

# The Fighting Chance

ROBERT W. CHAMBERS

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(A continued story.)

"Where do you go from here?"  
"To Lenox. The Claymores have asked us for a week. After that Hot Springs for another two weeks or so. After that to Oyster Bay. Mr. Quarrier opens his house on Sedge point," she added demurely, "but I don't think he expects to invite you to The Sedges."  
"How long do you stay there?" asked Seward irritably.  
"Until we go to town in December."  
"What will you find to do all that time in Oyster Bay?" he asked, more irritably.  
"What a premature question! The yacht is there. Besides, there's the usual neighborhood hunting, with the usual packs and inevitable net, the usual steeple chasing, the usual exchange of social amenities, the usual driving and riding, the usual, my poor friend, the usual, in all its uncompromising certainty. And what are you to do?"  
"I'm going to town."  
"And then?"  
"I don't know."  
"Oh, but haven't you been asked somewhere? You have, of course."  
"Yes, and I have declined."  
"Matters of business," she inferred.  
"Too bad!"  
"Oh, no."  
"Then," she concluded, laughing, "you don't care to tell me where you are going?"  
"No," he said thoughtfully; "I don't care to tell you."  
She laughed again carelessly and, placing one hand on the tiled pavement, sprang lightly to her feet.  
"A last plunge?" she asked as he rose at her side.  
"Yes, one last plunge together. Deep! Are you ready?"  
She raised her white arms above her head, finger tips joined, poised an instant on the brink, swaying forward; then, at his brief word, they flashed downward together, cutting the crystalline sea water, shooting like great fish over the glass tiled bed, shoulder to shoulder under the water, and, opening their eyes, they turned toward one another with a swift outstretch of hands, an uncontrollable touch of lips, the very shadow of contact; then cleaving upward, rising to the surface to lie breathlessly floating, arms extended and the sun filtering down through the ground glass roof above.  
"We are perfectly crazy," she breathed. "I'm quite mad; I see that. On land it's bad enough for us to misbehave. But submarine sentiment! We'll be growing scales and tails presently. Shall we dress? Even with a maid and the electric air blast it will take time to dry my hair and dress it."  
When he came out of his dressing room she was apparently still in the hands of the maid, so he sauntered through the house as far as the library and, drawing a check book from one pocket, fished out a memorandum book from another and began to cast up totals with a view to learning something about the various debts contracted at Shotover.  
He seemed to owe everybody. Fortune had smitten him hip and thigh, and, a trifle concerned, he began covering a pad with figures until he knew where he stood. Then he drew a considerable check to Major Belwether's order, another to Alderdene. Others followed to other people for various amounts, and he was very busy at work when, aware of another presence near, he turned around in his chair. Sylvia Landis was writing at a desk in the corner, and she looked up, nodding the little greeting that she always reserved for him even after five minutes' separation.  
"I'm writing checks," she said. "I suppose you're writing to your mother."  
"Why do you think so?" he asked curiously.  
"You write to her every day, don't you?"  
"Yes," he said. "But how do you know?"  
She looked at him with unblushing deliberation. "You wrote every day. If it was to a woman, I wanted to know. And I told Grace Ferral that it worried me. And then Grace told me. Is there any other confession of my own pettiness that I can make to

