

Farrand's Last Role



By Elizabeth Jordan

The Story of the Unhappy Prince Hidden Behind the Barriers, the Invading Princess, the Wishing Ring, and Sandry Other Matters

"AND—wait a moment, my dear—there's just one thing more." Seemingly the one thing more was in the untidy and overcrowded top desk drawer of the chairman of the last we forget committee, for that lady was now urgently disemboweling the drawer in an obvious search for something. Mrs. Huntington, even her nearest friends conceded, "had no system"; but they hastened to add that "her way with our poor boys was simply wonderful."

She now brought forth and casually dumped on the polished top of the desk an apple, three note books, a large shopping bag, two surplus paper weights, a calendar, an engagement pad, a brush broom, a small box of pens, a mass of unanswered letters held together by a brass clasp, a carton of peppermint filled chocolates, a check book, an ivory paper cutter, and a leather bound almanac dated two years back. Among this collection she excitedly fumbled, at first with pathetic hope, then with rising disappointment.

"Now, isn't that odd?" she asked the girl who, having risen to go, had paused at her words and was patiently waiting beside her. "I was positive my address book was in that drawer, yet I've taken everything out and it isn't there."

The girl made a suggestion. "Possibly it was crowded back by the other things. May I try?"

She thrust a hand and arm into the far recesses of the drawer and removed them covered with dust; but both women disregarded this slight detail. Miss Belden had also drawn forth a small, red covered book, which the chairman promptly grasped with the crown of an exultant baby.

"I knew it was there!" she boasted. "I always know exactly where my things are, though of course I can't invariably put my fingers on them the instant I want them. Good-by, dear. You're a heaven sent comfort to me. Most of the other girls seem to have lost all interest in our poor boys, now that the war is so far behind us. But I feel I have an army with banners when I think of you. The way you have given your time and your vitality, not to speak of your money, is simply marvelous."

Florence Belden, who had busied herself at a stationary wash stand in the corner of her leader's office, turned and smiled affectionately, but rather guiltily, as she demurely dried her hands on the office towel. She was more touched by the older woman's tribute than she cared to show, but she felt she did not deserve it. She had done something, of course, but so much more she could have done had been forgotten or postponed. Even as Mrs. Huntington talked Florence had been planning to take advantage of that lady's absent mindedness and escape before the chairman remembered what she had meant to ask her to do. The other's praise killed that ignoble impulse. Probably, Florence gloomily reflected, it had also killed all her own afternoon plans.

"There was something else you had in mind for me," she recalled to her leader; "something that made you look up the address book. What was it?"

"Let me see," she mused aloud. "I've forgotten his name, but I think it begins with F. Possibly I will recognize it if I see it. M-m-m. Fagan, Forest, French, Feeney—her lips moved almost noiselessly as she recited the long list of names. Florence watched her with full understanding. She knew now the special service required of her. It was without doubt to take some discouraged, maimed young soldier under her special wing, to write to him, to visit him in the hospital, to arrange for outings and other entertainment if he proved physically up to them. She had done a great deal of such work and she enjoyed it.

"Ah, here it is! Farrand—David Farrand. Twenty-seven. M-m-m." Mrs. Huntington flashed an eye down the Farrand record, to refresh her memory, then gave the result to her companion in a brisk summary.

"He has been in hospitals ever since the armistice, and I wouldn't dare to tell you how many operations he has had. Now, at last, he is getting better. In fact, he is almost well, but he can't be made to realize it. He is still a little 'hipped.' I am sure you could help to brace him up. The point is—let me see—what was it that made me pick him out for you? O, yes. He is from your home town, but everybody seems to have forgotten him. He hasn't had a letter or a visitor for months."

Miss Belden's delicate eyebrows rose. Her "home town" was the great eastern city upon which she now looked out through the windows of Mrs. Huntington's office. She had almost forgotten the small western city of Weyo, where she had been born, where her father had made his millions, and from which he had moved to New York ten years ago, bringing his motherless daughter with him. Since then, though Florence had ignored Weyo, Henry Belden had seen to it that Weyo should not forget the Beldens. He had given it the Belden library in memory of his wife; the Belden hospital, in memory of his father and mother; Belden park, in memory of himself. Once a year he drifted back there, for a few days of duck shooting in the region and a chat with his old friends.

