

The Tighting Chance

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(Continued from last week)

By instinct and experience normally temperate, only what was abnormal and inherited might work a mischief in this man. His listlessness, his easy acquiescence, were but consequent upon the self knowledge of self control, but mastery of the master vice required something different. He was sick of sickness, and because in this sickness will, mind and body are tainted, too, reason and logic lack clarity, and to the signals of danger his reply had always been either overconfident or weak, and it had been always the same reply: "Not yet. There is time." And now, this last week, it had come upon him that the time was now. The skirmish was already on, and it had alarmed him suddenly to find that the skirmish was already a battle, and a rough one.

As he stood there he heard voices on the stairs. People had already begun to retire, because late cards and point shooting at dawn do not agree. And a point shooting picnic in snugly elaborate blinds was popular with women, or was supposed to be.

Little by little the tumult died away. He turned and looked grimly at his bed; then, shutting off the lights, he opened his door and went out into the deserted corridor, where the elevator shaft was dark and only the dim night lights burned at angles in the passageways.

He had his rain coat and cap with him, not being certain of what he might be driven to, but for the present he found the tiny window overlooking the swimming tank sufficient to begin the vigil.

Secure from intrusion, as there were no bedrooms on that corridor, he tossed out and cap into the window seat, walked to and fro for awhile listening to the rain, then sat down, his well shaped head between his hands, and in silence he faced the enemy.

How long he had sat there he did not know. When he raised his face, all gray and drawn with the tension of conflict, his eyes were not very clear, nor did the figure standing there in the dim light from the hall mean anything for a moment.

"Mr. Seward?" in an uncertain voice, almost a whisper.

He stood up mechanically, and she saw his face.

"Are you ill? What is it?"

"Ill? No." He passed his hand over his eyes. "I fancy I was close to the edge of sleep." Some color came back into his face. He stood smiling now, the significance of her presence dawning on him.

"Did you really come?" he asked. "This isn't a very lovely but impalpable astral vision, is it?"

"It's horribly imprudent, isn't it?" she murmured, still considering the rather drawn and pallid face of the man before her. "I came out of pure curiosity, Mr. Seward."

She glanced at her. He moved a big bunch of hothouse roses so she could pass, and she settled down lightly on the edge of the window seat. When he had piled some big downy cushions behind her back she made a quick gesture of invitation.

"I have only a moment," she said as he seated himself beside her. "Part of my curiosity is satisfied in finding you here. I didn't suppose you so faithful."

"I can be fairly faithful. What else are you curious about?"

"You said you had something important?"

"To tell you? So I did. That was bribery, perjury, false pretenses, robbery under arms, anything you will. I only wanted you to come."

"That is a shameful confession!" she said, but her smile was gay enough, and she noiselessly shook out her fluffy skirts and settled herself a trifle more deeply among the pillows.

"Of course," she observed absently, "you are dreadfully mortified at yourself."

"Naturally," he admitted.

The patter of the rain attracted her attention. She peered out through the blurred casements into the blackness. Then, picking up his cap and indicating his rain coat, "Why?" she asked.

"Oh, in case you hadn't come."

"A walk? By yourself? A night like this on the cliffs! You are not perfectly mad, are you? What is the matter, Mr. Seward?"

"Well," he said, with a humorous glance at her, "I haven't seen you for ages. That's not wholesome for me, you know."

"But you see me now, and it does not seem to benefit you."

"I feel much better," he insisted, laughing, and her blue eyes grew very lovely as the smile broke from them in uncertain response.

"So you had nothing really important to tell me, Mr. Seward?"

"Only that I wanted you."

"Oh, I said important! Why have you so ostentatiously avoided me, Mr. Seward?" she asked languidly.

"Well, upon my word!" he said, with a touch of irritation.

"Oh, you are so dreadfully literal!" she shrugged, brushing her straight, sensitive nose with the pink blossom. "I only said it to give you a chance. If you are going to be stupid, good

night!" But she made no movement to go. "Yes, then; I have avoided you, and it doesn't become you to ask why."

