

The
Deathless
Miracle

Jeffery Farnol

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The Deathless Miracle

By Jeffery Farnol

A story of that sweet, beneficent power that transforms the commonplace and makes the ordinary glorious

No one, especially a woman, ever troubled to look at John Martin twice, until.... But I have begun this narrative at the wrong place. Let us try again:

John Martin was neither tall nor short, with eyes and hair of no particular color—a very ordinary young man who, having a passionless loathing for office work, did as little as possible in an office all day long. He caught the 8:35 every morning, trudged the too-familiar quarter mile to his place of business, got through the day's dull routine somehow and returned by the 6:15 to a dingy boarding house in a dismal

suburb. One of a countless host was John, quite lost in the ruck, a human cipher with no particular ambitions, no dream of nobler future until upon his purview dawned Princess Charming and the Gross Animal.

The Princess was a little too thin, much too pale, and slightly shabby; the Gross Animal rubicund of visage, full-bodied, and loud in every way.

It was on the crowded 8:35 of a bitter morning and John had just shaken open his newspaper when he became aware of her, and for two reasons: first, because she sat in the opposite corner and was looking at him, and, second, because she shivered in the icy blast of the open window. John, not recognizing her (of course) for the Princess, would have begun to scan his paper but he saw a small hand, in its worn glove, reach forth a little diffidently and essay quite vainly to pull up and close the heavy window; therefore, after a momentary hesitation, John touched the brim of his second-best (or business) hat and, seizing the strap, jerked up the window.

The Princess in a soft, shy voice had murmured her thanks and John had turned to his paper when the Gross Animal burst upon the scene—that is to say, the Plethoric Person, leaning across this slim, shrinking and very timid Princess, snatched the strap and let down the window with a crash:

"Sir!" he boomed, glaring round about him truculently. "Nothing like fresh air! Air's life!"

John, about to extinguish himself behind his newspaper, saw that she still watched him, and, moved by sudden adventurous impulse, he spoke:

"Excuse me, but ... are you cold?"

"Yes, I ... am rather," she answered, in the same shy murmur, "but it ... oh, it doesn't matter, please don't trouble."

Actuated by a second strange, wild impulse, John instantly jerked the window up again and in the utmost perturbation awaited the expected outburst.

"Well, of all the confounded insolence!" roared the Gross Animal, and reached for the window strap; but his plump hand in its natty, fur-lined glove was struck aside by a bony fist and his scowling eyes looked into other eyes (of no determinate color) that yet held a gleam not to be disregarded.

"Go on," said John, his commonplace features desperately grim, "touch that window and you get a punch right on the snout!" And John's chin looked as craggy as his fist.

The Gross Animal half rose in terrific wrath, he snorted, blinked and—subsided.... Somebody chuckled, papers rustled and the 8:35 sped on while in this thronged compartment reigned that silence which is, and ever hath been, so typically British.

At Cannon Street, long before the train had reached a standstill, John swung lightly to the platform and thereafter trudged, slow of foot and heavy of soul, to his day's labor and thus had passed the barrier when a soft voice arrested him:

"Please, I ... I should like to thank you." John took off his hat, turned from the hurrying throng and pausing beside the bookstall became aware of two large, brown eyes and a drooping, wistful mouth. "I think it was awfully ... brave of you."

"Oh, I don't know," he answered, twiddling his hat.

"But it was, he—that man didn't dare touch the window or say anything—you scared him."

"Scared him? Did I? Me?" said John, forgetting grammar in pleased amazement. "I rather expected he'd bounce me one at any moment."

"He was afraid to, you looked so frightfully fierce. I never saw anyone so terribly determined."

"I say, do you really mean that?" asked John and caught his breath, for these brown eyes were so direct and truthful that they inspired him with a marvelous sense of confidence seldom known till now, so much so that he squared his shoulders and forgot to slouch. "I was certainly ready to try a wallop at the blighter," he nodded, and cocked his chin; then,

stirred by something in these gentle, truthful eyes, he became truthful also: "Though I was in a blue funk all the time!" he confessed. "I'm no Dempsey or Gene Tunney!" Here John sighed and his shoulders drooped again.

"That only makes you all the braver!" she murmured.

"Not me!" he answered, shaking his head despondently as they moved slowly onward again. "I never fought anyone or ... anything since I was a kid at school."

"You will!" said she, softly, but with such gentle conviction that John pondered this until they were descending the steps into Cannon Street. "I'm wondering just what you mean?" he inquired.

"I mean you will fight difficulties and win. You have the look of success."

