

The
Journey's
End

Jeffery Farnol

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THE JOURNEY'S END

BY JEFFERY FARNOL

Author of "The Broad Highway," etc.

I

"You are a stranger in these parts, I think, sir?" said the landlord, glancing round his trim inn parlor with its neatly sanded floor, its raftered ceiling, its big, wide chimney, and the rows of glittering pewter that adorned its walls, and back to the wayworn and dusty traveler hungrily occupied with his food.

He was a very tall man, was this traveler, deep of chest, and broad of shoulder, and with a face burned and tanned. His expression, naturally stern, was rendered more so by a scar upon one cheek, and altogether there was an air about him of tireless action, and conflict with man and circumstance. Yet there was also a kindly light in his dark, long-lashed eyes, and his mouth was broad and humorous;

wherefore, as he set down his tankard, the landlord made bold to repeat his question:

"You're a stranger hereabouts, sir?"

"Yes and no," answered the traveler.

"Meaning, sir?"

"That I lived in this part of the country—many years ago."

"You've been a traveler,—eh, sir,—in furrin parts?"

"Yes, I have seen a good deal of the world."

"A sailor p'r'aps, sir,—or a soldier?" said the landlord, with his glance upon the traveler's scarred cheek.

"I have been both in my time,—and many things besides."

"Lord!" exclaimed the landlord, hitching his chair a little nearer, "think o' that now! Soldiers I've knowed, and sailors I've knowed, but I never knowed nobody as had been a sailor *and* a soldier."

"I've lived a harder life than most men," said the traveler.

"And as to—hactive service now?" pursued the landlord, more and more interested,— "wars, sir,—battle, murder, and sudden death,—you've seen plenty of haction,—eh, sir?"

"I have had my share of it," said the traveler, turning to help himself to more beef from the big joint before him.

"And as to—travels now—you know Hindia, p'r'aps?"

"Yes, I've been to India."

"Ah!—and Hafrica?"

"And Africa!" nodded the traveler.

"And China,—what about China?"

"Yes, I have been in China."

"Why then—p'r'aps you might happen to know—
America?"

"Yes."

"What,—you do?"

"Yes."

"Why, then, I had a brother once as went to America,—
Peter Adams he were called,—though his baptismal name
were John. P'r'aps you might 'ave seen him there, sir,—or
heard tell of him?"

"America is very large!" said the traveler, smiling, and
shaking his head.

"Aye, but so were my brother," nodded the landlord, "a
fine, strapping chap—almost as tall as you be, sir, and by
trade a blacksmith, and very like me except for him having

whiskers, and me none, and his hair being dark and mine light; still the family resemblance were very strong."

The traveler smiled, and shook his head as he pushed away his plate, and his smile was good to see.

"No," he answered, "I never ran across your brother in America that I know of; but now, seeing I have answered all your questions, let me ask you a few."

"Surely, sir,—sure—ly!"

"First then, do you know Sparkbrook Farm?"

"Ah, to be sure I do,—gets all my eggs and butter there."

"Who owns it?"

"Farmer Stebbins, sir."

This answer seemed unwelcome to the traveler, for his thick, black brows contracted, and he sighed.

"How long has Farmer Stebbins lived there?"

"Oh, this seven year and more."

"And what has become of—of the former owner?"

"Meaning old Prendergast,—him we called 'the Squire,' sir?"

"Yes."

"Died, sir;—his widder sold the place to Stebbins, and then she died too."

"Ah! And what became of the—the others?"

"Meaning the darters, sir? Well, they went to live over Tenterden way,—and got married."

"Both of them?"

"Why, 'ow might you come to know that there was two darters?"

"Both of them?"

"Well, I won't swear to so much as that, but Annabel did, —leastways, if it wasn't Annabel, it were Marjorie as did,—married a young farmer over Horsemonden way—"

"Then you're not sure—which one got married?" said the traveler, fixing the landlord with his piercing eyes.

"Not sure,—no, sir."

"And they're living, you say, at Horsemonden?"

