

The Fighting Chance

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(Continued from last week)

The unusual stillness of the house in the late morning sunshine was pleasant to Miss Landis. She had risen very late, unconscious of the stir and movement before dawn, and it was only when a maid told her as she came from her bath that she remembered the projected point shooting and concluded with an odd, happy sense of relief that she was almost alone in the house.

A little later, glancing from her bedroom window for a fulfillment of the promise of the sun which a glimpse of blue sky heralded, she saw Lella Mortimer settling herself in the forward seat of a motor car and Beverly Plank climbing in beside her, and she watched Plank steer the big machine across the wet lawn while the machinist swung himself into the tonneau, and away they rolled, faster, faster, rushing out into the misty hinterland where the long streak of distant forest already began to brighten, edged with the first rays of watery sunshine.

So she had the big house to herself, every bit of it, and with it freedom from obligation, from comment, from demand or exaction; freedom from restraint; liberty to roam about, to read, to dream, to idle, to remember. Ah, that was what she needed—a quiet interval in this hurrying youth of hers to catch her breath once more and stand still and look back a day or two and remember.

So to breakfast all alone was delicious; to stroll unhurried to the sideboard and leisurely choose among the fresh cool fruits; to loiter over cream and cereal; to saunter out into the freshness of the world and breathe it and feel the sun warming cheek and throat and the little breezes from a sunlit sea stirring the bright strands of her hair.

Out over the rain wet odorless grass she picked her way, skirts swung high above the delicate contour of ankle and limb, following a little descending path she knew full of rocky angles swept by pendant sprays of blackberry, and then down under the jutting rock, south through thickets of wild cherry along the crags, until before her the way opened downward again where a tiny crescent beach glistened white hot in the sun.

From his bedroom window Mortimer peeped forth, following her progress with a leer.

As she descended, noticing the rifts of bronzing seaweed piled along the tide mark, her foot dislodged a tiny triangle of rock, which rolled clattering and ringing below, and as she swung lightly to the sand a man, by her full length and motionless as the leaped seaweed, raised himself on one arm, turning his sun dazzled eyes on her.

The dull shock of surprise halted her as Sward rose to his feet, still dazed, the sand running from his brown shooting clothes over his tightly strapped puttees.

"Have you the faintest idea that I supposed you were here?" she asked briefly. Then, frank in her disappointment, she looked up at the cliffs overhead, where her line of retreat lay.

"Why did you not go with the others?" she asked, unsmiling.

"I don't know, I will, if you wish." He had colored slowly, the frank disappointment in her face penetrating his surprise, and now he turned around instinctively, also looking for the path of retreat.

"Wait," she said, aware of her own crude attitude and confused by it. "Wait a moment, Mr. Sward. I don't mean to drive you away."

"It's self exile," he said quietly—"quite voluntary, I assure you."

"Mr. Sward?"

And, as he looked up coolly: "Have you nothing more friendly to say to me? Is your friendship for me so limited that my first caprice oversteps the bounds?"

"I meant no criticism"—

"Indeed I can and must."
"And leave me here to dig in the sand with my heels? Merri!"

"Do you mean?"

"I certainly do, Mr. Sward. I don't want to dream now. I don't care to reflect. You see what you've done, don't you—saved me from an entire morning wasted in sentimental reverie over what might have been? Now you can appreciate it, can't you—your wisdom in appearing in the flesh to save a silly girl the effort of evoking you in the spirit? Ah, Mr. Sward, I am vastly obliged to you! Pray sit here beside me in the flesh for fear that in your absence I might commit the folly that tempted me here."

His low rumbling laughter accompanying her voice had stimulated her to a gay audacity which for the instant extinguished in her the little fear of him she had been barely conscious of.

"Do you know," he said, "that you also aroused me from my sun dreams?"

"Did I? And can't you resume them?"

"You save me the necessity."
"Oh, that is a secondhand compliment," she said disdainfully—"a weak plagiarism of what I conveyed very wittily. You were probably really asleep and dreaming of bird murder."

He waited for her to finish, then, amused eyes searching, he roamed about until high on a little drifted sand dune he found a place for himself, and while she watched him indignantly he curled up in the sunshine and, dropping his head on the hot sand, calmly closed his eyes.

"Upon—my—word!" she breathed aloud.

He unclosed his eyes. "Now you may dream; you can't avoid it," he observed lazily and closed his eyes, and neither taunts nor jeers nor questions nor fragments of shell flung with intent to hit stirred him from his immobility.

She tired of the attempt presently and sat silent, elbows on her thighs, hands propping her chin. Thoughts vague as the fitful breeze arose, lingered and, like the breeze, faded, dissolved into calm, through which, cadenced by the far beat of the ebb tide, her heart echoed, beating the steady intervals of time. A long while afterward a small cloud floated across the sun, and in the sudden shadow on the world doubt sounded its tiny voice, and her ears listened, and the enchantment faded and died away.

Turning, she looked across the sand at the man lying there. Her eyes considered him—how long she did not know, she did not heed—until, stirring, he looked up, and she paled a trifle and closed her eyes, stunned by the sudden clamor of pulse and heart.

When he rose and walked over she looked up gravely, pouring the last handful of white sand through her stretched fingers.

"Did you dream?" he asked lightly.

"Yes."
"Did you dream true?"

"Nothing of my dream can happen," she said. "You know that, don't you?"

"I know that we love and that we dare not ignore it."

She suffered his arm about her, his eyes looking deeply into hers, a close, sweet caress, a union of lips and her dimmed eyes' response.

"Stephen," she faltered, "how can you make it so hard for me? How can you force me to this shame?"

"Shame?" he repeated vaguely.

He looked at her, hesitated, and—"My habits?" he asked simply.

"Yes."
"I have them in check."
"Are you certain?"

