

The Fighting Chance

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Seward's eyes had suddenly narrowed; then he laughed, patting Sagamore's cheeks. "I don't believe I shall shoot very steadily this afternoon," he said, turning toward the group at luncheon under the trees. "I wish Quarter well with the cup."

"Nonsense!" said Marion Page curtly. "You are the cleanest shot I ever knew." And she raised her glass to him frankly and emptied it with the precision characteristic of her. "Your cup! With all my heart!"

"I also drink to your success, Mr. Seward," said Sylvia in a low voice, lifting her champagne glass in the sunlight. "To the Shotover cup—if you wish it."

In the little gust of hand clapping and laughter he turned again to Sylvia smilingly, saying under his breath, "As though winning the cup would compensate me now for losing it!"

She leaned involuntarily nearer. "You mean that you will not try for it?"

"Yes."

"That is not fair to me!"

"Why not?"

"Because—because I do not ask it of you."

"You need not, now that I know your wish."

"Mr. Seward, I—my—wish—"

But she had no chance to finish. Already Rena Bonnesdel was looking at them, and there was a hint of amused surprise in Eileen Shannon's mischievous eyes, averted instantly, with malicious ostentation.

Then Marion Page took possession of him so exclusively, so calmly, that something in her cool certainty vaguely irritated Sylvia, who had never liked her. Besides, the girl showed too plainly her indifference to other people, which other people seldom find amusing.

"Stephen," called out Alderdene anxiously counting the web loops in his khaki vest, "what do you call fair shooting at these ruffed grouse? You needn't be civil about it, you know."

"Five shells to a bird is good shooting," answered Seward. "Don't you think so, Miss Page?"

"You have a better score, Mr. Seward," said Marion Page, with a hostile glance at Alderdene, who had not made good. Impatient to start, she had turned her tailor made back to the company and was instructing his crest-fallen lordship very plainly: "You fire too quickly, Blinky. Two seconds is what you must count when a grouse flushes. You must say, 'Mark, right,' or 'Mark, left, bang!'"

And so the luncheon party, lord and lady, twins and maidens, guides and dogs, trailed away across the ridge, distant silhouettes presently against the sky, then gone. And after a little while the far dry, accentless report of smokeless powder announced that the opening of the season had been resumed and the birds were dying fast in the glory of a perfect day.

"Are you ready, Mr. Seward?" She stood waiting for him at the edge of the thicket. Miles resumed his game sack and her fowling piece. The dog came up, looking him anxiously in the eyes.

So he walked forward beside her into the dappled light of the thicket.

Within a few minutes the dog stood twice, and twice the whirring twitter of woodcock startled her, echoed by the futile crack of his gun.

"Beg pardon, sir."

"Yes, Miles," with a glint of humor. "Overshot, sir, excusin' the liberty, Mr. Seward. Both marked down forty yard to the left if you wish to start 'em again."

"Miles," he said, "my nerve is gone. Such things happen. I'm all in. Come over here, my friend, and look at the sun with me."

The discomfited keeper obeyed.

"Where ought that refrigent luminary to scintillate when I face Osprey Ledge?"

"Sir?"

"The sun. How do I hold it?"

"On the point of your right shoulder, sir. You ain't quittin', Mr. Seward, sir!" anxiously. "That Shotover cup is easy yours, sir!" eagerly. "Wot's a miss on a old drummer, Mr. Seward? Wot's twice overshootin' cock, sir, when a blind dropper can see you are the cleanest, fastest, hard shootin' shot in the hull county?"

But Seward shook his head, with an absent glance at the dog, and motioned the astonished keeper forward.

"Line the easiest trail for us," he said. "I think we are already a trifle tired. Twigs will do in short cover. Use a hatchet in the big timber. And go slow till we join you."

And when the unwilling and perplexed keeper had started, Seward, unlocking his gun, drew out the smooth yellow cartridges and pocketed them.

Sylvia looked up as the sharp metallic click of the locked breech rang out in the silence.

"Mr. Seward!" in quick displeasure.

"Yes?"

"What you do for your amusements cannot concern me."