"Ah!—leastways,—they was last time I heard on 'em."

"And how far is it to Horsemonden?"

"'Bout eight mile, sir."

"Thank you!" said the traveler, and rose.

"What,—be you a-going there, sir?"

"I am. How much do I owe you for my very excellent meal?"

And, after the traveler had settled his bill, he took up his hat and stick, and crossed over to the door. But upon the threshold he paused.

"You say you can't remember which it was?"

"Meaning—as got married?—no, sir, I can't. Ye see they was both fine, handsome young maids, and they both had many offers,—so it's like as not as they both got—"

"Good-by!" said the traveler, rather hastily, and turned on his heel.

"Stay a bit, sir," said the landlord, following him into the road. "If your 'eart be set on Horsemonden then your best way is across the fields,—it be two mile shorter, that way."

"How do I go?"

"You foller this highroad till you be come to the first stile on your right; you climb over that, and foller the path till you be come to a bridge over a brook; you cross that bridge and go on till you be come to another stile; you climb over that —"

"Thank you!" nodded the traveler, and turned away.

"—And foller the path again till you be come to a wood," continued the landlord, "you leave the wood on your left—"

"I see," said the traveler, beginning to quicken his steps.

"—No,—I mean your right," the landlord went on, his voice rising with the traveler's every stride, "you climbs over two more stiles, you crosses another brook, and Horsemonden lays straight afore you."

Hereupon the traveler nodded again, flourished his stick, and walked rapidly away.

"Well!" said the landlord, watching his long, easy stride, "well, if ever there was a impatient man in this here vale o' sorrer, there goes the impatientest!"

II

Meanwhile the traveler continued his way at the same rapid pace, crossing the stile as he had been directed; but, for the most part, he walked with bent head and a frown of thought upon his dark brow. Earlier in the day he had gazed with greedy eyes upon the well-remembered beauties of green valley and wooded hill, and had gloried in it all,—the warmth of the sun, the soft wind sweet with the fragrance of honeysuckle and new-mown hay, and the thousand delicious scents of hidden flowers and dewy soil; pausing to listen to the bubbling music of some brook, to stare into the cool,

green depths of woods thrilled with the song of thrush or blackbird; and had known that boundless content that only the returned exile can appreciate or understand.

But now? Now he strode on, blind and deaf to it all, faster and faster, eager only to reach the end of that journey which had led him across half the world. And as he walked, he thought of the struggle and tumult of these latter years,—the sufferings and hardships endured, the dangers outfaced, the bitter trials and disappointments, and the final realization. But now,—what were fortune and success but empty sounds, what but a mockery all his riches, if disappointment waited for him—at the journey's end?

So lost was he amid these whirling thoughts that he presently found that, despite the landlord's precise directions, he had missed his way, for he became aware that he was traversing a very narrow, grassy lane that wound away on each hand apparently to nowhere in particular. He stopped, therefore, and was looking about him in some annoyance when he heard the voice of a crying child, and going a little way along the lane, saw a little girl who sat demurely in the shade of the hedge, stanching her tears with the aid of a torn and bedraggled pinafore.

Now, as he looked down at her, and she looked up at him over the tattered pinafore, with two large tears, balanced and ready to fall, the traveler found himself very much at a loss since, hitherto in his varied experiences, small, feminine persons who lamented with the aid of tattered pinafores, had had no part. However, being a polite traveler, he raised his hat, and smiled. Whereupon the small person, forgetful of

her sorrow, smiled up at him; for, despite the big stick he carried, and his strange, dark face with its fierce black brows and the ugly mark upon the bronzed cheek, there was something in the long-lashed eyes, and the gentle curve to the firm, clean-shaven lips, that seemed to take her fancy, for she nodded her curly head at him approvingly.

"I'm awful glad you've come!" she sighed; "I've been waiting and waiting, you know."

"Oh, really?" said he, more at a loss than ever.

"Yes, I need somebody dre'fful bad, that's nice an' tall an' big, like you," she nodded, "an' I was 'fraid you'd never come, you know."