you?"  
"Did you really care to whom I was writing?" he asked slowly.  
"Care? I—it worried me. Was it not a pitifully common impulse? 'Sisters under our skin,' you know—I and the maid who dresses me. She would have snooped; I didn't; that's the only generic difference. I wanted to know just the same. But that was before—"  
"Before what?"  
"Before I—please don't ask me to say it. I did once when you asked me."  
"Before you cared for me—is that what you mean?"  
"Yes. You are so cruelly literal when you wish to punish me. You are interrupting me too. I owe that wretched Kemp Ferral a lot of money, and I'm trying to find out how much seven and nine are to close accounts with Marion Page."  
Seward turned and continued his writing. And when the little sheaf of checks was ready he counted them, laid them aside and, drawing a flat packet of fresh bank notes from his portfolio, counted out the tips expected of him below stairs. These arranged for, he straightened up and glanced over his shoulder at Sylvia, but she was apparently absorbed in counting something on the ends of her fingers, so he turned smilingly to his desk and wrote a long letter to his mother—the same tender, affectionately boyish letter he had always written her, full of confidences, full of humor, gayly anticipating his own return to her on the heels of the letter.  
In his first letter to her from Shotover he had spoken casually of a Miss Landis. It seemed the name was familiar enough to his mother, who asked about her, and he had replied in another letter or two, a trifle emphatic in his praise of her, because from his mother's letters it was quite evident that she knew a good deal concerning the very unconventional affairs of Sylvia's family.  
Of his swift and somewhat equivocal courtship he had had nothing to say in his letters. In fact, recently he had nothing to say about Sylvia at all, reserving that vital confidence for the clear sympathy and understanding which he looked forward to when he should see her and which, through dark days and bitter aftermaths, through struggle and defeat by his master vice, had never failed him yet, never faltered for an instant.  
So he brought his letter to a close with a tender and uneasy inquiry concerning her health, which, she had intimated, was not exactly satisfactory, and for that reason she had opened the house in town in order to be near Dr. Grisby, their family doctor.  
Sealing and directing the letter, he looked up to see Sylvia standing at his elbow. She dropped a light hand on his shoulder for a second, barely touching him—a fugitive caress, delicate as the smile hovering on her lips, as the shy tenderness in her eyes.  
"More letters to your sweetheart?" she asked, abandoning her hand to him.  
"One more, the last before I see her. I wish you could see her, Sylvia."  
"I wish so, too," she answered simply, seating herself on the arm of his chair as though it were a sidesaddle.  
"Would she care for me, do you think?" asked the girl in a low voice.  
"I think so, for your real self."  
"I know. She could only feel contempt for me as I am."  
"She is old fashioned," he said reverently.  
"That means all that is best in a woman—the old fashion of truth and faith, the old fashion of honor and faith in honor, the old, old fashion of love. All that is best, Stephen; all that is worth the love of a man. Some day somebody will revive those fashions."  
"Will you?"  
"Dear, they would not become me," she said, the tenderness in her eyes deepening a little, and she touched his head lightly in humorous caress.  
"What shall we do with the waning daylight?" she asked. "It is my last day with you. I told Howard it was my last day with you and I did not care to be disturbed."  
"You probably didn't say it that way," he commented, amused.  
"I did."  
"How much of that sort of thing is he prepared to stand?" asked Seward curiously.  
"How much? I don't know. I don't believe he cares. It is my uncle, Major Belwether, who is making things unpleasant for me. I had to tell Howard, you know."  
"What!" exclaimed Seward incredulously.  
"Certainly. Do you think my cen-

duct has passed without protest?"  
"You told Quarrier?" he repeated.  
"Did you imagine I could do otherwise?" she asked coolly. "I have that much decency left. Certainly I told him. Do you suppose that after what we did, what I admitted to you, that I could meet him as usual? Do you think I am afraid of him?"  
"I thought you were afraid of losing him," muttered Seward.  
"I was dreadfully. And the morning after you and I had been imprudent enough to sit up until nearly daylight and do what we did I made him take a long walk with me, and I told him plainly that I cared for you, that I was too selfish and cowardly to marry you, and that if he couldn't endure the news he was at liberty to terminate the engagement without notice."  
"What did he say?" stammered Seward.  
"I was informed that he held me strictly and precisely to my promise; that he would never release me voluntarily, though I was, of course, at liberty to do what I chose. My poor friend, he cares no more for love than do I! I happen to be the one woman in New York whom he considers absolutely suitable for him—by race, by breeding, by virtue of appearance and presbue eminently fitted to complete the material portion of his fortune and estate."  
Her voice had hardened as she spoke. Now it rang a little at the end, and she laughed unpleasantly.  
"It appears that I was a little truer to myself than you gave me credit for—a little truer to you, a little less treacherous, less shameless, than you must have thought me. But I have gone to my limit of decency, and were I ten times more in love with you than I am I could not put away the position and power offered me, but I will not lie for it nor betray for it."  
She dropped one arm on the back of his chair and rested her chin on it, staring at space across his shoulders.  
"That's how it had to be, you see, when I found that I cared for you. There was nothing to do but to tell him. He trusts me enough to marry me. He will be safe enough as far as my personal conduct is concerned," she added naively. "It seems that I am capable of love, but I am incapable of its degradation."  
Seward, leaning heavily forward over his desk, rested his head in both hands, and she stooped from her perch on the arm of the chair, pressing her hot cheeks against his hands—a moment only; then, slipping to her feet, she curled up in a great armchair by the fire, head tipped back, blue gaze concentrated on him.  
"The thing for you to do," she said, "is to ambush me some night, and

