

THE NOVEL OF FRED WELDY

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CHAPTER VIII

"HERE'S a good deal to poetry," continued Mr. Jarbo, dining with Mannie Murasky at Sedalini's, "beside getting the words to match at the ends of your lines. Technique's a big thing, but then you've got to look out for the poetic principle. Many a good lad's had to quit the business and go unhonored down the corridors of time because he was a shine when it came to handling the poetic principle."

Mr. Murasky, uncertain but disputatious, continued to polish a loaf of Italian bread across his sleeve, sparing mentally for what he termed a "comeback."

The poet moved far from Mannie's sphere. He was a fellow always dumb-struck by a pretty face or good things to eat, and an alliterative line or a felicitous measure, suggesting to his vague conceits the great thing he should some time do, would play the devil with a whole day's work for him.

"Never neglect the poetic principle," the versifier continued to admonish, "and if a man ever wants to land the big stuff he's got to look out for technique. Poe was strong on technique—if he'd have cut the booze—"

"Poe, nothing," put in Mannie loftily. "It had ever hit th' street alongside of Ham Arnold he'd been nothin' but a trail of smoke in th' distance. How's Ham feelin' this mornin'?"

John Hamilton Arnold was, indeed, Mannie's secret exemplar. He would like to have idled about the town in that fashion, being seen fashionably dressed along Market street in debonair raffish with the politicians, the sporting writers and race-track men.

He now looked on the downfall of his pet with mixed feelings, proud to have it said that he and J. Ham were on a "toot" together, but what indeed had happened?

No one knew—none questioned the prodigal, though about his bedside revolved a world of solitude. A hero returned battered from the wars could not have evoked such a going on of mustard and hot water, towels and ice, tea and toast as Miss Granberry got under way from the moment Arnold was found unconscious on the balcony. Mary Melody, home from the shop, bathed his brow; Sammy ran to the drug store; Angelo played the fiddle; Theresa watched him from the window with Hippid Italian eyes, while the Cookhouse Kid sat on the bed—the fallen champion was hedged about with interest. When Captain Calhoun put his head in the door he was led to with easy subterfuge; Mr. Arnold merely had a headache, and indeed he did! Even Bernice Murasky, the imperious shop lady, put by her shrewish disdain and came up with a softened judgment of this foolish business.

But none upbraided the sufferer. Down in the world of half lights, where chastity must smile and honor devise pretexts; where life wounds itself, beating a slow way with crippled wings, there is an amplitude of charity like unto that revealed for the stranger in the tent of Abraham; the indwellers can not moralize nor draw scientific deductions from the gring of the gods.

Therefore, Ham, though he got drunk, was most patiently restored, jestingly rehabilitated, and in no wise scolded.

But there was an astonished note among them all. What of the romance? Was Arnold married, and if so, what of the bride in blue? Among all the varying circles in which he revolved, impossible stories had run. Here, at Miss Granberry's, the thing focused—they had seen her; she was no street myth, but what had become of the country girl in blue? But none questioned the recreant, his mood did not invite; for 30 hours he was uncommonly sick.

The Blue Star laundry poet had his theory. To Nella Free and Mary and Bernice Murasky, in the dusk of the hall, he whispered a complete, evolved reconstruction of the downfall.

"No wedding bells for her," asserted Mr. Jarbo. "She shook him, and he took to drink. It's elemental, it's epic. In its simple grandeur—a fair, false face—a broken heart—and then quick to the booze." The poet was scratching through his pockets for a pencil and the back of a laundry tag whereon to write.

"She wouldn't!" cried Miss Melody indignantly. "That little thing with the big eyes—she wouldn't!"

"O woman, in our hours of ease," sighed Sammy, the pencil in his mouth. "My lands! Miss Granberry routed the gossips from the hall. Don't clutter up the place with no more poetry; the dress of your washtand is most full now, Mr. Jarbo."

But on the balcony outside, the poet mooned an hour over the deceit of women. "What a man wants to do is to get 'em out of his system," mused he, and then went down to Uncle Pop's back room to place his left on the table and read The Compendium of Universal Knowledge and World's Gazetteer. It was new and bound in shiny red morocco, with gilt letters, and one could carry it in one's vest pocket. It is not often one can procure universal knowledge for 40 cents. Mr. Jarbo saw that though the print was fine, yet the volume was laid utterance since his return from the quest of forgetfulness.

"There, there, dearie!" she sat by the bed, her hand on the cold compress across his brow. "Never mind—never mind."

There was a long silence, while they listened to the sparrows.