Florence had never gone back—not that her memories of Weyo were unpleasant, but because the recent full and wonderful years in New York were sponging off the pale impressions of her childhood days. She had been a tremendous success in the east. She had developed in a way that made Henry Belden's eyes shine when he thought of it. She was as democratic as he was. She had hosts of friends in every circle of life. Incidentally, she

loved her father absolutely, and wholly without his knowledge.

She was not thinking of all this now. Her mind was busy with the name of Farrand. It hung in her memory like a distant but full toned bell, vibrating pleasantly in the avenue of the years. Yes, indeed, she remembered a Farrand—two Farrands. The first had been a slight, stoop shouldered, rather sweet faced old man, a retired professor of chemistry from some western college, living on a position in a small but charming house on the outskirts of Weyo. There had been a garden—it was rather strange how vividly all these details were returning to her; and the second Farrand was a grandson of the first. The boy had been away at school most of the year, but home in the summers with his grandfather. He had been all of 16 or 17, dark, and large for his age.

In the summer time, when he was home, she was often absent visiting schoolmates or traveling with her father. And at all times, the Farrands kept to themselves. Heavens, how all the details were filling in! The old professor had lived alone, save for a man servant; there had seemed no one belonging to him except his grandson; both appeared to be hermits; and—last, yet most important of all—they had a garden whose beauty was celebrated by the few who saw it. That garden had slept behind high brick walls, and to the childish imaginations of Weyo it took on infinite romance and mystery from the fact.

She did not realize how long she had been silent and unhearing, but she caught the tail end of what evidently was the peroration of Mrs. Huntington's address.

"They say he is very unapproachable—wants to be left entirely alone. Of course that isn't good for him. And as soon as I heard that he came from Weyo, your old home, I am sure you would take an interest in his case."

Florence banished her crowding memories.

"I will," she promised. "Dad will, too. I am sure. Perhaps, in the conditions, it would be well to make haste rather slowly. I will write him this afternoon, and send him a basket in a few days. Then I'll motor out to the hospital in a week or two, after he has grown reconciled to seeing me."

"Floy, dear, you're such a comfort!"

That afternoon she wrote David Farrand a charming note, incidentally mentioning that they had once been fellow citizens of Weyo. Almost immediately it became clear that the fact did not interest him. He ignored the charming note. She had been prepared for this, and after a few days she wrote again, sending him a large package of new books and magazines.

The gift brought a formal six-line response from one of the nurses. Mr. Farrand, it appeared, wished to thank Miss Belden for her interest. He was not able to read much at present, but later he hoped to be. Miss Belden sent another letter, with a basket of hothouse fruit, a box of cigars, and the inevitable cigarettes. To this impressive offering the same nurse responded with a seven-line note of acknowledgment. Mr. Farrand, she explained, appreciated the pleasure the gifts had given his fellow patients at the hospital.

The firm young jaw of Florence Belden set a little as she read the brief document. It seemed clear that Farrand was still as remote as in the past. Ten days had been wasted in the preliminary skirmishes. It seemed high time for more direct measures, if he really needed help in returning to the living world. The June afternoon was surprisingly hot, but she ordered her motor car and drove forth to make her first call on the recalcitrant young warrior. Her fighting blood was up.

At the hospital she received the smiling welcome which always met her there, on every side. Her boys, she was told, were desperately homesick for her. They had not seen her for almost a fortnight—quite long enough, one of them pointed out, to undo all the good of her previous visits. When she had chatted with and scattered her gifts among them she sought out her now staunch friend, the head nurse, and expressed her wish to meet young Farrand. The austere Miss Greeley, who had recently humanized under the charm of the girl's face and manner and the real value of her work, reverted to her former aloof personality with a suddenness that amazed the caller.

"Farrand does not receive visitors," she briefly announced.

"I know—but don't you think you could persuade him to see me?" Miss Belden's voice held the cajoling notes of a child begging sweets from its nurse. "Mrs. Huntington thought you might. And you know," she reminded the other woman, "I've had some luck with boys who thought they didn't want to meet strangers. Besides, when it comes to that, Mr. Farrand and I are not really strangers. We are from the same western city, and I have known about him since I was a little girl."

