

# The Fighting Chance

ROBERT W. CHAMBERS

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(A continued story.)

Page boys and Rena and Eileen, on the side, were playing the last game against Sylvia, Marion and Ferrall on the other. The ball was flying about the pool. Marion caught it, but her brother Gordon got it away. Then Ferrall secured it and dived toward the red goal, but Rena Bonnesdel caught him under water; the ball bobbed up, and Sylvia flung both arms around it with a little warning shout and hurled it back at Seward, who shot forward like an arrow, his opponents gathering about him in full cry amid laughter and excited applause from the gallery, where Grace Ferrall and Captain Voucher were wildly offering odds on the blue and Alderdene and Major Belwether were thrifflily looking them.

Mortimer climbed the slippery marble stairway as fast as his lack of breath permitted, anxious for his share of the harvest if the odds were right. He managed to make several apparently desirable wagers with Kathryn Tassel and one with Beverly Plank, who was also obstinately backing the blues, the losing side. Sylvia played forward for the blues.

Suddenly through the confused blur of foam and spray the big, glistening ball shot aloft and remained.

"Blue! Blue!" exclaimed Grace Ferrall, clapping her hands, and a little whirlwind of cries and hand clapping echoed from the gallery as the breathless swimmers came climbing out of the pool with scarcely wind enough left for a word or strength for a gesture toward the laughing crowd above.

Mortimer, disgusted, turned away, already casting about him for some-

body to play cards with, it being his temperament and his temper to throw good money after bad. But Quarrier and Miss Calhoun had already returned to the squash courts, the majority of the swimmers to their several dressing rooms and Grace Ferrall's party, equipped for motoring, to the lawn, where they lost little time in disappearing into the golden haze which a sudden shift of wind had spun out of the cloudless afternoon's sunshine.

However he got Marion and also, as usual, the two men who had made a practice of taking away his money, Major Belwether and Lord Alderdene. He hadn't particularly wanted them. He wanted somebody he could play with, like Seward, for example, or even the two ten dollar Pages. Not that their combined twenty would do him much good, but it would at least permit him the pleasures of the card table without personal loss.

But the Pages had retired to dress, and Voucher was for motoring, and he had no use for his wife, and he was afraid of Plank's game, and Seward, seated on the edge of the pool and sharing a pint of ginger ale with Sylvia Landis, shook his head at the suggestion and resumed his division of the ginger ale.

Plank and Lella Mortimer came down to congratulate them. Sylvia, always instinctively and particularly nice to people of Plank's sort whom she occasionally encountered, was so faultlessly amiable, that Plank, who had never before permitted himself the privilege of monopolizing her, found himself doing it so easily that it kept him in a state of persistent

mental intoxication.

Seward, inclined to be amused by the duration of the trance into which Plank had fallen, watched the progress of that bulky young man's infatuation as he sat there on the pool's marble edge, exchanging trivial views on trivial subjects with Mrs. Leroy Mortimer.

Once in their history, during her early married life, Seward had been very sentimental about her, but neither he nor she had approached the danger line closer than to make daring eyes at one another across the frontiers of good taste. And their youthful enchantment had faded so naturally, so pleasantly, that always there had remained to them both an agreeable after taste—a sort of gay understanding which almost invariably led to mutual banter when they encountered. But now something appeared to be lacking in their rather listless badinage—something of the usual flavor which once had salted even a laughing silence with significance. Seward, too, had ceased to be amused at the spectacle of Plank's cauldlike infatuation, and Lella Mortimer's bored smile had lasted so long that her olive-pink cheeks were set, and she relaxed her fixed features with a little shrug that was also something of a shiver. Then, looking prudently around, she encountered Seward's eyes, and during a moment's hesitation they considered one another with an increasing curiosity that slowly became tentative intelligence.

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And her eyes said very plainly and wickedly to Seward's: "Oho, my friend! So it bores you to see Mr. Plank monopolizing an engaged girl who belongs to Howard Quarrier!"