"Ah, yes—I see, and is that why you were crying?"

"I wasn't—crying," she answered with scornful emphasis on the verb. "Ladies never cry,—they weep, you know, an' I just sat down here to shed a few tears."

"Ah, to be sure! And why were you weeping?"

"Well, I was weeping because my poor Norah got herself caught in the hedge, an', when I tried to get her down I tore my very best pinafore, an'—scratched my—poor—dear—little finger!" And hereupon at the recollection of these woes the two tears (having apparently made up their minds about it) immediately cast themselves overboard, and lost themselves in the folds of the tattered pinafore.

"Can I help you?"

"If you'll please reach Norah down out of that thorny hedge,—there she is!"

Looking in the direction indicated, he saw a pink-cheeked doll, very small of mouth, and very large and round of eye, who, despite her most unfortunate situation among the brambles, seemed to be observing a butterfly that hovered near-by, with a stoic philosophy worthy of Zeno himself.

In the twinkling of an eye Norah was rescued from her precarious perch, and held out to her small, rapturous mother; but, before she reached those little anxious hands, the traveler's hold suddenly relaxed, and poor Norah fell into the ditch.

"Child," said he, his voice sudden and sharp, "what is your name?"

But she was too busy rescuing and comforting the unfortunate Norah to answer a great, big, clumsy man's foolish questions just then.

"Who are you?" repeated the traveler, staring into the pretty flushed face that was no longer hidden in the pinafore.

"Did a nasty, big, dusty man frow her into the ditch then!"

"Child," said the traveler more gently, and stooping to look into the violet eyes, "tell me your name."

"My name," she answered with much hauteur, and pausing to smooth Norah's ruffled finery, "is Marjorie."

"Marjorie!" he repeated, and then again, "Marjorie!" and stood leaning on his stick, his broad shoulders stooping and his eyes staring away blindly into the distance.

"Yes,—Marjorie," she repeated,—"just like my Ownest Own."

"Do you mean your—mother?" he asked with a strange hesitation at the word.

"Yes, my mother, but I call her my Ownest Own 'cause she belongs all to me, you see. My Ownest Own lives with me—over there," she went on, pointing up the lane, "all alone with old Anna, 'cause Father has to work in the big city, oh, a long, long way off—in a train, you know. But he comes to see me sometimes, an' always brings me s'prises—in parcels, you know. Norah was a s'prise he brought me 'cause I was seven last week. An' now," said she, changing the subject abruptly, "now I'm all tired an' worn out,—so please take me home."

"No, I don't think I can take you home. You see I must be going."

"Going,—but where?"

"Oh, a long, long way—in a train and a ship," said the traveler with his gaze still on the distance.

"But please, I want you to come an' help Norah over the stiles,—she finds them so very trying, you know,—an' so do I."

But the traveler sighed, and shook his head.

"Good-by, Marjorie!" he said gently.

"Are you going to leave me—all alone, an' you've only just found me?"

"I must!"

"Well, then," said Marjorie, nodding her small head at him resolutely, "I shall sit down under the hedge again, an' weep—very loud!"—which she straightway proceeded to do, so that her lamentations frightened an inquisitive blackbird that had hopped audaciously near to stare at them with his bold, bright eye.

"Hush!" said the traveler, much perturbed, falling on his knees beside her, "hush, Marjorie,—don't do that!" But still she wept, and still she wailed, with Norah clasped tight in her arms, until at length he yielded in sheer desperation.

"Very well," he said, stroking her glossy curls with a touch that was wonderfully light and gentle for a hand so very big, "I'll go with you."

"I thought you would," she nodded, promptly smiling at him through her tears; "then please hold Norah a minute while I put on my sunbonnet." And when she had tied her bonnet strings exactly under the dimple in her chin, she held up her arms for Norah, and they set off along the lane together.

She slipped her warm fingers into his and remarked casually, "I like you 'cause you are so big an' tall, you know. My Ownest Own says that all great, big men are good an' kind, 'cause they are so big,—an' my Ownest Own knows all about everything,—an' that's why I'm taking you home to her."

