

The Fighting Chance.

... By ...
ROBERT W. CHAMBERS.

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"I wonder if you know Howard Quarrier," she said.

After a second's hesitation he replied: "Yes, a little. Everybody does."

"You do know him?"

"Only at the club."

"Oh, the Lenox?"

"The Lenox and the Patrons."

Preoccupied, driving with careless, almost inattentive, perfection, she thought idly of her twenty-three years, wondering how life could have passed so quickly, leaving her already stranded on the shoals of an engagement to marry Howard Quarrier. Then her thoughts, errant, wandered half the world over before they returned to Seward, and when at length they did, and meaning to be civil, she spoke again of his acquaintance with Quarrier at the Patrons club, the club itself being sufficient to settle Seward's status in every community.

"I'm trying to remember what it is I have heard about you," she continued amiably. "You are?"

An odd expression in his eyes arrested her long enough to note their color and expression, and she continued pleasantly: "You are Stephen Seward, are you not? You see, I know your name perfectly well." Her straight brows contracted a trifle. She drove on, lips compressed, following an elusive train of thought which vaguely, persistently, coupled his name with something indefinitely unpleasant. And she could not reconcile this with his appearance. However, the train of unlinked ideas which she pursued began to form the semblance of a chain. Coupling his name with Quarrier's and with a club aroused memory. Vague uneasiness stirred her to a glimmering comprehension. Seward—Stephen Seward? One of the New York Swards then—one of that race—

Suddenly the truth flashed upon her—the crude truth, lacking definite de-

tail, lacking circumstance and color and atmosphere—merely the raw and ugly truth.

Had he looked at her, and he did once, he could have seen only the unruffled and very sweet profile of a young girl. Composure was one of the masks she had learned to wear when she chose.

"Miss Landis," he said.

"Mr. Seward?" very gently. It was her way to be gentle when generous.

"I think," he said, "that you are beginning to remember where you may have heard my name."

"Yes, a little." She looked at him with the direct gaze of a child, but the lovely eyes were troubled. His smile was not very genuine, but he met her gaze steadily enough.

"It was rather nice of Mrs. Ferrall to ask me," he said, "after the mess I made of things last spring."

"Grace Ferrall is a dear," she replied.

After a moment he ventured, "I suppose you saw it in the papers."

"I think so. I had completely forgotten it. Your name seemed to—"

"I see." Then listlessly, "I couldn't have ventured to remind you that—that perhaps you might not care to be so amiable."

"Mr. Seward," she said impulsively, "you are nice to me! Why shouldn't I be amiable? It was—it was—I've forgotten just how dreadfully you did behave!"

"Pretty badly."

"Very."

"They say so."

"And what is your opinion, Mr. Seward?"

"Oh, I ought to have known better." Something about him reminded her of a bad small boy, and suddenly, in spite of her better sense, in spite of her instinctive caution, she found herself on the very verge of laughter. What was it in the man that disarmed and invited a confidence scarcely justified, it appeared? What was it now that moved her to overlook what few overlook, not the fault, but its publicity? Was it his agreeable bearing, his pleasant badinage, his amiably listless moments of preoccupation, his youth, that appealed to her, aroused her charity, her generosity, her curiosity?

And had other people continued to accept him too? What would Quarrier think of his negligence at Shotover?

CHAPTER TWO

A HOUSE of native stone built into and among weather scarred rocks, one massive wing butting seaward, others nosing north and south among cedars and outcropping ledges, the whole silver gray mass of masonry reddening under a westerling sun, every dormer, every leaded diamond pane afloat—this was Shotover as Seward first beheld it.

As the phaeton drew up under a pillared porte cochere one or two servants appeared. A rather imposing specimen bowed them through the doors into the hall, where in a wide chimney place the embers of a drift wood fire glimmered like a heap of dusty jewels. Bars of sunlight slanted on wall and rug, on stone floor and carved staircase, on the bronze foliations of the railed gallery above, where, in the golden gloom through a high window, sun tipped treetops against a sky of azure stirred like burnished foliage in a tapestry.

"There is nobody here, of course," observed Miss Landis to Seward as they halted in front of the fireplace. "The season opens today in this county, you see"—she shrugged her pretty shoulders—"and the women who don't shoot make the first field luncheon a function."

She turned, nodded her adieu, then, over her shoulder casually, "If you haven't an appointment with the sandman before dinner you may find me in the gunroom."

"I'll be there in about three minutes," he said. "And what about this dog?" looking down at the Sagamore pup, who stood before him wagging, attentive, always the gentleman to the tips of his toes.