throw me into a banister and drive us both to the parson's. I'd hate you for it as much as I'd love you, but I'd make you an interesting wife."  
"I may do that yet," he said, lifting his head from his hands.  
"You've a year to do it in," she observed. "By the way, you're to take me in to dinner, as you did the first night. Do you remember? I asked Grace Ferral then. I asked her again today. Heigho! It was years ago, wasn't it, that I drove up to the station and saw a very attractive and perplexed young man looking anxiously about for somebody to take him to Shotover? Ahem! The notorious Mr. Seward! Dear, I didn't mean to hurt you! You know it, silly! Mayn't I have my little joke about your badness—your redoubtable badness of reputation? There! You had just better smile. How dare you frighten me by making me think I had hurt you? Besides, you are probably unrepentant."  
She watched him closely for a moment or two, then, "Are you unrepentant?"  
"About what?"  
"About your general wickedness—about"—she hesitated—"about that girl, for example."  
"What girl?" he asked coldly.  
"That reminds me that you have told me absolutely nothing about her."  
"There is nothing to tell," he said in a tone so utterly new to her in its finality that she sat up as though listening to an unknown voice.  
Tone and words so completely excluded her from the new intimacy into which she had imperceptibly drifted that both suddenly developed a significance from sheer contrast. Who was the girl, then, of whom he had absolutely nothing to say? What was she to him? What could she be to him—an actress, a woman of common antecedents? She felt a little irritated, a little humiliated, a little hurt, and took refuge in a silence that he did not offer to break.  
Early twilight had fallen in the room. The firelight grew redder.  
"Sylvia," he said abruptly, reverting to the old, light tone hinting of the laughter in his eyes which she could no longer see, "suppose, as you suggested, I did ambush you—say after the opera—seize you under the very nose of your escort and make madly for a banister?"  
"I know of no other way," she said demurely.  
"Would you resist physically?"  
"Yes, I would. If I were going to surrender at once I might as well go off to church with you now."  
"Weniston church?" he said promptly.  
"I'll order the motor."  
She laughed, lazily settling herself more snugly by the fire. "Suppose if

were our fire?" she smiled. "There would be a dog lying across that rug, and a comfortable Angora tabby dozing by the fender, and—you, cross-legged, at my feet, with that fascinating head of yours tipped back against my knee."  
The laughter in her voice died out, and he had risen, saying unsteadily: "Don't! I—I can't stand that sort of thing, you know."  
She had made a mistake too. She also had suddenly become aware of her own limits in the same direction.  
"Forgive me, dear! I meant no mockery."  
"I know. After awhile a man finds laughter difficult."  
"I was not laughing at—anything. I was only pretending to be happy."  
"Your happiness is before you," he said sullenly.  
"My future, you mean. You know I am exchanging one for the other. And some day you will awake to the infamy of it. You will comprehend the depravity of the monstrous trade I made. And then—and then"—she passed one slim hand over her face—"then you will shake yourself free from this dream of me; then, at once, my punishment at your hands will begin. Dear, no man to his right senses can continue to love a girl such as I am."  
After a long silence, "Do you think before the year is out that you might be granted enough common sense?" he asked.  
"No, I shall not even pray for it. I want what is offered me. He might have stopped me. He did not. And now what is there on earth to halt me? Love cannot. Common decency and courage cannot. Fear of your unhappiness and mine cannot. No, even the certitude of your contempt some day is powerless to halt me now. I could not love—I am utterly incapable of loving—you enough to balance the sacrifice. And that is final."  
(To be continued.)

Dr. Ailin, Dentist, Cooper Bldg. 17

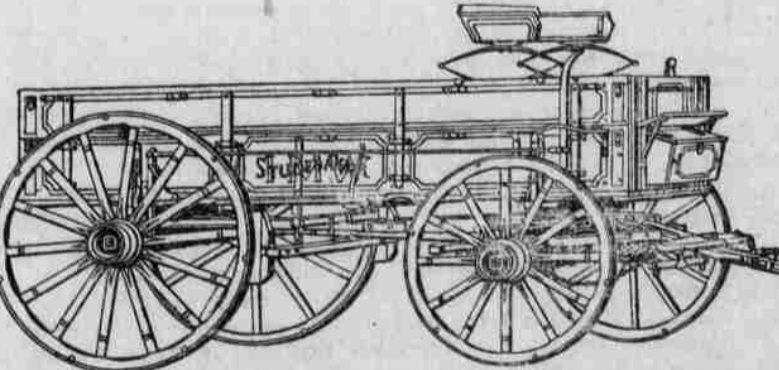
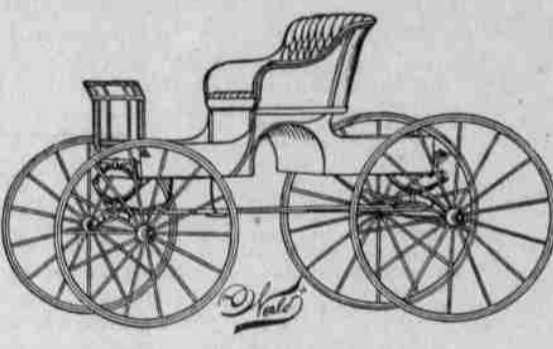
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