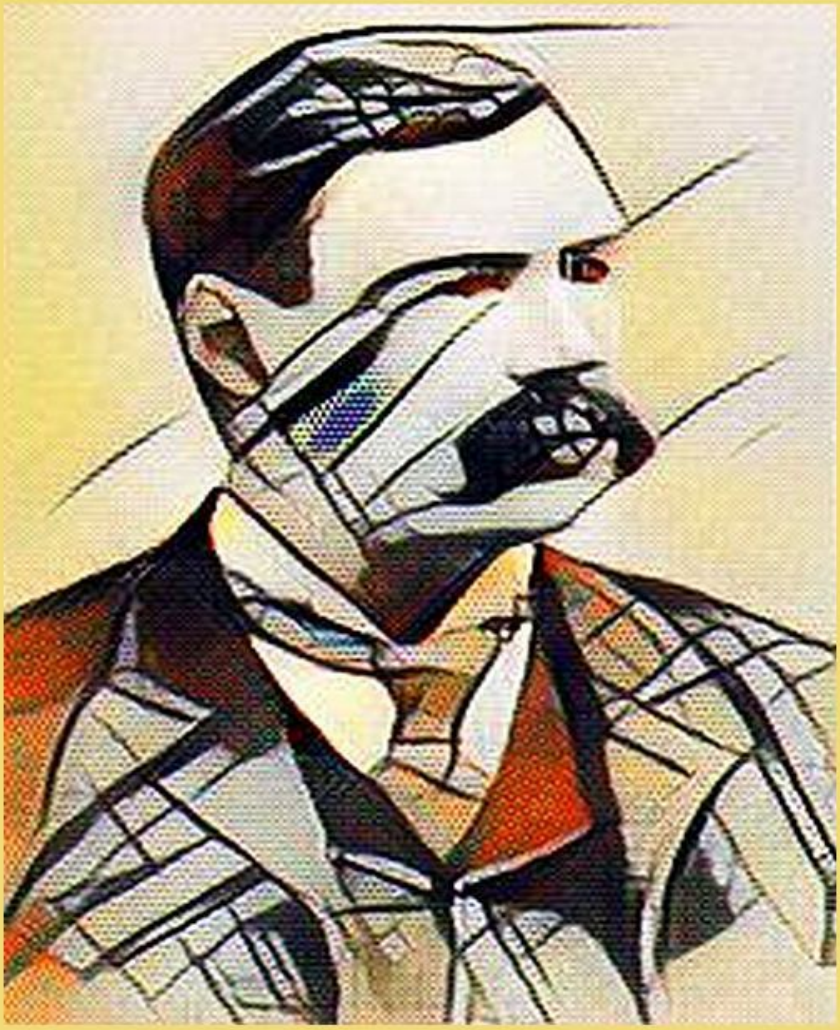
HAROLD FREDERIC



MARSENA
AND OTHER STORIES OF WARTIME

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MARSENA

MARSENA PULFORD, what time the village of Octavius knew him, was a slender and tall man, apparently skirting upon the thirties, with sloping shoulders and a romantic aspect.

It was not alone his flowing black hair, and his broad shirt-collars turned down after the ascertained manner of the British poets, which stamped him in our humble minds as a living brother to " The Corsair," " The Last of the Suliotes," and other heroic personages engraved in the albums and keepsakes of the period. His face, with its darkling eyes and distinguished features, conveyed wherever it went an impression of proudly silent melancholy. In those days — that is, just before the war — one could not look so convincingly and uniformly sad as Marsena did without raising the general presumption of having been crossed in love. We had a respectful feeling, in his case, that the lady ought to have been named Inez, or at the very least Oriana.

Although he went to the Presbyterian Church with entire regularity, was never seen in public save in a long-tailed black coat, and in the winter wore gloves instead of mittens, the local conscience had always, I think, sundry reservations about the moral character of his past. It would not have been reckoned against him, then, that he was obviously poor. We had not learned in those primitive times to measure people by dollar-mark standards. Under ordinary conditions, too, the fact that he came from New England — had indeed lived in Boston — must have counted rather in his favor than otherwise. But it was known that he had been an artist, a professional painter of pictures and portraits, and we understood in Octavius that

this involved acquaintanceship, if not even familiarity, with all sorts of occult and deleterious phases of city life.

Our village held all vice, and especially the vice of other and larger places, in stern reprobation. Yet, though it turned this matter of the newcomer's previous occupation over a good deal in its mind, Marsena carried himself with such a gentle picturesqueness of subdued sorrow that these suspicions were disarmed, or, at the worst, only added to the fascinated interest with which Octavius watched his spare and solitary figure upon its streets, and noted the progress of his efforts to find a footing for himself in its social economy.