Then without appearing to she took Plank away from temptation so skillfully that nobody except Seward understood that the young man had been incontinently removed. He, Plank, never doubting that he was a perfectly free agent, decided that the time had arrived for triumphant retirement.

Sylvia turned to Seward, glanced up at him, hesitated and began to laugh consciously.

"What do you think of my latest sentimental acquisition?"

"He'd be an ornament to a stock farm," replied Seward, out of humor.

"How brutal you can be!" she mused, smiling.

"Noneense! He's a plain boulder. Isn't he?"

"I don't know—is he? He struck me a trifle appealingly, even pathetically. They usually do, that sort. As though the trouble they took could ever be worth the time they lose!"

She sat, smiling maliciously down at the water, smoothing out the soaked skirt of her swimming suit and swinging her legs reflectively.

"Are you reconciled?" she asked presently.

"To what?"

"To leaving Shotover. Today is our last day, you know. You may be here again, but I—I shall not be if I ever come to Shotover again."

Her stockings beat the devil's tattoo against the marble sides of the pool. She reached up above her head, drawing down a flowering branch of Japanese orange, and caressed her delicate nose with the white blossoms dreamily, then mischievously, "I'm accustomed myself to this most significant perfume," she said, looking at him askance. And she deliberately hummed the wedding march, watching the color rise in his sullen face.

"If you had the courage of a sparrow you'd make life worth something for us both," he said.

She crossed her knees, one slender ankle imprisoned in her hand, leaning

forward thoughtfully above the water.

"Our last day," she mused, "for we shall never be just you and I again—never again, my friend, after we leave this rocky coast of Eden. I am to be married a year from Nov. 1."

He looked up at her in dark surprise, for he had heard that their wedding date had been set for the coming winter.

"A year's engagement?" he repeated, unconvinced.

"It was my wish. I think that is sufficient for everybody concerned." Then, averting her face, which had suddenly lost a little of its color, "A year is little enough," she said impatiently. "I—what has happened to us requires an interval—a decent interval for its burial. Stephen Seward, what do you think of me now?"

"I am learning," he replied simply.

"What, if you please?"

"Learning a little about what I am losing."

"You mean me?"

"Yes."

She bent forward impulsively, balancing her body on the pool's rim with both arms, dropping her knee until her ankles swung interlocked above the water. "Listen," she said in a low, distinct voice. "What you lose is no other man's gain. If I warm and expand in your presence, if I say clever things sometimes, if I am intelligent, sympathetic and amusing, it is because of you. You inspire it in me. Normally I am the sort of girl you first met at the station. I tell you that I don't know myself now; that I have not known myself since I knew you. Qualities of understanding, ability to appreciate, to express myself without employing the commonplaces, subtleties of intercourse—all, maybe, were latent in me, but sterile until you came into my life. And when you go, then, lacking impulse and incentive, the new facility, the new sensitive alertness, the unconscious self confidence, all will smolder and die out in me. Shall we take a farewell plunge and dress? You know we say goodbye tomorrow."

(To be continued.)

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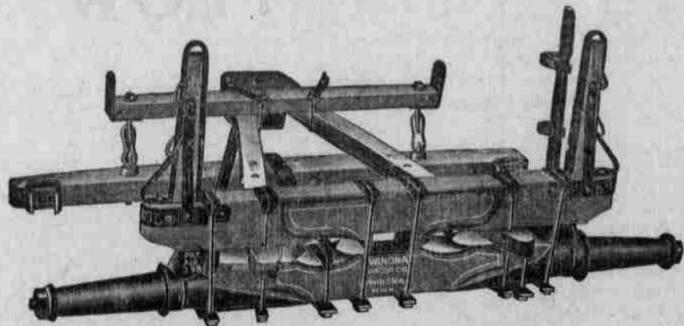
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