

The Fighting Chance

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(A continued story.)

comfortably suffused with reassurance under the reaction from his scare, attempted to refute the other's conclusions: "It doesn't mean anything, Mortimer. She's just the handsomest girl I ever saw. I know she's engaged. I only admired her a lot."

"You're not the only man," said Mortimer blandly, still striving to reconcile his preconceived theories with the awkward half confession of this great, red fisted, hulking horseman riding at his stirrup.

"I wouldn't have her dream," stammered Plank, "that I had ever thought of such a—"

"Why not? It would only flatter her."

"Flatter a woman who is engaged to marry another man?" gasped Plank.

"Certainly. Do you think any woman ever had enough admiration in this world?" asked Mortimer coolly. "And as for Sylvia Landis, she'd be tickled to death if anybody hinted that you had ever admired her."

"Good Lord!" exclaimed Plank, alarmed. "You wouldn't make a joke of it! You wouldn't be careless also 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 — 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, slyly 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.

"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 up on so fast," ended Plank, abashed.

"About your being in love with Syl!"

"Confound it!" roared Plank, crimson to his hair. And he set his heavy spurs to his mount and plunged forward in a storm of dust. Mortimer followed, silent, profoundly immersed in his own thoughts and deductions.

And all that afternoon, having taken to his room on pretense of neuralgia, he lay sprawled on his bed, thinking

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 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,

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laugh! 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 that she wouldn't snap up Plank in such a fix and make it look like a jilt for Quarrier? But Plank must do his part on the minute. Plank must step up in the very nick of time. Plank with his millions and his ambitions was bound to be a winner anyway, and Sylvia might as well be his pilot and use his money. And Plank would be very, very grateful—very useful, a very good friend to have, and Lella would learn at last that he, Mortimer, had cut his wisdom teeth, by God!

As for Sward, he amounted to nothing. Probably was one of that contemptible sort of men who butted in and kissed a pretty girl when he had the chance. He, Mortimer, had only disgust for such amateurs of the social highways.

After all, the matter was simple—absurdly simple. A word to Quarrier, and, crack, the match was off! Girl and as a hornet, but staggered, had no explanation to offer—man frozen stiff with rage, mute as an iceberg. Then, zip, enter Beverly Plank, the girl's rescuer at a pinch, her preserver, the savior of her "face," the big, highly colored, lenden eyed deus ex machina. Would she take 50 cents on the dollar—would she, to buy herself a new "face," and put it all over Quarrier, and live happy ever after—would she? Oh, not at all!

The main thing, after all, was to promise Plank his opportunity, but not tell him how he was to obtain it, for

Mortimer had an idea that there was something of the Puritan deep planted under the stolid young man's hide and that he might make some absurd and irrelevant objection to the perfectly proper methods employed by his newly self constituted guide and mentor. No; that was no concern of Plank's. All he had to do was to be ready. As for Quarrier, anybody could forecast his action when once convinced of Sylvia's behavior.

He lay there pondering several methods of imparting the sad but necessary information to Quarrier. One thing was certain—there was not now time enough before the house party dissolved to mold Plank into acquiescent obedience. That must be finished in town unless Plank invited him to stay at the Fells after his time was up at Shotover. By heaven, that was the idea! And there'd be a chance for him at cards. Only, of course, Plank would ask Lella too. But what did he care? He was no longer afraid of her. He'd soon be independent of her and her pittance.

And so, immersed in the details of his dirty little drama, he pondered over the possibility of an ulterior gentleman as he moved heavily to and fro, dressing himself, his neuralgia being much better, and presently descended the stairs to find everybody absent, engaged, as a servant explained, in a game of water basket ball in the swimming pool. So he strolled off toward the north wing of the house, which had been built for the squash courts and swimming pool.

(To be continued.)

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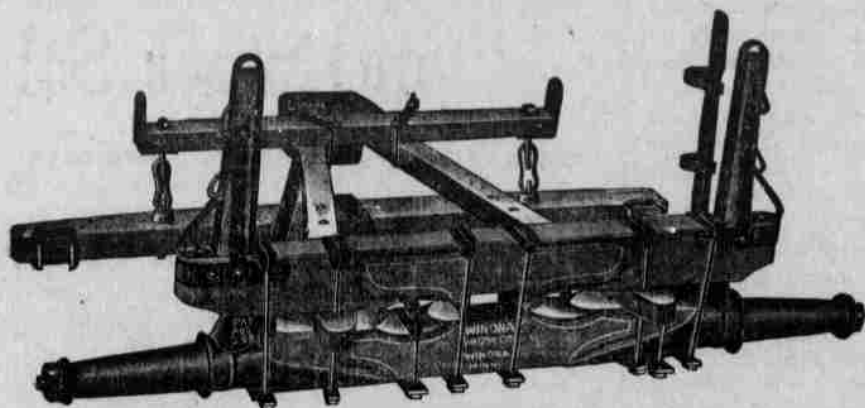
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