"You have?" Miss Greeley was human again. "You are the only one who does know, then," she volunteered. "He is our mystery man. He never talks about himself or his home or his past experiences. All we know about him is his army record, which is fine (he has half a dozen decorations), and what is on his hospital charts." She stopped, obviously for a moment's reflection, while the idol of the boys waited respectfully for the result of her meditations.

"He really ought to be stirred up a bit," Miss Greeley suddenly conceded. "Dr. Brown was saying so only the other day, and talking about the need of a new influence to hasten his convalescence. Yet if I go and ask him to see you, I am sure he won't do it—and you are the one person who could help him, if any one could," she handsomely ended.

Florence dropped her pose of the beguiling child and became briskly businesslike, addressing the other from the secure pedestal of past success.

"Suppose you take me straight to him and leave me there?" she calmly submitted. "He can't do more than order me out, and I don't imagine he will do that. I won't stay more than a few moments this first time—just long enough

to break the ice so I can come again. Where is he?"

While the head nurse pondered the suggestion, her mental process being slow when directed outside of their usual orbit, Florence cheerfully drew her forward in what she hoped was the line of the young man's retreat.

"I suppose you have wheeled him outside somewhere?" she asked.

"Yes. We keep them all out as much as we can, of course, though it's really cooler inside in this unseasonable heat. Who would think it was only the first week in June? But he has a pet spot among some trees—I think we'll find him there."

She had yielded and was briskly leading the way. The visitor followed her along the veranda and across a lawn toward a heavy clump of trees and shrubbery some distance away.

"There's a little open spot among those evergreens," Miss Greeley explained. "It is about the size of a small room, shaded on three sides, and in front there's a lovely view of the water. That's where Farrand sits most of the time. He has helped himself to the place and it has become an understood thing that others shall keep away."

Florence endeavored to go in quietly. Her foot broke a twig and the camp chair struck a branch and evoked a protesting hiss, but the silent figure in the wheel chair did not turn its head.

"I hope I haven't startled you," she said gently. As he seemed unable to answer at once, she went on.

"I should not have come, of course. I know you don't want to meet strangers. But—I could not feel that we were strangers." He was making it hard for her, with his silence and his intent, almost resentful glance. "You see," she added with a smile, "we both come from Weyo, as I told you in my first note—and I remember you when you were a boy."

"You—you do?" he stammered. A change took place in his expression, a change which she could not analyze. Was it merely resigned acceptance? It looked like that.

"Of course you are Miss Belden," he ended quietly.

She was encouraged. At least he was not asking her to go.

"Yes. Do you remember me at all?"

For the first time she smiled. It was an ironical smile, and his voice, when he spoke, matched it.

"Of course," he said again.

She went on, resolutely. "Your grandfather's garden was one of the fairy places of my imagination," she told him, "because none of us children was ever invited to enter it. I used to look at the high brick wall that shut us out, and imagine the garden peopled with all sorts of things—fairies and gnomes and trolls. And sometimes I was horribly sorry for you because you had to live there, and sometimes I envied you."

She stopped. For a full moment he did not speak, but stared out over the water, his expression changing again. She felt that she understood. So much had happened since those old days! At last he turned to her with the air of one who has made up his mind, who has actually squared his shoulders to meet the issue of the moment.

"You were a schoolgirl then," he said at last, in the casual conversational tone of a courteous but not especially interested host. "A little girl with golden hair that always seemed blowing in the wind."

"Yes, I was 14, and rather untidy about ribbons. Of course you can't really remember much about me," she plumed hopefully.

"O, yes, I do." The words were reassuring, but his voice lacked warmth. "You and your father permeated Weyo like an atmosphere. When people there were not talking about your father's public gifts they were gossiping about your parties and your birthday parties and that sort of thing. And I remember seeing you quite often riding or motoring, always with your hair blowing out like a golden mane."

She had not liked part of this speech, nor the manner in which it was delivered. But—after all—he was a sick soldier, and, in a way, an old friend. Also, having shut out all others, he had at least received her, and that was progress enough for one day. She would go away and think him over before venturing another interview. She rose.