It was taken for granted among us that he possessed a fine and well-cultivated mind, to match that thoughtful countenance and that dignified deportment. This assumption continued to hold its own in the face of a long series of failures in the attempt to draw him out. Almost everybody who was anybody at one time or another tried to tap Marsena's mental reservoirs — and all in vain. Beyond the barest commonplaces of civil conversation he could never be tempted. Once, indeed, he had volunteered to the Rev. Mr. Bunce the statement that he regarded Washington Allston as in several respects superior to Copley; but as no one in Octavius knew who these men were, the remark did not help us much. It was quoted frequently, however, as indicating the lofty and recondite nature of the thoughts with which Mr. Pulford occupied his intellect. As it became more apparent, too, that his reserve must be the outgrowth of some crushing and incurable heart grief, people grew to defer to it and to avoid vexing his silent moods with talk.

Thus, when he had been a resident and neighbor for over two years, though no one knew him at all well, the whole community regarded him with kindly and even respectful emotions, and the girls in particular felt that he was a distinct acquisition to the place.

I have said that Marsena Pulford was poor. Hardly anybody in Octavius ever knew to what pathetic depths his poverty during the second winter descended. There was a period of several months, in sober truth, during which he fed himself upon six or seven cents a day. As he was too proud to dream of asking credit at the grocer's and butcher's, and walked about more primly erect than ever, meantime, in his frock-coat and gloves, no idea of these privations got abroad. And at the end of this long evil winter there came a remarkable spring, which altered in a violent way the fortunes of millions of people — among them Marsena. We have to do with events somewhat subsequent to that even, and with the period of Mr. Pulford's prosperity.

The last discredited strips of snow up in the ravines on the hill-sides were melting away; the robins had come again, and were bustling busily across between the willows, already in the leaf, and the budded elms; men were going about the village streets without their overcoats, and boys were telling exciting tales about the suckers in the creek; our old friend Homer Sage had returned from his winter's sojourn in the county poorhouse at Thessaly, and could be seen daily sitting in the sunshine on the broad stoop of the Excelsior Hotel. It was April of 1862. A whole year had gone by since that sudden and memorable turn in Marsena Pulford's luck. So far from there being signs now of a possible adverse change, this new springtide brought such an increase of good fortune, with its attendant responsibilities, that Marsena was unable to bear the halcyon burden alone. He took in a partner to help him, and then the firm jointly hired a boy. The partner painted a signboard to mark this double event, in bold red letters of independent form upon a yellow ground:

PULFORD & SHULL.

Empire State Portrait Athenaeum and Studio.

War Likenesses at Peace Prices.

Marsena discouraged the idea of hanging this out on the street; and, as a compromise, it was finally placed at the end of the operating-room, where for years thereafter it served for the sitters to stare at when their skulls had been clasped in the iron head-rest and they had been adjured to look pleasant. A more modest and conventional announcement of the new firm's existence was put outside, and Octavius accepted it as proof that the liberal arts were at last established within its borders on a firm and lucrative basis.

The head of the firm was not much altered by this great wave of prosperity. He had been drilled by adversity into such careful ways with his wardrobe that he did not need to get any new clothes. Although the villagers, always kindly, sought now with cordial effusiveness to make him feel one of themselves, and although he accepted all their invitations and showed himself at every public meeting in his capacity as a representative and even prominent citizen, yet the heart of his mystery remained unplucked. Marsena was too busy in these days to be much upon the streets. When he did appear he still walked alone, slowly and with an air of settled gloom. He saluted such passers-by as he knew in stately silence. If they stopped him or joined him in his progress, at the most he would talk sparingly of the weather and the roads.

Neither at the fortnightly sociables of the Ladies' Church Mite Society, given in turn at the more important members' homes, nor in the more casual social assemblages of the place, did Marsena ever unbend. It was not that he held himself aloof, as some others did, from the simple amusements of the evening. He never shrank from bearing his part in " pillow," " clap in and clap out," "post-office," or in whatever other game was to be played, and he went through the kissing penalties and rewards involved without apparent aversion. It was also to be noted, in fairness, that, if any one smiled at him full in the face, he instantly smiled

in response. But neither smile nor chaste salute served to lift for even the fleeting instant that veil of reserve which hung over him.

Those who thought that by having Marsena Pulford take their pictures they would get on more intimate terms with him fell into grievous error. He was more sententious and unapproachable in his studio, as he called it, than anywhere else. In the old days, before the partnership, when he did everything himself, his manner in the reception-room downstairs, where he showed samples, gave the prices of frames, and took orders, had no equal for formal frigidity — except his subsequent demeanor in the operating-room upstairs. The girls used to declare that they always emerged from the gallery with " cold shivers all over them." This, however, did not deter them from going again, repeatedly, after the outbreak of the war had started up the universal notion of being photographed.

When the new partner came in, in this April of 1862, Marsena was able to devote himself exclusively to the technical business of the camera and the dark-room, on the second floor. He signaled this change by wearing now every day an old russet-colored velveteen jacket, which we had never seen before. This made him look even more romantically melancholy and picturesque than ever, and revived something of the fascinating curiosity as to his hidden past; but it did nothing toward thawing the ice-bound shell which somehow came at every point between him and the good-fellowship of the community.