"I was drunk as a fool," he muttered; "did I lose my watch—dad's watch?"

"No, no; only the crystal's broken. There—be quiet."



"NOT THE MONEY," SHE DEMANDS, "IT'S AN OPERATIVE MATTER WITH ME."

She stole herself against the advertisement his eyes paid to her regal figure, her face, her sensuous womanhood. And yet he had defeated her; she could not find way against his irony.

"Well," she turned at the door. "I lost your money—I'll recover it or repay you every cent."

"Why bother? I imagine you're a scientist, or a theosophist, or something extremely superior. Anyhow, you just said nothing mattered, nothing is real. Well, my money was a mere human hallucination—why worry about it? What's a handful of paper to do with the eternal verities?"

She hesitated to control the anger on her tongue. The letter broke the hollow sphere of her serenity; he won on undaunted.

"I remember a deal of your talk. I wonder how you come to be doing that sort of thing. You're a creature far different from the cabman or where you're a piece of it."

"Lost?"

"I found a roll of money in the cab—it must have been considerable—and it seemed to me unsafe for you to have. I didn't know the cabman, or where you might possibly go later, and I thought I would keep it for you."

"Yes, but lost—"

"It's desperately hard to say. I am a stranger to you, but I put her hand to her hair nervously, and again leaned to him—"but I lost the money that night. When we reached the bottom of the hill it had slipped somewhere. I searched in the cab and up the street again, and everywhere. I couldn't find it—it couldn't have been dropped on the sidewalk."

"No, I put it in my dress—here— but—well, I've lost your money." She rose and faced him abruptly. "How much was it?"

"Arnold was lighting another cigarette on the table and looked at her with a smile. "Nothing—I'm not quite sure myself."

"You know," she retorted. "It was a large amount. How much?"

"It was not. I am a stranger here—I am preaching in the street, but that is no title to honesty. I've lost your money and I'm going to account for it. How much was it? Demand to know." Her voice rose sharply.

"Well, Arnold's response was velocity nonchalant, "forty-five dollars."

"You know better. I saw a hundred dollars bill on the sidewalk, and there were many more. I wish the truth."

"That hundred was merely phony—I mean counterfeit. I beg your pardon, but the language of the street comes a deal easier with this present head."

"He watched her still with a cigarette ash alrily. She did not guess, beneath his measuring ease, the splitting sickness on him. "I suppose, as you are a preacher, you worried a deal. It was a hard job," he murmured.

"You think I am an evangelist, which I am not in the least." Her voice had a suggestion of irritation at being put on the defensive before this unregenerate and his languid eye interest of the silken movement of her raiocout.

"It was something about our souls, I recall," said he, "and didn't I say something foolish? I was in the devil's own humor. I suppose that—don't distress yourself. I was unusually drunk, but I wanted to be drunk. I'm glad I was drunk. But it's a shame to embarrass you."

"This is not you who is speaking." She watched steadily his morbid eyes. "You belittle your soul."

"I have none. I am a liar and a thief." He smiled slowly at her flushing face, the brightening of her eye, the imperious daintiness about her.

"You're the earth man—you're feet in the clay," she went on, "but your soul is above all this. And you can't even deceive yourself. You got drunk to try it, for some reason, and you failed!"

He watched her still with a gentle satire of interest. She went on with a direct charge to his rebuffing. "You can find the serene and inner life. Beyond that, nothing matters—nothing is real."

"Beg pardon, but in my world everything matters and is real. You yourself are very real—behind this patter of yours I believe you're magnificently human."

would stop a ferry boat—a straight left 'n' ten a shirt; in 'n' out he 'n' fight—seesaw, duck 'n' stall; on foot-work 't'at mutt'd make Gans look like he was pulled to th' mat. He's a wonder, a wonder."

"Yes, like that other farmer you imported who fought three rounds, and then suddenly remembered his mother was opposed to boxing," said Ledyard, and the quartet hooted. Mr. Murasky, and his shadow toward, the boyish book keeper at the shoe store, brought the conversation again to the races, and again Mannie breathed the onset. He had a horse in pickle—yes, he did something like that, he did, and magnanimously told his friends in to the roof. "Th' talent 't'ink this horse is a jangler from Spokane," confided Mannie, shaking his thin shoulders until his yellow diamond let loose a heady radiance. "It's exclusive—Bomba, in th' aft—don't forget 'at name. Sell your sister's hatpins an' get on."

The shoe store man's eyes glittered nervously; Mannie had handed a low blow, and he was himself much about the track. Perhaps?

