', though you be wastin' your opportoonities shameful, Peter, shameful."

"Am I, Ancient?"

"Ay, that ye be—moon can't last much longer—she be on the wane a'ready!"

"Moon?" said I, staring.

"Ah, moon!" nodded the old man; "theer's nowt like a moon, Peter, an' if she be at the full so much the better."

"But what have the moon and I to do with each other(Ancient?"

"Old I be, Peter, a old, old man, but I were young once, an' I tell 'ee the moon 'as a lot more to do wi' it than some folks think!"

"Ancient," said I, "what might you be driving at?"

"Love, Peter!"

"Love!" said I, letting go the handle of the bellows.

"An' marriage, Peter."

"What in the world—put—such thoughts into your head?"

"You did, Peter."

"I?"

"Ah, some men is born lovers, Peter, an' you be one. I never see such eyes as yourn afore, so burnin' 'ot they be. Ah, Peter! some maid will see the lovelight aflame in 'em some day, an' droop 'er 'ead an' blush an' tremble—for she'll know, Peter, she'll know; maids was made to be loved, Peter——"

"But, Ancient, I am not the kind of a man women would be attracted by. I love books and solitude, and am called a—pedant! and, besides, I am not of a loving sort——"

"Some men, Peter, falls in love as easy as they falls out; it comes to some soft an' quiet—like the dawn of a summer's day, Peter; but to others it comes like a gert an' tur'ble storm—oh, that it do! Theer's a fire ready to burn up inside o' ye at the touch o' some woman's 'and, or the peep o' 'er eye—ah! a fire as'll burn, an' burn, an' never go out again—not even if you should live to be as old as I be—an' you'll be strong an' wild an' fierce wi' it—an' some day you'll find 'er, Peter, an' she'll find you——"

"And," said I, staring away into the distance, "do you think that, by any possible chance, she might love me, this woman?"

"Ay, for sure," said the Ancient, "for sure she will; why don't 'ee up an ax er? Wi' a fine, round moon over 'ead, an' a pretty maid at your elber, it's easy enough to tell 'er you love 'er, aren't it?"

"Indeed, yes," said I, beginning to rub my chin, "very easy!" and I sighed.

"An' when you looks into a pair o' sweet eyes, an' sees the shine o' the moon in 'em—why, it aren't so very fur to 'er lips, are it, Peter?"

"No," said I, rubbing my chin harder than ever; "no—and there's the danger of it."

"Wheer's t' danger, Peter?"

"Everywhere!" I answered; "in her eyes, in her thick, soft hair, the warmth of her breath, the touch of her hand, the least contact of her garments—her very step!"

"I knowed it!" cried the Ancient joyfully, peering at me under his brows; "I knowed it!"

"Knew what?"

"You be in love—good lad! good lad!" and he flourished his pipe in the air.

"In love!" I exclaimed; "in love—I?"

"Sure as sure!"

"But love, according to Aristotle, is—"

"Love, Peter, is what makes a man forget 'is breakfus', an' 'is work, an' 'is——"

"But I work very hard—besides——"

"Love is what makes a man so brave as a lion, Peter, an' fall a-tremblin' like a coward when She stands a-lookin' up at 'im; love makes the green earth greener an' the long road short—ah! almost too short, sometimes; the love of a woman comes betwixt a man an' all evils an' dangers—why don't 'ee up an' ax 'er, Peter?"

"She'd laugh at me, Ancient."

"Not she."

"That soft, low laugh of hers."

"Well, what o' that?"

"Besides, she hardly knows me!"

The Ancient took out his snuff-box and gave two loud double knocks upon the lid.

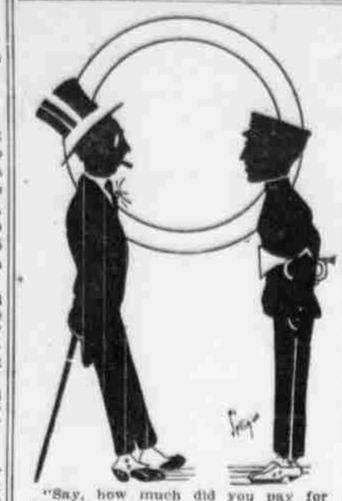
"A woman knows a man sooner than a man knows a woman—ah, a sight sooner! Why, Lord bless ye, Peter, she 'as 'im all reckoned up long afore 'e knows for sure if 'er eyes be black 'uns or brown 'uns—that she 'as." Here he extracted a pinch of snuff. "As for Prudence—she loves 'ee wi' all 'er 'eart an' soul!"

