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The Fighting Chance

ROBERT W. CHAMBERS

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(Continued from October 22.)

"Oh, I'd appeal!"
"No use. I am the tribunal of last resort."
"Then I throw myself upon the mercy of the court."
"You do well, Mr. Sward. This court is very merciful. How much do you care for bird murder? Very much? Is there anything you care for more? Yes? And could this court grant it to you in compensation?"
He said deliberately, roused by the level challenge of her gaze, "The court is incompetent to compensate the prisoner or offer any compromise."
"Why, Mr. Sward?"
"Because the court herself is already compromised in her future engagements."
"But what has my engagement to do with—"
"You offered compensation for depriving me of my shooting. There could be only one adequate compensation."
"And that?" she asked, coolly enough.
"Your continual companionship."
"But you have it, Mr. Sward."
"I have it for a day. The season lasts three months, you know."
"And you and I are to play a continuous wadville for three months? Is that your offer?"
"Partly."
"Then one day with me is not worth those many days of murder?" she asked in pretended astonishment.
"Ask yourself why those many days would be doubly empty," he said, so seriously that the pointless game began to confuse her.

"Then"—she turned lightly from uncertain ground—"then perhaps we had better be about that matter of the cup you prize so highly. Are you ready, Mr. Sward? There is much to be killed yet, including time, you know."
"I am not sure," he reflected, "just exactly what I should ask of you if you insist on taking away"—he turned and looked about him through the burnt gold foliage—"if you took away all this out of my life."
"I shall not take it, because I have nothing in exchange to offer, you say," she answered imprudently.
"I did not say so," he retorted.
"You did, reminding me that the court is already engaged for a continuous performance."
"Was it necessary to remind you?" he asked, with deliberate malice.
She flushed up, vexed, silent, then looked directly at him with beautiful hostile eyes. "What do you mean, Mr. Sward? Are you taking our harmless, life badinage as warrant for an intimacy unwarranted?"
"Have I offended?" he asked, so impulsively that a flash of resentment brought her to her feet, angry and self-possessed.
"How far have we to go?" she asked quietly.

He rose to his feet, turned, hailing the keeper, repeating the question. And at the answer they both started forward, the dog ranging ahead through a dense growth of beech and chestnut, over a high brown ridge, then down, always down along a leafy ravine to the water's edge—a forest pond set in the gorgeous foliage of ripening maples.
"I don't see," said Sylvia impatiently, "how we are going to obey instructions and go straight ahead. There must be a stupid boat somewhere!"
But the game laden keeper shook his head, pulled up his hip boots, and pointed out a line of alder poles set in the water to mark a crossing.
"Am I expected to wade?" asked the girl anxiously.
"This here," observed the keeper, "is one of the most sportin' courses on the estate. Last season I seen Miss Page go through it like a scared deer—the young lady, sir, that took last season's cup"—in explanation to Sward, who stood doubtfully at the water's edge, looking back at Sylvia.
Raising her dismayed eyes she encountered his; there was a little laugh between them. She stepped daintily waded out, across the stones to the water's edge, instinctively gathering her skirts in one hand.
"Miles and I could chair you over," suggested Sward.
"Is that fair—under the rules?"
"Oh, yes, miss, as long as you go straight," said the keeper.
So they laid aside the guns and the guide's gamessack, and formed a chair with their hands, and bearing the girl between them, they waded out along the driven alder stakes, knee deep in brown water.

Her arm, lightly resting around his neck, tightened a trifle as the water rose to his thighs; then the faint pressure relaxed as they thrashed shoreward through the shallows, ankle deep once more, and landed among the dry

feeds on the farther bank.
Miles, the keeper, went back for the guns. Sward stamped about in the sun, shaking the drops from waterproof breeches and gaiters, only to be half drenched again when Sagamore shook himself vigorously.
"I suppose," said Sylvia, looking sideways at Sward, "your contempt for my sporting accomplishments has not decreased. I'm sorry. I don't like to walk in wet shoes even to gain your approval."
And as the keeper came splashing across the shallows: "Miles, you may carry my gun. I shall not need it any longer."
The upward roar of a bevy of grouse drowned her voice. Poor Sagamore, pointing madly in the blackberry thicket all unperceived, cast a dismayed glance aloft where the sunlit air quivered under the winnowing rush of heavy wings. Sward flung up his gun, heading a big quartering bird. Steadily the glittering barrels swept in the arc of fire, hesitated, wavered, then the possibility passed. The young fellow lowered the gun slowly, gravely, stood a moment motionless with bent head until the rising color in his face had faded.