At his side, Arnold suddenly muttered unintelligibly. He had been in some queer moods the past month, his crest had been a strong, dark, in fact, he was still immaculate in dress, but he drank more than he had ever been known to before, and had been at the racetrack every afternoon while drawing his salary from the state treasury for his clerical work at the capitol.

Strange stories had gone about concerning Ham—things at which even the tenderloin winced a bit; they centered about some unquiet girl who spent her days in the street, and some had even heard Arnold's declaration that he was to marry her. And then she had disappeared, and J. Ham spent more money than ever before, plunged higher on the ponies, drifted deeper into the after midnight life, reckless, morbid, untiring, unappeased. But in the head of the street, the affairs were already almost forgotten by his familiars. It was some queer work, but then it was no one's business. The grand jury inquiry into the registration frauds had also dropped from view; the mere unseen machinations of the sinist' power that creeps for ever about the underpinning of the social structure had intervened and an acquiescent if doubting public was gulled from the issue. The banded evil of the city, John Hamilton Arnold, forced forward as a challenge; honest men dared not accept the wage of battle, and his nonchalant perjury was now of the past. He, himself, had been busy taking to himself the aids of oblivion.

"What odds are you getting, Ham? How's President posted?" repeated Eddie Ledyard curiously.

"I've got no call to play a cent. I don't know anything about the horse."

But young Ledyard's face grew crafty; there was "something doing"—sure there was!

"Get set you better," interposed Mannie Murasky, "give an' a half."

"President—President—" repeated Ledyard, "let's look up the form." He rose, and then turned to the table: "Come on, some night, Hammy! We've got a piano, and Stella's home from school. And mother's always asking why you never come."

Arnold waved an indifferent goodbye as Mannie went with the clerk.

"That lad's got no call to play a cent," he muttered. "I used to run with him in school, and now he's keeping his mother and sister on his salary."

"There's nobody compelled to play the races," Ferreri protested sullenly; man could not make any money out of money to us like Louis did just now. "We've gone pretty far, ain't we, old man?"

"Pretty far," said the other. "They grind you through the mill—Fred, I know."

"We thought we were socialists," laughed Weldy mirthlessly. "We were chubbucked with big schemes, weren't we? They got us into union politics and hammered away at the boys to our way of thinking, and crack over some of the dirt we saw all around. The Social Commonwealth, the Fraternity of Man—Lord, Lord!"

"Fred, there's nothing wrong with our theories—our beat of march—our human betterment and all that—but we're wrong—that's it. The run of men aren't intelligent enough, aren't honest enough, to conduct a highly organized union. Character, that's what's lacking."

"Well, they ain't all as bad as that." "Aren't they? Well, now, take the organization here, the thing that rules, the thing that's the present social state—the outwaird—well, that doesn't cut any figure—take it from Barron Chatom, who runs things here for a half dozen moneyed men in New York—take it from Chatom, down through every class of men, who concern themselves with public affairs, who do things, down through them all to the hypo dens we beat out of the lodging houses in election day—who's honest?"

The statesman shut his eyes against the smoke of his cigar for a minute; then he murmured in protest: "Thunder—thunder!"

"Uncle Pop, Captain Calhoun, Sammy Jarbo, poor devil driving a laundry wagon for ten a week and writing his verses to Mary Melody—but show me the men who are shoved against life aren't willing to get out of the groove? I don't say they do, but it needn't do it—they stand for it, which is the same thing when results aren't there. Socialism? Hell! As long as you haven't sand enough to run an industrial revolution, show me—I'm crooked—but I deal with crooks."

The legislator sullenly protested the legislator's sullenly.

"Show me a man in politics who isn't advanced by crookedness, who isn't willing to keep his mouth shut about the thousand deals away down beneath him that bobst him along—one man who fights against his own area against reason? Why, he'd be crazy, wouldn't he? He couldn't be elected to referee a dog fight!"

"You're putting it pretty strong, Ham, great, strong heart, and the people, the people are damned," said Arnold. "Let them be gouged—they stand for it. You're anti-social," answered Weldy solemnly. "You're a regular bandit—an outlaw. Ham, you're the most dangerous man in the community."

The other smiled and broke off suddenly. "How's Lillie and the babies?"

"Fine. We're building over in Berkeley, but it's a tight race to get the money. I'm going to get the mortgage renewed next week. And when I get through with this cursed legislature I'll stick close to the office and come home at night, and pay my station dues and attend the meetings. But the boys'll never get me into politics again, no dirty gambler can say he owns me!"

To Be Continued Next Sunday