But here he stopped, and glanced down at his guide in sudden trepidation:

"Taking me—home—to—her!" he repeated, slowly.

"Oh yes, I'm taking you as a s'prise. You see," she went on, "to-day is my Ownest Own's birfday, so I came out to try an' find a s'prise for her, an' I looked an' looked, but I couldn't find anything, an' then Norah got caught in the hedge, an' I wept. An' then you heard me, an' then, when I saw you, I thought you'd do for a s'prise 'cause you're so big an' tall, so I'm taking you to my Ownest Own for a birfday s'prise present."

"But," said he, still hesitating, "supposing she shouldn't happen to—like me?"

"Oh, but she will!" returned Marjorie, nodding the big sunbonnet complacently. "My Ownest Own always loves my s'prises, you see, an' you are such a big one though you are a bit dusty, you know."

"Tell me more about her,—is she happy—your—mother?"

"Oh yes, she's got me, you see, an' old Anna, an' the Marquis,—he's the parrot, an' we're all as happy as happy."

'Course she weeps sometimes, but all ladies weep, now an' then, you know,—I do myself."

At last they came in sight of a cottage. It was small, but neat and trim, and stood in a wide garden of flowers and fruit-trees, inclosed by a tall hedge of clipped yew, in which there was a small gate. Beside this wicket was a large tree in the shadow of which the traveler stopped.

"Richard!" cried a sharp, querulous voice, "Richard! Richard!"

"Who is that?" he exclaimed, glancing about.

"Oh, it's only the Marquis," Marjorie answered, laughing to see how this great, big man started at the sound, "it's the parrot, you know. Now you please stay here," she went on, "while I go an' find my Ownest Own, an' don't come till I call you, an'—why there she is!"

But the traveler had already seen a tall, graceful figure coming slowly toward them through the flowers. Leaning one hand against the tree for support, he looked with hungry eyes upon the proud beauty of her whose memory had been with him in the hum and bustle of strange cities, in the loneliness of prairies, in the fierce tumult of war and conflict—w weary years of stress and struggle through which he had fought his way to her until now, upon this golden afternoon, he had reached his journey's end. The child Marjorie—her child!—stood between them, smiling up at him with finger raised admonishingly as she bade him keep quiet. And, in this moment, the bitterness of all the past seemed

concentrated and he leaned more heavily against the tree. But, though he uttered no sound, suddenly, as if she divined his presence, Marjorie, the woman, looked up, and saw him, —and uttered a broken cry and ran toward him with hands outstretched and stopped, breathing quick, and so they gazed upon each other for a long, silent minute.

"Richard!" she said at last, in the voice of one who dreams, "Richard!"

"I have—come back—you see," said he, his voice harsh and uneven.

"I thought you were—dead, Richard."

"Yes, it was a long time for you to wait,—too long, I know now,—but I have come back to you, Marjorie, as I told you I would."

"But you never wrote,—all these long, long years!"

"I did,—yes, I did at first. I sent you three letters."

"I never got them."

"That was part of my ill fortune."

"Why did you ever go? We all believed in you, Richard. Even Father, in his heart of hearts, knew you could never have stooped to take the money, and the real thief was caught soon after, and confessed;—why did you go, Richard?"

"I was a proud young fool!" said he, bitterly.

"We advertised for you in all the papers."

"I have been in places where papers are not known," he answered; "you see I have lived a lonely life at all times, Marjorie."

"Lonely, Richard? Do you know what loneliness is, I wonder?—the endless chain of nights and days and weeks and months and years; the watching and hoping and praying and the soul-destroying disappointment?"

"And we were to have been married—in a fortnight!" said he dully, "how impossible it all seems,—now! And yet, all these years I have hoped and dreamed that it might yet be,—that the more I endured of hardship and disappointment, the more surely should I find happiness waiting for me—at the journey's end."

"Then you—did—still care, Richard?"