The partnership was scarcely a week old when something happened. The new partner, standing behind the little show case in the reception-room, transacted some preliminary business with two customers who had come in. Then, while the sound of their ascending footsteps was still to be heard on the stairs, he hastily left his post and entered the little workroom at the back of the counter.

" You couldn't guess in a baker's dozen of tries who's gone upstairs," he said to the boy. Without waiting for even one effort, he added: " It's the Parmalee girl, and Dwight Ransom's with her, and he's got a Lootenant's uniform on, and they're goin' to be took together! "

"What of it?" asked the unimaginative boy. He was bending over a crock of nitric acid, transferring from it one by one to a tub of water a lot of spoiled glass plates. The sickening fumes from the jar, and the sting of the acid on his cracked skin, still further diminished his interest in contemporary sociology. " Well, what of it? " he repeated, sulkily.

" Oh, I don't know," said the new partner, in a listless, disappointed way. "It seemed kind o' curious, that's all. Holdin' her head up as high in the air as she does, you wouldn't think she'd so much as look at an ordinary fellow like Dwight Ransom."

" I suppose this is a free country," remarked the boy, rising to rest his back.

"Oh, my, yes," returned the other; "if she's pleased, I'm quite agreeable. And — I don't know, too — I daresay she's gettin' pretty well along. May be she thinks they ain't any too much time to lose, and is making a grab at what comes handiest. Still, I should 'a' thought she could 'a' done better than Dwight. I worked with him for a spell once, you know."

There seemed to be very few people with whom Newton Shull had not at one time or another worked. Apparently there was no craft or calling which he did not know something about. The old phrase, " Jack of all trades," must surely have been coined in prophecy for him. He had turned up in Octavius originally, some years before, as the general manager of a " Whaler's Life on the Rolling Deep" show, which was specially adapted for moral exhibitions in connection with church fairs. Calamity, however, had long marked this enterprise for its own, and at our village its career culminated under the auspices of a sheriff's officer.

The boat, the harpoons, the panorama sheet and rollers, the whale's jaw, the music-box with its nautical tunes — these were sold and dispersed. Newton Shull remained, and began work as a mender of clocks. Incidentally, he cut out stencil-plates for farmers to label their cheese-boxes with, and painted or gilded ornamental designs on chair-backs through perforated paper patterns. For a time he was a maker of children's sleds. In slack seasons he got jobs to help the druggist, the tinsmith, the dentist, or the Town Clerk, and was equally at home with each. He was one of the founders of the Octavius Philharmonics, and offered to play any instrument they liked, though his preference was for what he called the bull fiddle. He spoke often of having travelled as a bandsman with a circus. We boys believed that he was quite capable of riding a horse bareback as well.

When Marsena Pulford, then, decided that he must have some help, Newton Shull was obviously the man. How the arrangement came to take the form of a partnership was never explained, save on the conservative village theory that Marsena must have reasoned that a partner would be safer with the cash-box downstairs, while he was taking pictures upstairs, than a mere hired man. More likely it grew out of their temperamental affinity. Shull was also a man of grave and depressed moods (as, indeed, is the case with all who play the bass viol), only his melancholy differed from Marsena's in being of a tirelessly garrulous character. This was not always an advantage. When customers came in, in the afternoon, it was his friendly impulse to engage them in conversation at such length that frequently the light would fail altogether before they got upstairs. He recognized this tendency as a fault, and manfully combated it — leaving the reception-room with abruptness at the earliest possible moment, and talking to the boy in the work-room instead.

Mr. Shull was a short, round man, with a beard which was beginning to show gray under the lip. His reception-room manners were urbane and persuasive to a degree, and he particularly excelled in convincing people that the portraits of themselves, which Marsena had sent down to him in the dummy to be dried and varnished, and which they hated vehemently at first sight, were really unique and precious works of art. He had also much success in inducing country folks to despise the cheap ferrotype which they had intended to have made, and to adventure upon the costlier ambrotype, daguerreotype, or even photograph instead. If they did not go away with a family album or an assortment oi~ frames that would come in handy as well, it was no fault of his.

He made these frames himself, on a bench which he had fitted up in the work-room. Here he constructed show-cases, too, cut out mats and mounts, and did many other things as adjuncts to the business, which honest Marsena had never dreamed of.

" Yes," he went on now, " I carried a chain for Dwight the best part o' one whole summer, when he was layin' levels for that Nedahma Valley Railroad they were figurin' on buildin'. Guess they ruther let him in over that job — though he paid me fair enough. It ain't much of a business, that surveyin'. You spend about half your time in findin' out for people the way they could do things if they only had the money to do 'em, and the other half in settlin' miserable farmers' squabbles about the boundaries of their land. You've got to pay a man day's wages for totin' round your chain and axe and stakes — and, as like as not, you never get even that money back, let alone any pay for yourself. I know something about a good many trades, and I say surveyin' is pretty nigh the poorest of 'em all."

" George Washington was a surveyor," commented the boy, stooping down to his task once more.