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The Fighting Chance

ROBERT W. CHAMBERS

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(Continued from last week)

"Isn't that a stunning picture?" said Seward in a low voice. "What a beauty he is—like a statue in white and blue veined marble. You may talk, Miss Landis; woodcock don't flush at the sound of the human voice as grouse do."

"See his brown eyes roll back at us! He wonders why we don't do something!" whispered the girl. "Look, Mr. Seward! Now his head is moving, oh, so gradually to the left!"

"The bird is moving on the ground," nodded Seward. "Now the bird has stopped."

"I do wish I could see a woodcock on the ground," she breathed. "Do you think we might by any chance?"

Seward noiselessly sank to his knees and crouched, keen eyes minutely busy among the shadowy browns and grays of wet earth and withered leaf, and after awhile cautiously he signaled the girl to kneel beside him and stretched out one arm, forefinger extended.

"Sight straight along my arm," he said, "as though it were a rifle barrel." Her soft cheek rested against his shoulder, a stray strand of shining hair brushing his face.

"Under that bunch of fern," he whispered, "just the color of the dead leaves. Do you see? Don't you see that big woodcock squatted flat, bill pointed straight out and resting on the leaves?"

After a long while she saw suddenly, and an exquisite little shock tightened her fingers on Seward's extended arm.

"Oh, the feathered miracle!" she whispered. "The wonder of its cleverness to hide like that! You look and stare, seeing it all the while and not knowing that you see it. Then in a flash it is there, motionless, a brown shaped shadow among shadows. The dear little thing! Mr. Seward, do you think—are you going to?"

"No, I won't shoot it."

"Thank you. Might I sit here a moment to watch it?"

She seated herself soundlessly among the dead leaves. He sank in to place beside her, laying his gun aside.

"Rather rough on the dog," he said, with a grimace.

"Now. It is very good of you, Mr. Seward, to do this for my pleasure. Oh—hi! Do you see? Oh, the little beauty!"

The woodcock had risen, plumage puffed out, strutting with wings bowed and tail spread, facing the dog. The sudden pygmy defiance thrilled her. "Brave, brave!" she exclaimed, enraptured, but at the sound of her voice the bird crouched like a flash, large dark liquid eyes shining, long bill pointed straight toward them.

"He'll fly the way his bill points," said Seward. "Watch!"

He rose. She sprang lightly to her feet. There came a whirring flutter, a twittering shower of sweet notes, soft wings beating almost in their very faces, a distant shadow against the sky, and the woodcock was gone.

Quieting the astounded dog, gun rattled in the hollow of his left arm, he turned to the girl beside him. "That sort of thing wins no cups," he said.

"It wins something else, Mr. Seward—my very warm regard for you."

"There is no choice between that and the Shover cup," he admitted, considering her.

"I—do you mean it?"

"Of course I do!"

"Then you are much nicer than I thought you. And, after all, if the price of a cup is the life of that brave little bird I had rather shoot clay pigeons. Now you will scorn me, I suppose. Begin!"

"My ideal woman has never been a life taker," he said coolly. "Once when I was a boy there was a girl, very lovely, my first sweetheart. I saw her at the traps once just after she had killed her seventh pigeon straight, 'pulling it down' from overhead, you know, very clever. The little thing was breathing on the grass, and it made sounds"—He shrugged and walked on. "She killed her twenty-first bird straight. It was a handsome cup too."

And after a silence, "So you didn't love her any more, Mr. Seward?" mockingly sweet.

They laughed, and at the sound of laughter the tall stemmed alders echoed with the rushing roar of a cock grouse thundering skyward. Crack! Crack! Whirling over and over through a cloud of floating feathers, a heavy weight struck the springy earth. There lay the big mottled bird, splendid silky ruffs spread, dead eyes closing, a single tiny crimson bead twinkling like a ruby on the gaping beak.

"Dead!" said Seward to the dog who had dropped to shot. "Fetch!" And, signaling the boy behind, he relieved the dog of his burden and tossed the dead weight of ruffled plumage toward him. Then he broke his gun, and as the empty shells flew rattling backward slipped in fresh cartridges, locked the barrels and walked forward, the flush of excitement still staining his unburned face.

"You deal death mercifully," said the girl in a low voice. "I wonder what your old-devant sweetheart would

think of you."

"A dungler had better stick to the traps," he assented, ignoring the badinage.

"I am wondering," she said thoughtfully, "what I think of men who kill." He turned sharply, hesitated, shrugged. "Wild things' lives are brief at best—fox or flying tick, wet nests or mink, owl, hawk, weasel or man. But the death man deals is the most merciful. Besides," he added, laughing, "ours is not a case of sweethearts."

"My argument is purely in the abstract, Mr. Seward. I am asking you whether the death man deal is more justifiable than a woman's gift of..."

"Oh, well, life taking, the giving of life—there can be only one answer to the mystery, and I don't know it," he replied, smiling.

"I do."

"Tell me, then, he said," still amused. They had passed swale after swale of silver birches, waist deep in perturbed fern and brake. The big timber lay before them. She moved forward, light gun swung easily across her leather padded shoulder, and on the wood's sunny edge she seated herself, straight young back against a giant pine, gun balanced across her fattened knees.

"You are feeling the pace a little," he said, coming up and standing in front of her.

"The pace? No, Mr. Seward."

She sat, bright head pillowed in her arms, idly attentive to his low running comment on beast and bird and tree, on forest stillness and forest sounds, on life and the wild laws of life and death governing the great out world 'twixt sky and earth.

Somewhere in the woodland world the crows were holding a noisy session, and she told him that was the jury debating the degree of his guilt in killing the birds.

"Because you're guilty, of course," she continued. "I wonder what your sentence is to be?"

"I'll leave it to you," he suggested lazily.

"Suppose I sentenced you to slay no more?"

(To be continued)

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