"Who? Me?" said John again, staring his amazement. "But I'm only ... I've never done anything worth while."

"Because you've never tried, I think," she answered, shaking her head at him. "A man can do anything if he's determined enough and believes in himself."

"But," said John, gloomily, "I'm the sort that needs someone else to believe in me too—and nobody does, and I don't blame 'em."

"Your own folks?" she questioned.

"Dead!"

"So are mine," said she with a quick sigh.

"That's tough—on a girl!" mused John.

"Yes ... Good-by!" She nodded. "I work over there."

"What, here in Walbrook? So do I," said John. "I say, will you ... would you mind ... what I mean is—please, what's your name?"

"Mary—Mary Willis."

"Thanks! Mine's John Martin. Perhaps we'll meet again?"

"If you like ... perhaps," she murmured; and was gone.

"Determined! Me! Good Lord!" muttered John. Then, squaring his shoulders, he strode along the crowded pavement until, catching sight of a slim, young fellow, a little shabby yet very blithe and confident of air, he halted suddenly, amazed to see this was his own reflection cast by a mirror in a shop doorway.

Angier, the head clerk, greeted him with his usual matutinal scowl and the question:

"Well, what are you so dashed spry about this morning?"

"Old lad," answered John, setting his hat on its customary peg, "I'm thinking it's about time the boss gave me a raise."

"Have another think, then, my poor fish!" moaned Angier, climbing wearily upon his lofty stool.

John pulled down his cuffs, moistened and smoothed their rough edges, and two minutes later was gazing down upon that awesome object, to wit: the pink cranium of the Olympian—George Dale, Esquire, of Dale, Peek and Dale—just now spread-eagled above his morning correspondence.

"Wassmatter?" hissed this demigod, eyes cocked and a-glare beneath shaggy, white eyebrows.

"Sir, it's about a—" John swallowed violently, squared his shoulders again and continued in voice a little louder, "a raise in my salary, sir."

"Eh—eh?" barked the Olympian. "Ha, damme, a raise? How long have you been with us?"

"Five years, sir."

"How many raises have you had?"

"None, sir."

"See me later! Tell cashier! G'tout!"

So came John's first step, and he in such fever to tell Mary that daily in his luncheon hour he haunted Walbrook and the vicinity until he espied her at last, and felt himself the more elated because of the glow in her brown eyes and murmurous commendation.

Within this narrow and busy thoroughfare is, or was, a small sedate tea-shop wherein moves a sedate and elderly waitress answering to the name of Sibyl; and here daily it became the custom for this ordinary young man to break bread with the Princess, who, though she filled the place with the magic of her gentle, inspiring presence, was for him only Mary Willis, especially when of a Saturday afternoon (and the time their own) she would pour his tea and listen with such glad sympathy, her wise brown eyes upon his preoccupied, commonplace features, while he told her of his failures or successes and discussed his problems, relying upon her quick judgment.

So time sped, bringing its changes as time must. John was greatly changed, his shoulders seemed broader, his eye bright and purposeful, his slouching step quick and firm; his clothes were no longer shabby, his small bedroom had burgeoned into a cozy flat, for John was climbing apace.

Though pressure of business kept him prisoned all the week or sent him traveling far and wide, yet every Saturday afternoon brought him to the humble little teashop and mere Mary. On this particular Saturday he was so obsessed with momentous affairs that he was less aware than ever of the Princess and blind to the trouble in her gentle eyes.

"I'm glad you've succeeded, John. I knew you would!"

"But I haven't told you half yet.... Mary, they want me to go abroad.... Africa! To open a new branch!"

"Abroad, John! When?"

"At once! They're offering me ... fifteen hundred a year!"

"Oh!" said she, very softly, but the teapot clattered as she set it down.

"Fifteen hundred isn't so bad to begin with, eh, Mary?"

"It's ... wonderful!" she murmured.

"But Africa's a long way off and I don't like leaving old London ... and you, of course. Besides, I hate change."

"It's good for us ... sometimes," said she breathlessly. "And ... you've changed ... very much since we ... first met."

"Well, I should hope so!" snorted John, glancing down at his immaculate person. "But about this offer? I've a good mind to let it go. What do you say, Mary?" Dumbly she turned to glance across the little shop, empty now save for themselves and Sibyl crocheting demurely in her corner, and with head thus averted she whispered:

"Oh, why ask me?"

"Because you will advise me for the best. You always do, you always have." Then, being the Princess, she answered, though with face still averted:

"You must go ... of course! This is the chance you've worked for.... And now ... I'll go home."