"Prudence!" said I, staring.

"Ah! Prudence—I be 'er grandfeyther, an' I know."

(CONTINUED TOMORROW.)

SCRAPPLE



"Say, how much did you pay for that cornet?"

"Two hundred bucks."

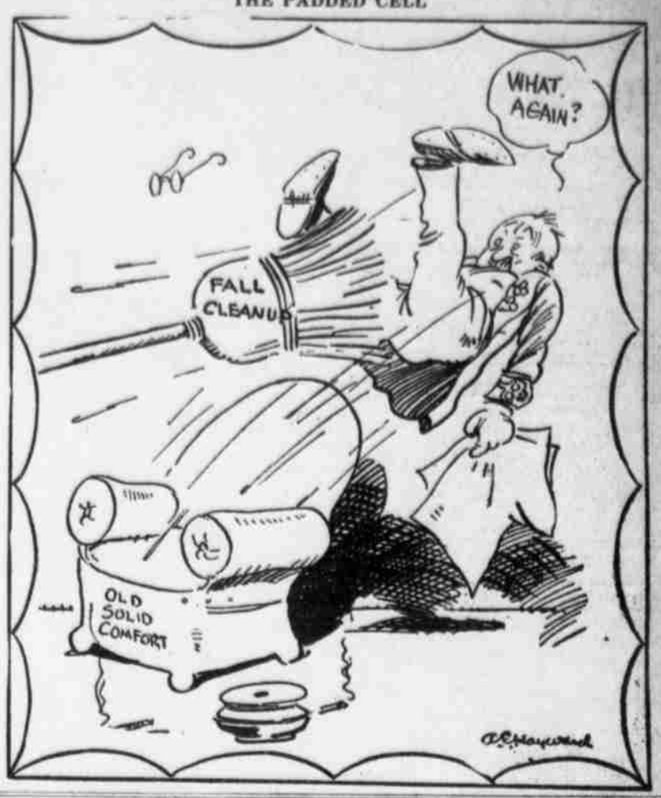
"Some money to blow in."

Smart Bobby

Mother—Bobby, look down to the corner and tell me if you can see papa coming.

Bobby—I can see down to the corner, but I can't see any father.

THE PADDED CELL



Big Boy—My father is a policeman. What does yours do?

Small Boy—Whatever mother tells him.

Waiter—We have a new French dish today, sir. Would you like to try it?

Diner—Matters not to me. Any old dish will do just so it will hold a good, old-fashioned order of corned beef and cabbage.

Sound Advice

"Doctor, I can't sleep at night."

"Try sleeping in the daytime. Five dollars, please."

Didn't Say That

Count—I can't live without you, Miss Monne!

Miss Monne—Don't you mean, Count that you cannot live as you'd like to without me?

THE STANDARD DRESS COMES HOME

"WELL, I'M——" "LET'S GET RID OF THE SLEEVES" "AND HALF THE BODICE."

"CUT AWAY, MY GOOD GIRL." "NOW WE'LL USE UP THE BITS YOU'VE CUT OFF." "NOT SO BAD, AFTER ALL!"

—Punch.

It has been suggested in England in connection with the thrift campaign that all ladies should adopt one form of evening dress, as men do, and one only.

—AND THE WORST IS YET TO COME

Two of a Kind

Father—What do you think of a boy who throws orange skins on the pavement?

Son—I don't know. What do you think of an orange skin that throws a man on the pavement?

Two Periods

He—There are two periods in a man's life when he never understands a woman.

She—Indeed! And when are they?

He—before and after marriage.

A Wise Suggestion

He—I am a poor man.

She—When we are married, I can learn to cook.

He—Hadn't you better learn now and practice while your father is yet supplying the raw material, and in good health, so to speak?

Not the Only Way

"And must I leave you thus, dear heart?"

"No; you must not. The bars may would be safe. Paris is waiting for you in the front hall."