"Because I kissed you?"

"You hint at the true reason so obliquely, so delicately," she said, "that I scarcely recognize it." The cool mockery of her voice and the warm, quick color tinting neck and face were incongruous. He thought, with slow surprise, that she was not yet letter perfect in her role of the material triumphant over the spiritual.

"I am sorry I came," she said reflectively. "You don't know why I came, do you? Sheer loneliness, Mr. Seward. There is something of the child in me still, you see. It seems my fate to pass my life in bidding you good night," she said, straightening up and turning to him with the careless laughter touching mouth and eyes again. Then, resting her weight on one hand, her smooth white shoulder rounded beside her cheek, she looked at him out of humorous eyes.

"What is it that women find so attractive in you? The man's experienced inexperience? The boy's unconscious cynicism? The mystery of your self sufficiency? The faintly femininity in you? The youth in you already showing traces of wear that hint of future sorrow? What will you be at thirty-five, at forty? Ah," she added softly, "what are you now? For I don't know, and you cannot tell me if you would."

"What comes with you?" he asked after a pause.

"Comes? How?"

"In your affections. What prepossessions?"

She laughed audaciously. "Your traits—some of them—all of them that you reveal. You must be aware of that much already considering everything."

One slim white hand held a rose against her cheek; the other lay idly on her knee, fresh and delicate as a fallen petal, and he laid both hands over it and lifted it between them.

"Mr. Seward, I am afraid this is becoming a habit with you." The gay mockery was not quite genuine, the curve of lips too sensitive for a voice so lightly cynical.

He smiled, bending there, considering her hand between his, and after a moment her muscles relaxed and bare round arm and hand lay abandoned to him.

"Quite flawless—perfect," he said aloud to himself.

"Do you—read hands?"

"Vaguely." He touched the smooth palm. "Long life, clear mind and"—he laughed—"heart supreme over reason! There is written a white lie, but a pretty one."

"It is no lie."

She suddenly flushed and attempted to close her hand, doubling the thumb over. There was a little half hearted struggle, freeing one of his arms, which fell, settling about her slender waist; a silence, a breathless moment, and he had kissed her. Her lips were warm this time.

She recovered herself, avoiding his eyes, and moved backward, shielding her face with pretty upflung elbows out turned. "I told you it was becoming a habit with you!" The loud beating of her pulses marred her voice. "Must I establish a dead line every time I commit the folly of being alone with you?"

"I'll draw that line," he said, taking her in his arms.

"I—I beg you will draw it quickly, Mr. Seward."

"I do; it passes through your heart and mine!"

"Is—do you mean a declaration again? You are compromising yourself, you know. I warn you that you are committing yourself."

"So are you. Look at me!"

In his arms, her own arms pressed against his breast, resisting, she raised her splendid youthful eyes, and through and through her shot pulse on pulse until every nerve seemed to be aquiver.

"While I'm still sane," he said, with a dry catch in his throat, "before I tell you that I love you look at me!"

"I will if you wish," she said, with a trembling smile, "but it is useless."

"That is what I shall find out in time. You must meet my eyes. That is well. That is frank and sweet."

"And useless—truly it is. Please don't tell me anything."

"You will not listen?"

"There is no chance for you if you mean love. I—I tell you in time, you see. I am utterly frivolous—quite selfish and mercenary."

"I take my chance."

"No; I give you none. Why do you interfere? A girl's policy costs her something if it be worth anything. Whatever it costs, it is worth it to me. And I do not love you. In so short a time how could I?"

Then in his arms she fell a-trembling. Something blinded her eyes, and she turned her head sharply, only to encounter his lips on hers in a deep, clinging embrace that left her dazed, still resisting with the fragments of breath and voice.

"Not again—I beg—you. Let me go now. It is not best. Oh, truly, truly it is all wrong with us now." She bent her head, blinded with tears, swaying,

stunned, then, with a breathless sound, turned in his arms to meet his lips, her hands contracting in his, and, confronting, they passed, suspending the crisis, young faces close and hearts afloat.