"Why so early today, Mary?"

"My head aches and I'm ... rather tired."

"I wonder," said John as they stepped into the street, "why you are so different from other girls? Lord, Mary, I shall hate to leave London and—"

"You'll get used to it, John. Africa must be wonderful ... and you'll be ... settling down ... getting married—"

"Too busy, Mary! Besides I've never met—her yet. I mean the only woman, the dream girl."

"No, I thought you hadn't, John. But you'll find her ... in Africa perhaps. I wonder what she'll be like? Beautiful, of course."

"Well, naturally! Someone with yellow hair and blue eyes. And yet—I fancy I'm not the marrying sort—"

"And there's my bus, John ... Good-by! No, don't come any farther ... I'd rather be alone, my head's cracking! You'll try to see me before ... you leave?"

"Good Lord, Mary, of course!" And when she and the bus had vanished, John hurried to his cozy flat, there to lay plans for his ever-brightening future, while Mary, locked within the solitude of her bare little room, wept long and bitterly because her eyes were brown.

Ensued a harassing week for John. Nevertheless on Saturday afternoon he entered the teashop, bright-eyed and eager, to find it a wilderness holding no more than an aged man who champed a muffin and Sibyl busied with her never-ending crocheting; crossing this howling desolation, John questioned her in tone aggrieved:

"Where is she, Sibyl? Has she gone? Couldn't she wait?"

Sibyl sniffed.

"Sir," she answered, "if you mean Miss Mary, she ain't been here since Monday, she ain't well—"

"Eh, d'you mean she's ill?"

"And, what's more, she's lost her job! Ah, lost it three weeks ago, she did—"

"Three ... weeks!" gasped John. "But ... why didn't she tell me?"

"P'r'aps because you never asked her. You never do. And now she's ill, pining away! Ain't been herself for a long time, but you never noticed—not you."

"No, I didn't, Sibyl, I didn't ... damn it, I never even guessed—"

"No, you ain't much of a guesser, Mr. John! Some folks may think you're smart, and others, that's me, thinks you're a chump and—what's more—" Sibyl stopped, head cocked in romantic speculation for, with a sort of leap, John was off

and away. He hailed a taxi and therein was whirled to a grim street of gloomy houses, into one of which he sped and, climbing many stairs, knocked upon a door, which had barely opened when:

"Mary!" said he.

"John!" she gasped.

"Why, Mary, how pale you look! May I come in? Are you ill? I never knew, never guessed—"

"Oh, I'm all right now," she answered breathlessly. "Do you mind sitting on the bed? And you ... you've come to say good-by, of course—"

"Yes, Mary. But you see I didn't want to leave London and you, so I stuck the firm for another two hundred pounds and they agreed! So I simply must go, now."

"Yes ... yes, of course you must."

"But I can't leave you like this ... I mean out of a job. So I want you please to let me help you ... I mean to say I'm going to lend you a hundred pounds—"

"That's sweet of you, John, but there's no need. I found a situation yesterday. I'm going to begin on Monday."

"Fine!" cried he, clasping her nerveless hand. "I'm frightfully glad. Still, I'm going to lend you that hundred—"

"No, John—please, I'd rather not! Tell me, when do you sail?"

"Next Tuesday ... I say, Mary, will you—I thought perhaps you'd let me take you out to dinner and a theater—"

"No—no, oh, I couldn't! I mean ... I'm not quite up to it, John dear ... but thank you all the same. And, John, I ... always hate saying good-by—let's say it and have done." So John clasped her slim, cold hands, felt an impulse to kiss her, checked it, muttered, "Good-by!" and heard the door close behind him.

Having descended the many stairs he paused and stood irresolute, but this time, obeying impulses, went hurrying back for a last word. Receiving no answer to his knock he ventured to open the door.... She was kneeling by the open window, her slim body shaken by great sobs, her pale face agonized with bitter grief. Now as he stood, dumb-struck and aghast, he suddenly beheld this forlorn and woeful figure through a glitter of tears that burned and stung; and these tears being manly because they were so utterly unselfish wrought such magic that he visioned her truly at last, seeing not the grief-wrung features of poor, desolate Mary but the Princess radiant with a beauty imperishable, the very woman, his ideal and inspiration.

"Mary!" he cried; and, looking up, she saw commonplace John quite transfigured by the new-born adoration of his

eyes, the half-fearful entreaty of his eager, outstretched arms.

"My dear!" she whispered, "oh, my dear!"

Thus the Princess in her mercy went to him.

[The end of *The Deathless Miracle* by Jeffery Farnol]