"We have established a common interest," she declared lightly, "and now I am going. I promised Miss Greeley I wouldn't stay long. But—I'm coming again."

He made no effort to detain her, nor did he apologize, grimly or humorously or bitterly, as many of the poor boys did, for his inability to show her the courtesy of rising. He merely inclined his head.

"Good-by," he said. And as an obvious afterthought, "Thank you."

She hesitated. Then, "May I come again?" she asked, and wondered at herself. She had not intended to ask that question.

"Why—why, yes," she heard him say at last. Then, slowly, as if he had realized his ungraciousness, he smiled up at her. "Please come again," he said.

It was her first glimpse of the enchanted prince. She laughed triumphantly.

"I didn't give you much chance to escape me," she handsomely admitted. "Will you tell me what was in that garden when I came again? I have always wanted so dreadfully to know."

"I will tell you," he said gravely. "It was really rather a jolly old place. The odd part of it is that when I was a kid I thought, too, that it was full of goblins. It had a lot of dark, mysterious spots. I used to play goblins in those corners—lots of 'em! And—he looked at her—"I used to rescue you from all sorts of perils. You, of course, were the obvious princess," he ended more lightly. That, surely was "personal" enough. To her amazement, it made her heart contract. In the next instant she understood. He was still the enchanted prince, and he had come to this—suffering and poverty and neglect. For a speechless moment she stood looking down at him. Then she put her hand into his.

"We shall have wonderful things to talk about," was all she could say as she left him.

But when she made her second visit, three days later, it was not immediately of haunted gardens that she talked. Since their first meeting she had been thinking of Farrand in an amazing degree. Her thoughts were like birds which, after brief flights, returned to him as to their home. She told herself that this was because he was from Weyo—avoiding any analysis of why that simple fact had suddenly taken on a peculiar significance and importance. She must plan for him. She must make that home town take an interest in its distinguished son. She must find out why he was in such financial straits. She must enlist dad's aid. All this being so, of course, she must think of Farrand.

It was of her plans that she talked when again she found him in his favorite haunt in the hospital grounds, and she was so absorbed in these, so sure of their appeal to him, now that an entente had been established, that at first she failed to perceive his lack of response. The ice had been broken. Surely she could plunge in.

"Two of the Weyo boys are at college here," she told Farrand, at the end of her almost uninterrupted monologue. "Of course, you remember them—Bob Gordon and Ted Fiske. They are coming to New York as soon as college closes. I want to bring them to see you."

She had said all she meant to say, but she would have gone on, feminine fashion, filling his silence with sound rather than lose the ground she felt that she had gained. Now, however, she was checked by the look in his eyes as he abruptly leaned toward her.

"Miss Belden," he said crisply, "will you do me a favor?"

"Of course I will—any number of them." She was conscious that she had made a mistake.

"Then I beg that you will say nothing about me to our Weyo friends, or to your father, or, in fact, to anyone. I am glad to know you—"

"I didn't give you much choice about that," she interrupted nervously.

He went on as if she had not spoken.

"But to meet a lot of well-meaning people just now, wherever they come from or wherever they are, would do me more harm than good. I know this. I made it plain to the doctors and to Miss Greeley. And I shall be much obliged if you do not even mention my name to the friends you have spoken of. Is that understood?"

She felt like a schoolgirl severely disciplined by a master. The flag of her pride went down before the new experience.

"Why, of course," she stammered. "That is, I won't speak to anyone I haven't already mentioned you to. I talked to dad about you the day I was here."

"To what others did you speak?" To those boys?" He fairly fired the question at her.

"No, but only because I haven't seen them, she honestly admitted. "And I wrote to Helen Moore, who lived in Weyo when we did. She is married now and her home is in Philadelphia, but I knew she would be interested. However," she added in a different tone, her pulse suddenly restored by the realization of how friendly had been her intentions in all this meddling, "you may be sure that neither Helen nor dad will trouble you. And I realize now that the way I myself leaped over your barriers was—was unpardonable. I must apologize for that."

"Please don't apologize." His voice had changed. From the first she had observed what an agreeable and well-bred speaking voice it was. Now it held an unsuspected quality of beauty and charm. "You are the exception," he went on. "There's always an exception, you know, to the strictest rules. I shall be frightfully cut up if you drop me."