"I think I may be—now."
"Yet," she said timidly, "you lost one fight—since you knew me."

The dull red mantling his face wrung her heart. She turned impulsively and laid both hands on his shoulders. "That chance I would take, with all its uncertainty, all the dread inheritance you have come into. I love you enough for that. And if it turned out that—that you could not stem the tide even with me to face it with you, and if the pity of it, the grief of it, killed me I would take that chance if you loved me through it all. But there is something else. Hush! Let me have my say while I find the words—something else you do not understand. Turn your face a little. Please don't look at me. This is what you do not know—that in three generations every woman of my race has—gone wrong! Every one! And I am beginning with such a marriage, deliberately, selfishly, shamelessly, perfectly conscious of the frivolous, erratic blood in me, aware of the race record behind me!"

"Once when I knew nothing—before I met you—I believed such a marriage would not only permit me mental tranquility, but safely anchor me in the harbor of convention, leaving me free to become what I am fashioned to become—autocrat and arbiter in my own world. And now! And now! I don't know—truly I don't know what I may become. Your love forces my hand. I am displaying all the shallowness, falseness, pettiness, all the mean and cruel and callous character which must be truly my real self. Only I shall not marry you! You are not to run the risk of what I might prove to be when I remember in bitterness all I have renounced. If I married you, I should remember, unreconciled, what you cost me. Better for you and for me that I marry him and let him bear with me when I remember that he cost me you!"

Suddenly deep within him something seemed to fall, die out, perhaps a tiny newly lighted flame of unaccustomed purity, the dawning flicker of aspiration to better things. Whatever it was, material, spiritual, was gone now, and where it had glimmered for a night the old accustomed twilight doubt crept in—the same dull acquiescence, the same uncertainty of self, the familiar lack of will, of incentive, the congenial tendency to drift, and with it came weariness, perhaps reaction from the recent skirmishes with that master vice.

"I suppose," he said in a dull voice, "you are right."

"No; I am wrong—wrong!" she said, lifting her lovely face and heavy eyes. "But I have chosen my path. And you will forget."

"I hope so," he said simply.

"If you hope so, you will."

"Good Lord!" exclaimed Plank, alarmed. "You wouldn't make a joke of it! You wouldn't be careless about such a thing! And there's Quarrier! I'm not on joking terms with him. I'm on most formal terms."

"Quarrier?" sneered the other, flicking at his stirrup with his crop. "He's on formal terms with everybody, including himself. He never laughed on purpose in his life; once a month only, to keep his mouth in; that's his limit. Do you suppose any woman would stand for him if a better man looked sideways at her?" And, reversing his riding crop, he deliberately poked Mr. Plank in the ribs.

"A—better man!" muttered Plank, scarce crediting his ears.

"Certainly. A man who can make good, is good, but a man who can make better is it with the ladies—God bless 'em!" he added, displaying a heavy set of teeth.

Beverly Plank knew perfectly well that in the comparison so delicately suggested by Mortimer his material equipment could be scarcely compared to the immense fortune controlled by Howard Quarrier, and as he thought it his reflections were put into words by Mortimer, airily enough.

"Nobody stands a chance in a show down with Quarrier. But—"

Plank gaped until the tension became unbearable.

"But—what?" he blurted out.

"Plank," said Mortimer solemnly, and his voice vibrated with feeling, "let me do a little thinking before I ask you a—vital question."

But Plank had become agitated again, and he said something so bluntly that Mortimer wheeled on him, glowering:

"Look here, Plank; you don't suppose I'm capable of repeating a confidence, do you—if you choose to make me understand it's a confidence?"

"It isn't a confidence; it isn't anything. I mean it is confidential, of course. All there's in it is what I said, or, rather, what you took me up on so fast, y'end Plank, abashed.

thinking. Not that he meant harm to anybody, he told himself very frequently. He had, of course, information which certain degraded men might use in a contemptible way, but he (Mortimer) did not resemble such men in any particular. All he desired was to do Plank a good turn. There was nothing disreputable in doing a wealthy man a favor. And God knew a wealthy man's gratitude was necessary to him at that very moment—gratitude substantially acknowledged. He liked Plank, wished him well. That was all right, too, but a man is an ass who doesn't wish himself well also. Two birds with one stone. Three, for he hated Quarrier! Four, for he had no love for his wife! Besides, it would teach Lella a wholesome lesson—teach her that he still counted; serve her right for her disgusting friendship for Plank.

No, there was to be nothing disreputable in his proceedings; that he would be very careful about. Probably Major Belwether might express his gratitude substantially if he, Mortimer, went to him frankly and volunteered not to mention to Quarrier the scene



Leroy Mortimer.

he had witnessed between Sylvia Landis and Stephen Sward at 3 o'clock in the morning in the corridor, and if in playful corroboration he displayed the cap and rain coat and the big fan, all crushed, which objects of interest he had discovered later in the bay window. Yes, probably Major Belwether would be very grateful, because he wanted Quarrier in the family. He needed Quarrier in his business. But, fugh! That was close enough to blackmail to rub off! No, no! He wouldn't go to Belwether and promise any such thing! On the contrary, he felt it his duty to inform Quarrier! Quarrier had a right to know what sort of a girl he was threatened with for life. A man ought not to let another man go blindly into such a marriage. Men owed each other something, even if they were not particularly close friends. And he had always had a respect for Quarrier, even a sort of liking for him—yes, a distinct liking! And, anyhow, women were devils, and it behooved men to get together and stand for one another!

Quarrier would give her her walking papers, and, in her humiliation, is there anybody mad enough to fancy Mortimer, peeping down at them ever the thicket above, yawned impatiently and glanced about him for the most convenient avenue of self effacement when the time arrived.

(To be continued.)

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