Miss Landis laughed. "Take him to your room if you like. Dogs have the run of the house."

So he followed a servant to the floor above, where a smiling and very ornamental maid preceded him through a corridor and into that heavy wing of the house which fronted the sea.

"Tea is served in the gunroom, sir," said the pretty maid and disappeared to give place to a melancholy and silent young man, who turned on the bath laid out fresh raiment and, whispering "Scotch or Irish, sir?" presently faced himself.

Before he quenched his own thirst Seward filled a bowl and set it on the floor, and it seemed as though the dog would never finish gulping and slapping in the limpid icy water.

"It's the salt air, my boy," commented the young man, gravely refilling his own glass as though accepting the excuse on his own account.

Then man and beast completed ablutions and grooming and filed out through the wide corridor, around the gallery and down the broad stairway to the gunroom, an oaken vaulted place illuminated by the sun, where mellow lights sparkled on glass cased rows of fowling pieces and rifles, on the polished antlers of shaggy moose heads.

Miss Landis sat curled up in a cushioned corner under the open casement panes offering herself a cup of tea. She looked up, nodding invitation. He found a place beside her. A servant

whispered, "Scotch or Irish, sir?" then set the crystal paraphernalia at his elbow.

He said something about the salt air casually. The girl gazed meditatively at space.

The sound of wheels on the gravel outside aroused her from a silence which had become a brown study, and to Seward presently she said, "Here endeth our first rendezvous."

"Then let us arrange another immediately," he said, stirring the ice in his glass.

The girl considered him with speculative eyes. "I shouldn't exactly know what to do with you for the next hour if I didn't abandon you."

"Why bother to do anything with me? Why even give yourself the trouble of deserting me? That solves the problem."

"I really don't mean that you are a problem to me, Mr. Seward," she said, amused. "I mean that I am going to drive again."

"I see."

"No; you don't see at all. There's a telegram. I'm not driving for pleasure."

She had not meant that either, and it annoyed her that she had expressed herself in such terms. As a matter of fact, at the telegraphed request of Mr. Quarrier she was going to Black Fells Crossing to meet his train from the lakes and drive him back to Shotover. The drive, therefore, was, of course, a drive for pleasure.

"I see," repeated Seward amiably.

"Perhaps you do," she observed, rising to her graceful height. He was on his feet at once, so carelessly, so good humoredly acquiescent that without any reason at all she hesitated.

"I had meant to show you about—the cliffs, the kennels and stables, I'm sorry," she concluded, lingering.

"I'm awfully sorry," he rejoined without meaning anything in particular. That was the trouble—whatever he said apparently meant so much.

With the agreeable sensation of being regretted she leisurely gloved herself, then walked through the gunroom and hall, Seward strolling beside her.

The dog followed them as they turned toward the door and passed out across the terraced veranda to the driveway, where a tandem cart was drawn up, faultlessly appointed. Quarrier's mania was tandem. She thought it rather nice of her to remember this.

She inspected the ensemble without visible interest for a few moments. The wind freshened from the sea, fluttering her veil, and she turned toward the east to face it. In the golden splendor of declining day the white sails of yachts crowded landward on the last leg before beating westward into Blue harbor. A small white cruiser steaming south left a mile long stratum of rose tinted smoke hanging parallel to the horizon's plane. The westerling sun struck sparks from her bright work.

They had turned their backs to the tandem. The grooms looked after them, standing motionless at the horses' heads.

"Mr. Seward, this is too fine to miss," she said. "I will walk as far as the headland with you. Please smoke if you care to."

The breeze blown conversation became fragmentary, veering as capriciously as the purple wind flaps that spread across the shoals. But always to her question or comment she found in his response the charm of freshness, of quick intelligence or of a humorous and idle perversity which stimulates without demanding.

Once, glancing back at the house where the cart and horses stood, she said that she had better return, or perhaps she only thought she said it, for he made no response that time, and a few moments later they reached the headland, and the Atlantic lay below, flowing azure from horizon to horizon under a universe of depthless blue. And for a long while neither spoke.

With her the spell endured until conscience began to stir. Then she awoke, uneasy, as always, under the shadow of restraint or pressure until her eyes fell on him and lingered.

A subtle change had come into his face. Its leanness struck her for the first time—that and an utter detachment from his surroundings, a somber oblivion to everything and to her.

How curiously had his face altered! How shadowy it had grown, effacing the charm of youth in it!

The slight amusement with which she had become conscious of her own personal exclusion grew to an interest tinged with curiosity.

The interest continued, but when his silence became irksome to her she said so very frankly. His absent eyes, still clouded, met hers unsmiling.