"Really?" She was incredulous, but anxious to be convinced. She looked at him with eyes whose clear brown depths showed conflicting doubt and hope.

"On my honor."

He was smiling at her, not sentimentally, but with frank good humor—his most charming, boyish smile. It illumined the situation like a sun breaking through clouds. She drew a breath of relief.

"Then we're going to be friends?" she asked, and again she wondered at herself. What inner force was driving her on, making her actually humble to this man? She told herself that it was pity—of course it was pity!

"Indeed, we are," he assured her. "But we're going to be mighty exclusive. We're going to meet in the old garden that interested you so much and depend on its high walls to keep out everybody else. Shall you mind that—for a little while? And is it a bargain?"

He was still smiling, but his eyes were serious again. She answered under the urge of that new, driving inner force.

"Of course, it's a bargain. If you wish it so. What right have I to drag others into your life?"

He followed her lead.

"It all depends, with most of the fellows, on whether those who come to see them are really interested in them. The men can always tell. And—well—they don't like to be patronized or made the objects of some butterfly's three-day charity impulse."

Despite herself, she again swung the conversation back to him. There was something she had to know.

"In your case," she said, slowly, "I can understand. You have always shut everybody out—you and your grandfather. You must have been horribly lonely—but you seemed to prefer it, even when you were a boy. And evidently you have kept up your barriers all your life." Her voice stopped there, but he caught the unasked question: "Have you?"

"I was lonely, all right." He made the admission, then abruptly shied away from further revelations. The little girl with the blowing hair was knocking too urgently on the door of the past.

"What part of our garden will you play in?" he asked.

"Oh, are you going to give me some of it?" She had herself in hand now. This

pity for him that made her heart swell and her throat ache should and would be diverted into practical channels.

"Of course. And I think the part you would like best is the sunken garden. That's off in the southwest corner, and you get into it by going down a little flight of red brick steps. When you are there you seem quite away from all the rest of the world."

"But you will invite me into it sometimes, won't you?"

"Let's go in now," she said.

At her request he described the garden in detail. It was an enchanting place—quite as mysterious and romantic as she had pictured it. The old man, it seemed, had lived his life there—pottering around it all day long, eating his meals in the open, reading and studying, even sleeping there in a screened, flat hammock, on summer nights. Listening. Florence seemed to see his thin shadow, even now, flitting in and out among the trees.

They were side by side on a stone bench in the sunken garden, discussing a favorite fairy tale, when her eyes fell on her wrist watch. She shook her head reproachfully.

"I've stayed an hour," she exclaimed. "Shocking!" Miss Greeley won't let me come any more if I do this sort of thing. And my boys will think I have deserted them."

She made the last statement with clear deliberation. He was to understand that she had forever dissociated him from the mere rank and file of "the boys." They were old friends. She rose from the camp chair and stopped at his side for a moment. Among the black hair on his temple was a narrow line of white. The impulse to touch it was almost overwhelming. She set her teeth.

"Is there anything I can send back to you?" she asked. "Or any message I can take into the hospital as I go by?"

"No, thank you," he said, almost absently. His expression, too, was almost absent. If pique had not been too trivial an emotion for that big moment, she would have indulged in it. He was so obviously resigned to her going. Her heart went down, down. Had she found him too late?

"I am just coming back slowly from the old garden and the kid I was," he said at last, and he added, with a sigh that ended in a smile: "It's a long journey."

Recalling these words, and all his words, during the drive home, Florence realized how whole heartedly he at least had played their little game.

When she visited him the third time, after a dragging interval of four days, she carried out to his chair in the grounds a great mass of flowers and dropped them into his lap. It had seemed rather an absurd thing to do—but what could one offer a sick soldier who certainly did not smoke or read and who, apparently, did not eat? She saw at once that the flowers pleased him. He fumbled among them with his thin hands and raised a cluster of them to his face.

"These old-fashioned white roses might have grown in the garden. Don't you remember the two rows of white roses bushes I told you about, that lined the east walk?" he asked eagerly. "I don't suppose one could find roses like those nowadays, with the delicious old-time perfume. In fact, I don't remember that any rose I have had since had any perfume at all."

