

The Fighting Chance

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(A continued story.)

Grace Ferrall came into the room and found a duel of silence in progress under the dull fire glow tinting the ceiling.

"Another quarrel," she commented, turning on the current of the drop light above the desk from which Seward had risen at her entrance. "You quarrel enough to marry. Why don't you?"

"I wish we could," said Sylvia simply.

Grace laughed. "What a little fool you are!" she said tenderly, seating herself in Seward's chair and dropping one hand over his where it rested on the arm. "Stephen, can't you make her—a big, strong fellow like you? Oh, well; on your heads be it! My conscience is now clear for the first time, and I'll never meddle again." She gave Seward's hand a perfunctory pat and released him with a discreetly stifled yawn. "I'm disgracefully sleepy. The wind blew like fury along the coast. Sylvia, have you had a good time at Shotover—the time of your life?"

Sylvia raised her eyes and encountered Seward's.

"I certainly have," she said faintly. The dinner was very gay. The ceremony of christening the Shotover cup, which Quarrier had won, proceeded with presentation speech and a speech of acceptance faultlessly commonplace, during which Quarrier wore his smile—which was the only humorous thing he contributed.

The cup was full. Seward eyed it, perplexed, deadly afraid, yet seeing no avenue of escape from what must appear a public exhibition of contempt for Quarrier if he refused to taste its contents. That meant a bad night for him. Yet he shrank more from the certain misinterpretation of a refusal to drink from the huge loving cup, with its heavy wreath of scented orchids, now already on its way toward him, than he feared the waking struggle so sure to follow.

Marion received the cup, lifted it in both hands and said distinctly, "Good hunting!" as she drank to Quarrier. Her brother Gordon took it and drank entirely too much. Then Sylvia lifted it, her white hands half buried among the orchids. "To you!" she murmured for Seward's ear alone, then drank gayly, mischievously. "To the best shot at Shotover!" And Seward took the cup. "I salute victory," he said, smiling, "always and everywhere. To him who takes the fighting chance and wins out! To the best man! Health!" And he drank as a gentleman drinks, with a gay bow to Quarrier and with death in his heart.

Later the irony of it struck him so grimly that he laughed, and Sylvia, beside him, looked up, dismayed to see the gray change in his face.

Later at cards the aromatic odor of Alderdene's decanter roused him to fierce desire, but he fought it down until only the deadened, tearing ache remained to shake and loosen every nerve. And when Ferrall, finishing his usual batch of business letters, arrived to cut in if needed Seward dropped his cards, with a shudder, and rose so utterly unnerved that Captain Voucher, noticing his drawn face, asked him if he were not ill.

He was leaving on an earlier train than the others, having decided to pass through Boston and Deptford, at which latter place he meant to leave Sagamore for the winter in care of the manager of his mother's farm, so he took a quiet leave of those to whom the civility might not prove an interruption. In the big hall he passed Marion and stopped to take his leave.

No, he would do no hunting this season either at Carysford or with the two trial packs at Eastwood. Possibly at Warrenton later, but probably not. Business threatened to detain him in town more or less.

And that was all, unless he disturbed Sylvia, seated at cards with Quarrier and Major Belwether and Lella Mortimer and very intent on the dummy, very still and a trifle pallid with the pallor of concentration.

So that was all, then. Ascending the stairs, a servant handed him a letter bearing the crest of the Lenox club. He pocketed it unopened and continued his way.

In the darkness of his own room he sat down, the devil's own clutch on his shrinking nerves, a deadly desire tearing at his very vitals and every vein a tiny trail of fire run riot. He had been too long without it, too long to endure the craving aroused by that gay draft from Quarrier's loving cup.

The awakened fury of his desire appalled him, and for awhile that occupied him, enabling him to endure. But fear and dismay soon passed in the

purely physical distress. He walked the floor, haggard, the sweat starting on his face; he lay with clenched hands stiffened out across the bed, deafened by the riotous clamor of his pulses, conscious that he was holding out, unconscious how long he could hold out.

He turned on the light later to look for his pipe, and he caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror. It was a sick man who stared back at him out of hollow eyes, and the physical revulsion shocked him into something resembling self command.

"D—n you!" he said fiercely, setting his teeth and staring back at his reflected face. "I'll kill you yet before I've finished with you!"