"Right, as usual," he said, so gayly that a reluctant smile trembled on her lips.

"Then why have you done this? It is unreasonable if you don't feel as I do about killing things that are having a

good time in the world."

He stood silent, absently looking at the fowling piece cradled in his left arm. "Shall we sit here a moment and talk it over?" he suggested listlessly.

Her blue gaze swept him. His vague smile was indifferently bland.

"If you are determined not to shoot we might as well start for Osprey Ledge," she suggested. "Otherwise what reason is there for our being here together, Mr. Seward?"

Awaiting his comment, perhaps expecting a counter proposition, she leaned against the tree beside which he stood, and after a while, as his absent-minded preoccupation continued:

"Do you think the leaves are dry enough to sit on?"

He slipped off his shooting coat and placed it at the base of the tree. She seated herself, and, as he continued to remain standing, she stripped off her shooting gloves and glanced up at him inquiringly. "Well, Mr. Seward, I am literally at your feet."

"Which redresses the balance a little," he said, finding a place near her.

He sat there, chin propped on his linked fingers, elbows on knees and, though there was always the hint of a smile in his pleasant eyes, always the indefinable charm of breeding in voice and attitude, something now was lacking. And after a moment she concluded that it was his attention. Certainly his wits were woolgathering again. His eyes, edged with the shadow of a smile, saw far beyond her, far beyond the sunlit shadows where they sat.

In his preoccupation she had found him negatively attractive. She glanced at him now from time to time, her eyes returning always to the beauty of the subdued light where all about them silver stemmed birches clustered like slim shining pillars crowned with their autumn canopy of crumpled gold.

"Enchantment?" she said under her breath. "Surely an enchanted sleeper lies here somewhere."

"You," he observed, "unawakened."

"Asleep?!" She looked around at him. "You are the dreamer here. Your eyes are full of dreaming even now. What is your desire?"

He leaned on one arm, watching her. She had dropped her unglowed hand, searching among the newly fallen gold of the birch leaves drifted into heaps. On the third finger a jewel glittered. He saw it, conscious of its meaning, but his eyes followed the hand idly heaping up autumn gold—a white-slim hand, smoothly fascinating. Then the little restless hand swept near to his, almost touching it, and then instinctively he took it in his own curiously, lifting it a little to consider its nearer loveliness. Perhaps it was the unexpectedness of it, perhaps it was sheer amazement, that left her hand lying idly relaxed like a white petaled blossom in his.

After a little while the consciousness of the contact disconcerted her. She withdrew her fingers, with an involuntary shiver.

"Is there no chance for me, Miss Landis?"

The very revulsion of self possession returning chilled her; then anger came quick and hot; then pride. She deliberated, choosing her words coolly enough. "What chance do you mean, Mr. Seward?"

"A fighting chance. Can you give it to me?"

"A fighting chance? For what? Very low, very dangerous."

"For you."

Then in spite of her her senses became unsteady. A sudden ringing confusion seemed to deafen her, through which his voice, as if very far away, sounded again:

"Men who are worth a fighting chance ask for it sometimes, but take it always. I take it."

Her pallor faded under the flood of bright color. The blue of her eyes darkened ominously to velvet.

"Mr. Seward," she said very distinctly and slowly, "I am not—even—sorry—for you."

"Then my chance is desperate indeed," he retorted coolly.

"Chance! Do you imagine?" Her anger choked her.

"Are you not a little hard?" he said, palling under his tan. "I suppose women dismissed men more gently—even such a man as I am."

For a full minute she strove to comprehend.

"Such a man as you?" she repeated vaguely. "You mean"—A crimson wave dyed her skin to the temples, and she leaned toward him in horror stricken contrition. "I didn't mean that, Mr. Seward! I—I never thought of that! It had no weight. It was not in my thoughts. I meant only that you had assumed what is unwarranted—that you—your question humiliated me, knowing that I am engaged—knowing me so little—so!"

"Yes, I knew everything. Ask yourself why I risk everything to say this to you? There can be only one answer."

Then, after a long silence, "Have I ever," she began tremblingly—"ever by word or look?"

"No."

"Have I even?"