"Sylvia, I love you."

For an instant their lips clung. She had rendered him his kiss. Then tremblingly, "It is useless even though I loved you."

"Say it!"

"I do."

"Say it!"

"I—I cannot! And it is no use—no use! I do not know myself—this way. My eyes are wet. It is not like me; there is nothing of me in this girl you hold so closely, so confidently. I do care for you—how can I help it? How could any woman help it? Is not that enough?"

"Until you are a bride—yes."

"A bride? Stephen, I cannot!"

"You cannot help it, Sylvia."

"I must! I have my way to go."

"My way lies that way."

"No, not! I cannot do it; it is not best for me—not best for you. I do care for you; you have taught me how to say it. But—you know what I have done—and mean to do, and must carry through. Then how can you love a girl like that?"

"Dear, I know the woman I love."

"Silly, she is what her life has made her—material, passionately selfish, unable to renounce the root of all evil. Even if this—this happiness were ours always—I mean if this madness could last our wedded life—I am not good enough, not noble enough, to forget what I might have had and put away. Is it not dreadful to admit? Do you not know that self contempt is part of the price? I have no money. I know what you have. I asked. And it is enough for a man who remains unmarried. For I cannot 'make things do.' I cannot 'contrive.' I will not cling to the fringe of things or play that heartbreaking role of the shabby expatriated on the continent. My role in life is to mount to a security too high for any question as to my dominance. Can you take me there?"

"There are other heights, Sylvia."

"Higher?"

"Yes, dear."

"The spiritual; I know. I could not breathe there, if I cared to climb. And I have told you what I am—all stiff and lace and smooth skinned selfishness." She looked at him wistfully. "If you can change me, take me." And she rose, facing him.

"I do not give you up," he said, with a savage note hardening his voice, and it thrilled her to hear it, and every drop of blood in her body leaped as she yielded to his arms again, heavy laden, trembling, confused, under the piercing sweetness of contact. Then her voice, broken, breathless:

"Good night. Love me while you can and forgive me. Good night. Where are we? All—all this must have stunned me, blinded me. Is this my door or yours? Hush! I am half dead with fear—to be here under the light again. If you take me again, my knees will give way. And I must find my door. Oh, the ghastly imprudence of it! Good night, good night. I—I love you!"

CHAPTER SIX

AFTER the first few days of his arrival at Shotover time had threatened to hang heavily on Mortimer's mottled hands.

After the second day afield he recognized that his shooting career was practically over. Then Mortimer, not yet done with self indulgence in more convenient forms, cast about him within his new limits for occupation between those hours consecrated to the rites of the table and the card room.

He drove four, but found that it numbed his arms and that the sea air made him sleepy. Motor cars agreed with him only when driving with a pretty woman. Forced through ennui to fish off the rocks, he soon tired of the sea perch and rock cod and the malodors of periwinkle and clam.

Then he took up his headquarters in the reading room on the chance of his wife's moving elsewhere, which she did, unobtrusively carrying Captain Voucher with her in a sudden zeal for billiard practice on rainy mornings now too frequent along the coast.

Mortimer possessed that mysterious talent, so common among the financially insolvent, for living lavishly on an invisible income, but, plan as he would, he had never been able to increase that income through confidential gossip with men like Quarrier or Belwether or even Ferrall. What information his pretty wife might have extracted he did not know. Her income had never visibly increased above the vanishing point, although, like himself, she denied herself nothing. One short, lively interview with her had been enough to drive all partnership ideas out of his head.

He was always studying women. Years before, Grace Ferrall had snapped her slim fingers in his face, and here at Shotover the field was limited. Mrs. Vendenning had left. Agatha Cathness was still a pale and reticent puzzle. Rena, Kathryn and Eileen tormented him. Marion Page coolly au fait yawned in his face. There remained Sylvia, who, knowing nothing about his species, met him halfway with the sweet and sensitive deference due a somewhat battered and infirm gentleman of forty-eight, until a sleek aside from Major Belwether spoiled everything, as usual, for her, leaving her painfully conscious and perplexed between doubt and disgust.