"Care!" His voice thrilled through her, and she saw how the strong, brown hand quivered upon the tree.

"You had not—forgotten?"

"Your memory has been with me always, Marjorie," he answered, speaking in the same low, repressed tone, "and always will be,—even though I am too late."

"Too late?"

"I waited too long," he went on, not looking at her now, "I hoped, and expected too much of Fortune; my journey does

not end here as I prayed it might. I must go on and on, until my time is accomplished,—but your memory will go with me to the end, Marjorie."

"Richard,—what do you mean?"

"I mean that the hand which led me here was the hand of your child—whose father works in the city."

"My child—Marjorie?" Now, as she spoke, her eyes that had hitherto sought his face as the face of one come back from the dead, wavered and fell, the color deepened in her cheek again and her bosom rose with a long, fluttering sigh. She turned slowly and went toward him, but, in that same moment, the quiet was suddenly dispelled by the wailing lamentation of the child, seated sedately beneath the hedge, with Norah clasped tight in her arms. In an instant Marjorie was down upon her knees beside her, all soft caresses and tender solicitude, whereat the wailing gradually subsided.

"I'm all right now, my Ownest Own," she said, smoothing Norah's rumpled frock, "I only thought you'd forgot all 'bout me. You see I went an' found you such a nice, big s'prise,—though he is a bit dusty, I know,—an' you never even said, 'Thank me very much.'"

"Thank you, darling, thank you!" and the two Marjories kissed each other.

"He wouldn't let me bring him at first 'cause he was 'fraid you wouldn't like him, you know, but you do, don't you, my Ownest Own?"

"Yes, dear."

"You like him lots, an' lots,—don't you?"

"Yes, dear."

"An' you thank me for him very much,—don't you?"

"And I thank you very much."

"Very well!" sighed the small autocrat, "now we're all happy again, an' please take me in to tea, 'cause I'm dre'fful hungry, my Ownest Own."

III

Richard Carmichael, in his wanderings to and fro in the waste places of the world, had fronted death many times in one shape or another, he had met disaster calm-eyed, and trampled terror underfoot; yet never had he more need of his stern self-repression and iron will than now, as he sipped his tea in the pleasant shade of the fruit-trees, listening to the merry chatter of the child, and answering the many questions of the woman, glancing at her but seldom, yet aware of her every look and gesture, even while he turned to minister to the numerous wants of the child, or to kiss the pink-cheeked doll, at her imperious command.

"You are very quiet, Richard!"

"Why, I was never much of a talker—even in the old days, Marjorie," he answered, and there was a touch of bitterness in his tone because of the radiant light in her eyes, and the thrill of happiness in her voice. The hope that he had cherished in his heart all these years was dead; his dream was ended; he was awake at last, and the journey's end was not yet.

"Richard!" screamed the Marquis, "Richard! Richard!"

"Did you teach him to say that, Marjorie?"

"Yes,—the Marquis is quite an accomplished bird, you see. Let me fill up your cup, Richard."

"I've tried to teach him to say my father's name too, but he won't, you know," said the child.

"Talk, Richard,—tell your adventures,—what you have done, and where you have been all these years," said Marjorie, rather hastily.

So, perforce, he began to describe the wonders he had seen, the terrors of the wilderness, the solemn grandeur of mighty mountains and rushing rivers; of storm and tempest; he told of strange peoples, and wondrous cities, while she listened wide-eyed and silent.

"And how did you get that scar upon your cheek?" she asked when he paused.

"Trying to arrest a murderer."

"And did you arrest him?"

"Yes."

"Was he hanged?"

"No,—it wasn't necessary."

"Do you mean—?"

"Yes."

"Oh, Richard!"

"'Fraid my Norah's getting awful sleepy!" interjected the child at this juncture.

"You are greatly altered, Richard."

"And yet you knew me on the instant."

"You seem—so much colder and—harder."

"I have lived among hard people."

"And so much bigger and stronger."

"That is because I have labored."

"And—much quieter."