"No. I've simply discovered how I feel. That's what I was dreaming about when you asked me. I was

afraid I might do this too soon, but I meant to do it anyway before it became too late."

"It was too late from the very moment we met, Mr. Seward." And, as he reddened painfully again, she added quickly, "I mean that I had already decided."

And, as he said nothing: "You were a little rough, a little sudden with me, Mr. Seward. Men have asked me that question—several times, but never so soon, so unreasonably soon—never without some preliminary of some sort, so that I could foresee—be more or less prepared. But you gave me no warning. I—if you had I would have known how to be gentle. I—I wish to be now."

Still he said nothing. He sat there listlessly studying the sun spots glowing, waxing, waning, on the carpet of dead leaves at his feet.

"As for what you have said," she added, a little smile curving the sensitive mouth. "It is impulsive, unconsidered, a trifle boyish, Mr. Seward. I pay myself the compliment of your sincerity. It is rather nice to be a girl who can awaken the romance in a man within a day or two's acquaintance. We shall not misunderstand each other again, shall we?"

He raised his head, considering her, forcing the smile to meet her own.

"We shall be better friends than ever," she asserted confidently.

"Yes, better than ever."

"Because what you have done means the nicest sort of friendship, you see. You can't escape its duties and responsibilities now, Mr. Seward. I shall expect you to spend the greater part of your life in devotedly doing things for me. Besides, I am now privileged to worry you with advice. Oh, you have invested me with all sorts of powers now!"

He nodded.

She sprang to her feet, flushed, smiling a trifle excited.

"Is it all over, and are we the very ideals of friends?" she asked.

"The very ideals."

"You are nice!" she said impulsively, holding out both gloveless hands. He held them, she looking at him very sweetly, very confidently. "And you are content?" persuasively.

"Of course not," he said.

"Then I am sorry for you. Look at that!" turning her left hand in his so that the jewel on the third finger caught the light.

"I see it."

"And yet?"

"And yet?"

"That," she observed, with composure, "is sheer obstinacy. How can you really care for me? Do you actually believe that devotion comes like that?"

"Exactly like that."

"So suddenly? It is impossible!" with a twist of her pretty shoulders.

"How did it come to you?" he asked between his teeth.

Then her face grew scarlet, and her eyes grew dark, and her hands contracted in his—tightened, twisted fingers entangled, until, with a little sob, she swayed toward him, and he caught her. An instant, a minute—more perhaps she did not know—she half lay in his arms, her untaught lips close against his. Lassitude, faint consciousness, then tiny shock on shock came the burning revulsion, and her voice came back, too, sounding strangely to her, a colorless, monotonous voice.

He had freed her. She remembered that somebody had asked him to—perhaps herself. That was well. She needed to breathe, to summon strength and common sense, find out what had been done, what reasonable madness she had committed in the half light of the silver stemmed trees clustering in shameful witness on every hand.

Suddenly the hot humiliation of it overwhelmed her, and she covered her face with her hands, standing, almost swaying, as wave on wave of incredulous shame seemed to sweep her from knee to brow. That phase passed after a while. Out of it she emerged flushed, outwardly composed, into another phase, in full self possession once more, able to understand what had happened without the disproportion of emotional exaggeration. After all, she had only been kissed. Besides, she was a novice, which probably accounted in a measure for the unreasonable emotion coincident with a caress to which she was unaccustomed. Without looking up at him she found herself saying coolly enough to surprise herself: "I never supposed I was capable of that. It appears that I am. I haven't anything to say for myself except that I feel fearfully humiliated. Don't say anything now. I do not blame you; truly I do not. It was contemptible of me—to do it—wearing this!"—She stretched out her slender left hand, not looking at him. "It was contemptible!" She slowly raised her eyes, summoning all her courage to face him.



She swayed toward him, and he caught her.

(To be continued)

George Nessling, marker for Company H, Oregon National Guard, of Dallas, was shot in the leg Saturday afternoon by Private Tom Magers. The accident occurred at the rifle range near town. Nessling was rushed at once to the Dallas hospital where it was found that his wound, while serious, was not fatal.

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