And that was all for awhile. The astonished and disgusted keeper stared into the thicket. The dog lay quivering, impatient for signal. Sylvia's heart, which had seemed to stop with her voice, silenced in the gusty thunder of heavy wings, began beating too fast. For the ringing crack of a gun shot could have spoken no louder to her than the glittering silence of the suspended barrels nor any promise of his voice sound as the startled stillness sounded now about her, for he had made something a trifle more than mere amends for his rudeness. He was overdoing everything a little.

He stood on the thicket's edge, absently unloading the weapon, scarcely understanding what he had done and what he had not done.
A moment later a far hail sounded across the uplands, and against the sky figures moved distantly.
"Alderdene and Marion Page," said Sward. "I believe we lunch yonder, so we not, Miles?"
They climbed the hill in silence, arriving after a few minutes to find others already at luncheon—the Page boys, eager, enthusiastic, recounting adventure by flood and field; Rena Bonasdel, tired and frankly bored and decorated with more than her share of mud; Eileen Shannon, very pretty, very attractive, having done more execution with her eyes than with the dainty fowling piece beside her.

Marion Page nodded to Sylvia and Sward with a crisp, businesslike question or two, then went over to inspect their bag, nodding approbation as Miles laid the game on the grass.
"Eight full brace," she commented. "We have five and an odd cock pleasant—from Black Falls, I suppose. The people to our left have been blazing away like Coney Island, but Rena's guide says the ferns are full of rabbits that way, and Major Belwether can't hit fur afoot. You," she added frankly to Sward, "ought to take the cup. The birches ahead of you are full of woodcock. If you don't Howard Quarrier will. He's into a flight of the blue bird."
(To be continued)

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Buy Farm at Corvallis.
The Armstrong place, formerly the property of W. C. Metcalf, about two miles south of this city, was sold last Tuesday to Messrs. T. J. Pettit of Corvallis and Peter Kurre of Independence. There are 102 acres in this farm and this is to be cut into five and ten acre tracts and placed on the market. The land lies just across the road from the race track, reaches to Mary's river and is as slightly a piece of ground as is to be found anywhere. Messrs. Kurre and Pettit propose to cut a road through, fence the smaller tracts and sell at only a fair advance on their money. It is understood the ground cost them \$10,000.

By a typographical error the balance of cash on hand for the book fund, as published in the library report last week, was made to read \$12 when it should have been \$112.

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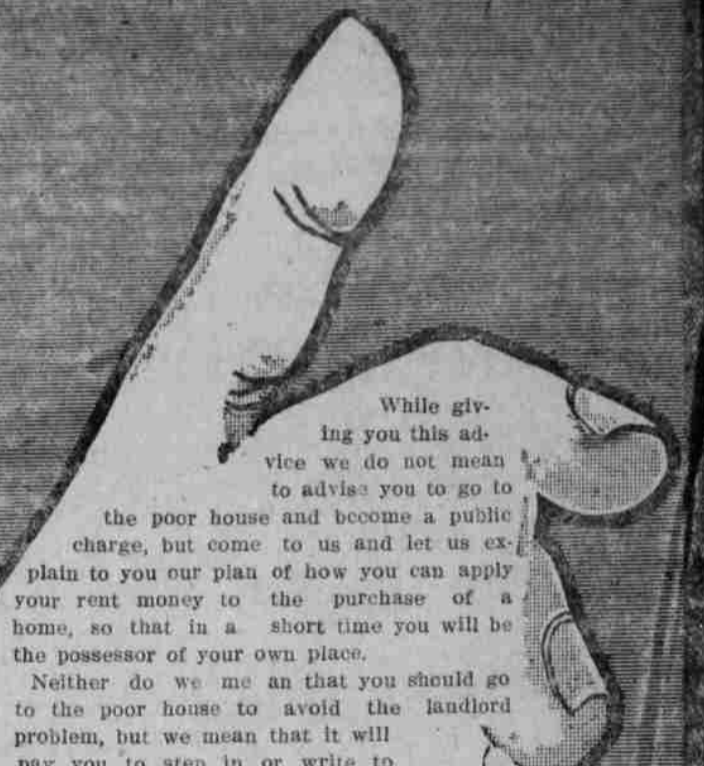
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