"That is because I am, perhaps, a little wiser."

"Do you think—I am altered, Richard?"

"Yes,—you are more beautiful, I think."

"But you don't look at me, Richard."

"'Fraid my Norah's nearly asleep now!" sighed the child again, stifling a yawn very politely, "an' 'fraid I am too."

"So you are, sweetheart," said Marjorie; "say 'Good-night,' and your Ownest Own will take you up to bed."

"Good-night—Richard!" said the small person demurely, and held up her mouth to be kissed.

"Good-by!" returned the traveler, bending his dark head down to hers, "Good-by, little Marjorie!" And, when he had kissed her, he rose and stretched out his hand toward his hat and stick.

"But—you're not going to go, Richard?" said the child, planting herself before him.

"Yes."

"Do you mean—in a train, an'—a ship?"

"Yes, Marjorie."

"Oh! but you mustn't, you know," she said, shaking her curls at him, "you must make him stay, my Ownest Own, 'cause I shall be sure to want him—to-morrow."

"Do you mean that you are really—going—back, Richard?" asked Marjorie.

"Yes,—to the wilderness,—it's the only place for me, Marjorie."

"Then Richard—at least—wait—a little while."

"Wait?"

"Until I have tucked little Sleepy-head up in bed," she answered, rising. "I sha'n't be long; stay where you are, and—wait."

"Wait?" said he again.

"I have—something I want to tell you," she said, not looking at him now, and, as she turned away, he noticed, for the first time, that she still wore her gardening gloves. So he sat down again, and watched the two Marjories go up the long, flower-bordered walk together until they entered the cottage.

To wait? To look into her eyes again? To have her once more within reach of his arms? To listen a few moments longer to the sweet, low tones of her voice, and then—to go? No—a thousand times! Better to slip away, now, in the silence, unseen; yes, better so—much better than the cold, dead memory of a formal leave-taking.

Wherefore, upon the instant, up sprang the blundering traveler, and snatching hat and stick, hurried down the path and through the gate. But once in the lane and out of sight of the cottage, his stride slackened and his feet dragged wearily, and as he came to a small coppice he turned in among the trees and threw himself face downward in the grass.

But in a few minutes he was startled by a woman's voice, calling his name.

He started to his feet to find her standing there amid the green, flushed of cheek and panting with her haste.

"Why did you go away, Richard?"

"Because I was—afraid."

"Afraid?"

"Of myself! Oh, why have you followed me?" he cried passionately, "don't you understand yet,—can't you see? I love you, Marjorie, I loved you as a boy,—to-day I am a man, and, with the years, with all I have endured, my love has grown until it fills the world. Go back!—you must go back—to your child—and his, and leave me to go on—to the journey's end."

"Richard!" she said gently, "if you have been faithful all these years don't you think—I have?"

"What do you mean?" he demanded, huskily. For answer she reached out her hands to him, and then he saw that she no longer wore her gloves,—he saw also that her white fingers were without a ring.

"Marjorie! What do you mean?" he repeated.

"I mean that I am even as you left me; I mean that no man's lips have ever pressed mine; I mean that I am as much yours to-day as ever I was."

"But—the child?"

"The child!" she laughed, brokenly, "she was my sister Annabel's, who died at her birth, and I have tried to take her place. Yes, I know, I let you think otherwise—because I—I wanted to be sure you—cared, Richard; I wanted to see you—suffer—just a little, Richard, because I have suffered so very long. And then, when I came back to tell you—you had gone. And then a great fear came to me, and I followed you—I ran all the way, Richard, and—and—that's all; only you will forgive me for wanting to see you suffer—just a little?"

"Forgive you,—oh my Marjorie!" and he caught her hands, and bent his head above them.

"Dick!" she whispered, stooping above him, all warmth and tenderness, "you great, strong, foolish Dick, to think that I could ever have forgotten you,—you will never leave me again?"

"No," he answered, clasping her to him, "I have reached my journey's end."

[The end of *The Journey's End* by Jeffery Farnol]