He pinned a rose in his tunic, kept a bunch of white roses in his hands, and looked regretfully at the mass left in his lap.

"It's a pity to let those die," he said tentatively. "They ought to have some water."

She turned back to him and shook her head. "No, they have come to die for you. I brought a lot more. Those are in a big pitcher of water at the head of your bed. These are for a fairy ring—to put in a circle around your chair and make a wish over."

He smiled. It was the smile she had begun to watch for hungrily, the boyish, charming smile under which his dark face seemed to flash into light.

"Who is going to make the first wish?" he asked.

"You are—first. Then I shall make one, too."

"All right," he said. "But I'll have my work cut out for me, thinking up a wish." His face had clouded again. She looked at him, heavy-hearted and solemn-eyed.

"It would be nice if we could both make the same wish," she ventured. "What would that be?" He asked the question almost indifferently, watching her as she now rose and began to drop the flowers around him, but seemingly feeling no great interest in the pretty game.

"That you may soon be as well and strong as you ever were, and"—she hesitated, then resolutely brought out the rest—"that your ambitions may be re-awakened."

He turned and gave her a sudden, sharp look.

"Just why do you say that?"

The tone distressed her, but she held her ground.

"Dr. Brown tells me you are really amazingly clever—that you could do anything you attempted if only you an effort. But he said another thing would work up enough ambition to make that disturbed me very much," she rushed on, before he could interrupt. "He added that you had been getting on beautifully up till a fortnight ago, but that since then you have slipped back until you are as indifferent and almost as impossible to influence as you were when you came. Everyone has noticed the change, but he says he can't account for it. That made me feel—unhappy. For, don't you see, I came in just about that time, to help you—and perhaps you were right. Perhaps you needed to be left alone. Possibly I have done you more harm than good. That's why I am making the ring—and my wish. When I have done it, I am going to leave you in peace."

"Do you think it would be peace?" he asked, quietly.

"I don't know," she said, trying to speak steadily. "I don't know anything

about you. You have never told me anything, you know, except about that garden."

"So you have decided to drop me?" He asked the question slowly, his dark eyes unwaveringly on her face.

She leaned forward, picked up one of the flowers in his lap, and slowly pulled it to pieces.

"Please don't put it that way," she said at last, in a voice so low he had to lean closer to hear it. "Surely I have shown you how much I wanted to help, and—I have let you see how much I have enjoyed the effort. But, apparently, I have merely made things worse for you—or something has. I believe Dr. Brown holds me responsible, or he wouldn't have spoken as he did. So—you understand—"

For a long time silence lay between them like a substance which neither could remove.

"I wish," he said at last, "I could find the words to tell you what I've got to say. But—I can't!" The final admission was almost a groan. The sound brought her upright in her chair, her brown eyes seeking his, which did not meet them.

"Surely," she then said, "you know there is nothing that you can't say to me."

His eyes met hers and held them.

"You mean that?"

"Of course I meant it."

She waited, watching his face. He drew a deep, shaken breath.

"The second time you came here," he began, obviously forcing out the words, "you spoke to me about Ted Fiske. Do you happen to remember Dan, the chauffeur his father had so many years?"

She felt chilled. What had the Fiske chauffeur to do with what he and she were discussing?

"Dan?" she repeated, confusedly. "Why, why—yes. He drove me thousands of miles. I suppose. I was always going off on trips with Ted's mother and sisters. Why do you ask?"

"Do you remember any of his children?"

"Don't you remember any one of them?"

"There was one—there was one—"

"Yes." The word came at her like a bullet.

"There was one who was always acting—I mean always playing a part among the other boys."

"Yes," he said curtly. "Tell me all that you remember about him."

"Sometimes he was a king," she went on, unsteadily; "sometimes a beggar, sometimes a prince, sometimes a highwayman, sometimes a red Indian. Whatever he was, he took the part seriously and kept it up for days and weeks at a time. He made all the other children accept it. The whole town talked about him. Some people thought he was—a little queer. But his father was proud of him. A year or so after we left Weyo I heard that Dan had sent the boy east to college."

For some reason she could not go on. Her throat and lips felt dry.

"Do you remember the youngster's name?"