"I was thinking of men I knew—for example, a man who through generations has inherited every impulse and desire that he should not harbor, a man with intellect enough to be aware of it, with decency enough to desire decency. What chance has he with the storms which have been brewing for him even before he opened his eyes on earth? Is that a square deal?"

The troubled concentration of her face was reflected now in his own. The wind came whipping and flicking at them from league wide tossing wastes. The steady thunder of the sea accented the silence.

Turning to the sea, he had become engrossed in his own thoughts again, and again she was first curious, then impatient, at the ease with which he excluded her. She remembered, too, that the cart was waiting; that she had scarcely time now to make the train.

She stood irresolute, inert, disinclined to bestir herself. An inborn aptitude for drifting, which threatened to become a talent for indecision, had always alternated in her with sudden impulsive conclusions and when her pride was involved in decisions which sometimes scarcely withstood the analysis of reason.

Physically healthy, mentally unweakened, sentimentally incredulous, totally ignorant of any master passion and conventionally drilled, her beauty and sweet temper had carried her easily on the frothy crest of her first season over the eligible and ineligible alike, leaving her at Lenox a rather tired and breathless girl in love with pleasure and the world which treated her so well.

The death of her mother abroad had made little impression upon her, her uncle, Major Belwether, having cared for her since her father's death, when she was ten years old. So, although the scandal of her mother's self exile had been in a measure condoned by a tardy marriage to the man for whom she had left everything, her daughter had grown up ignorant of any particular feeling for a mother she could scarcely remember.

However, she wore black and went nowhere for the second winter, during which time she learned a great deal concerning the unconventional proclivities of the women of her race and family, enough to impress her so seriously that on an exaggerated impulse she had come to one of her characteristic decisions.

That decision was to break the unsavory record at the first justifiable opportunity, and the opportunity came in the shape of Quarrier—as though wedlock were actually the sanctuary which an alarmed nation pretends it to be!

Now, approaching the threshold of a third and last season and having put away her almost meaningless mourning, there had stolen into her sense of security something irksome in the promise she had made to give Quarrier a definite answer before winter.

Perhaps it had been the lack of interest in the people at Shotover, perhaps a mental review of her ancestors' capricious records, perhaps a characteristic impulse that had directed a telegram to Quarrier after a midnight confab with Grace Ferrall.

However it may have been, she had summoned him. And now he was on his way to get his answer, the best whip, the most eagerly discussed and one of the wealthiest unmarried men in America.

Lingering irresolutely, considering with idle eyes the shadows lengthening across the sun shot moorland, the sound of Seward's even voice aroused her from a meditation bordering on lassitude.

She answered vaguely. He spoke again, all the agreeable, gentle, humorous charm dominant once more, releasing her from the growing tension of her own thoughts, absolving her from the duty of immediate decision.

"I feel curiously lazy," she said, "perhaps from our long drive." She seated herself on the turf.

"Talk to me, Mr. Seward, in that lazy way of yours."

What he had to say proved inconsequent enough, an irrelevant suggestion concerning the training of field dogs. The conversation veered again toward the mystery of heredity.

"Do you mean, Mr. Seward, that heredity is an excuse for moral weakness?" she asked.

"I don't know. Those inheriting nothing of evil say it is no excuse."

"It is no excuse."

"You speak with authority," he said. "With more than you are aware of," she murmured, not meaning to say it.

She stood up impulsively, her fresh face turned to the distant house, her rounded young figure poised in relief against the sky.

"Inherited or not, idleness, procrastination, are my besetting sins. Can't you suggest the remedy, Mr. Seward?"

"But they are only the thieves of Time, and we kill the poor old gentleman."

"Leagued assassins," she repeated pensively.

Her gown had caught on the cliff briars. He knelt to release it, she looking down, noting an ugly tear in the fabric.

"Payment for my iniquities—the first installment," she said, still bowing down over his shoulder and watching his efforts to release her. "Thank you, Mr. Seward. I think we ought to start, don't you?"

He straightened up, smiling, awaiting her further pleasure. Her pleasure being capricious, she seated herself again, saying: "What I meant to say was this: Evils that spring from heredity are no excuse for misconduct in people of our sort. Environment, not heredity, counts. And it's our business, who have every chance in the world, to make good."

He looked down, amused at the piquant incongruity of voice and vernacular.

"What time is it?" she asked irrelevantly.

He glanced at his watch. She turned her eyes toward the level sun, conscious and a little conscience stricken that it was too late for her to drive to Black Fells Crossing unless she started at once.

It grew stiller. The wind went down with the sun.

(To be continued.)

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