Meanwhile the wealthy master of Blacks Falls, Beverly Plank, had found encouragement enough at Shotover to venture on tentative informality. There was no doubt that ultimately he must be counted on in New York but no-

body except him was impatiently cordial for the event, and so at the little house party he slipped and slid from every attempt at closer quarters until, rolling smoothly enough, he landed without much discomfort somewhere between Mr. and Mrs. Leroy Mortimer. And it was not a question as to "which would be good to him," observed Major Belwether, with his misleading and benevolent mirth. "It was which would be goodest quickest!"

And Mrs. Mortimer, abandoning Captain Voucher by the same token, displayed certain warning notices perfectly comprehensive to her husband, and at first he was inclined to recognize defeat.

But the general unsuccess which had so faithfully attended him recently had aroused the long dormant desire for a general review of the situation with his wife—perhaps even the further hope of some conjugal arrangement tending toward an exchange of views concerning possible alliance.

The evening previous, to his intense disgust, host, hostess and guests had retired early in view of the point shooting at dawn, for not only was there to be no point shooting for him, but he had risen from the card table heavily hit, and, besides, for the first time his apples and port had disagreed with him.

As he had not risen until midday, he was not sleepy. Books were an aversion equaled only by distaste for his own company. Irritated, bored, he had perforce sulkily entered the elevator and passed to his room, where there was nothing on earth for him to do except to thumb over last week's sporting periodicals and smoke himself stupid.

But it required more than that to ensnare the goddess of slumber. He walked about the room haunted by slow thoughts; he stood at the rain smeared pane, fat fingers resting on the glass. The richly flavored cigar grew distasteful, and if he could not smoke, what, in pity's name, was he to do?

For hours he sat in his room or paced the four walls, doubtful, chagrined, furious by turns. Once he drew out a memorandum book and stood under a lighted sconce studying the figures.

His uneasiness had produced a raging thirst. He punched an electric button with his fleshy thumb and prowled around, waiting. Nobody came. He punched again and looked at his watch. It astonished him to find the hour was 3 o'clock in the morning. That discovery, however, only appeared to increase his thirst. He opened the hall door, prepared to descend into the depths of the house and raid a sideboard, and as he thrust his heavy head out into the lighted corridor his eyes fell upon two figures standing at the open door of a bedroom. One was Seward; that was plain. Who was the girl he had kissed? One of the maids? Somebody's wife? Who?

Every dull pulse began to hammer in Mortimer's head. In his excitement he stepped halfway into the corridor, then skipped nimbly back, closing his door without a sound.

"Sylvia Landis, by all that's holy!" he breathed to himself and sat down rather suddenly on the edge of the bed.

After awhile he rose and crept to the door, opened it, gazed his eyes to the crack in time to catch a glimpse of Seward entering his own corridor alone.

And that night Mortimer, lying awake in bed busy with schemes, became conscious of a definite idea. It took shape and matured so suddenly that it actually shocked his moral sense. Then it scared him.

"But—but that is blackmail!" he whispered aloud. "A man can't do that sort of thing. What the devil ever put it into my head? And there are men I know—women, too—scoundrelly blackmailers, who'd use that information somehow and make it pay too. The scoundrels!"

He squirmed down among the bedclothes with a sudden shiver, but the night had turned warm.

"Scoundrels!" he said, with milder emphasis. "Blackmailers! Contemptible pups!"

He fell asleep an hour later, muttering something incoherent about scoundrels and blackmail.

And meanwhile in the darkened house from all round came the noise of knocking on doors, sounds of people stirring, a low voice here and there, lights breaking out from transoms, the thud of rubber shod heels, the rattle of cartridges from the echoing gunroom. For the guests at Shotover were awaking lest the wet sky, whitening behind the east, ring with the whimping wedges of wild fowl rushing seaward over empty blinds.

(To be continued)

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