Then he filled his pipe and, opening his bedroom window, sat down, resting his arm on the sill. A splendid moon shined on the sea. Through the intense stillness he heard the surf, magnificently dissonant among the reefs, and he listened, fascinated, leathery the tides as he feared and loathed the inexorable tides that surged and ebbed with his accursed desire.

Once he said to himself weakly, for he was deadly tired, "What am I making the light for anyway?" And, "Who are you making the light for?" echoed his heavy pulses.

He had asked that question and received that answer before. After all, it had been for his mother's sake alone. And now—and now? His heart beat out another answer, and before his eyes two other eyes seemed to open, fearlessly, sweetly, divinely tender. But they were no longer his mother's grave gray eyes.

After the second pipe he remembered his letter. It gave him something to do, so he opened it and tried to read it, but for a long while, in his confused physical and mental

condition, he to comprehend its purport.

Little by little he began to comprehend its purport—that his resignation was regretfully requested by the governors of the Lenox club for reasons unassigned.

The shock of the thing came to him after awhile like a distant, dull report long after the flash of the explosion. Well, the affair, bad enough at first, was turning worse, that was all. How much of that sort of discredit could a man stand and keep his balance? And what would his mother say?

Confused from his own physical suffering, the blow had fallen with a deadened force on nerves already numbed, but his half stupefied acquiescence had suddenly become a painful recoil when he remembered where the brunt of the disgrace would fall, where the center of suffering must always be and the keenest grief concentrated. Roused, appalled, almost totally unnerved, he stood staring at the letter, beginning to realize what it would mean to his mother. A passion of remorse and resentment swept him. She must be spared that! There must be some way, some punishment for his offense, that could not strike her through him. It was wicked, it was contemptible, insane, to strike her. What were the governors of the Lenox about, a lot of sniveling hypocrites, pandering to the horrified snobbery at the Patrons? Who were they, anyway, to discipline him? Scarce one in fifty among the members of the two clubs was qualified to sit in judgment on a Seward!

But that tempest of passion and mortification passed, too, leaving him standing there dumb, desperate, staring at the letter crushed in his shaking hand.

He must see somebody, some member of the Lenox, and do something—something! Ferrall! Was that Ferrall's step on the landing?

He sprang to the door and opened it. Quarrier, passing the corridor, turned an expressionless visage toward him and passed on, with a nod almost imperceptible.

"Quarrier!" he called, swept by a sudden impulse.

Quarrier halted and turned.

"Could you give me a moment here in my room? I won't detain you." The faint trace of surprise faded from Quarrier's face. He quietly retraced his steps and, entering Seward's room, stood silently confronting its pallid tenant.

"Will you sit down a moment?" Quarrier seated himself in the armchair by the window, and Seward found a chair opposite.

"Quarrier," said the younger man, turning a tensely miserable face on his visitor, "I want to ask you something. I'll not mince matters. You know that the Patrons have dropped me, and you know what for."

"Yes, I know."

"When I was called before the board of governors to explain the matter, if I could, you were sitting on that board."

"Yes."

"I denied the charge, but refused to explain. You remember?"

Quarrier nodded coldly.

"And I was dropped by the club?"

A slight inclination of Quarrier's symmetrical head corroborated him.

"Now," said Seward, slowly and very distinctly, "I shall tell you unofficially what I refused to tell the other governors officially." And as he began speaking Quarrier's face flushed, then the features became immobile, set and inert and his eyes grew duller and duller, as though under a smooth surface the soul inside of him was shrinking back into some dark corner, silent, watchful, suspicious and perhaps defiant.

"Mr. Quarrier," said Seward quietly, "I did not take that girl to the Patrons club, and you know it."

Quarrier was all surface now. He had drawn away internally so far that even his eyes seemed to recede until they scarcely glimmered through the slits in his colorless mask. And Seward went on:

"I know perfectly well what sort of woman I was to meet at that fool supper Billy Fleetwood gave, and you must have, too, for the girl you took in was no stranger to you. Her name is Lydia Vyse, I believe."

The slightest possible glimmer in the elder man's eyes was all the answer he granted.

"What happened," said Seward calmly, "was this: She bet me she could so disguise herself that I could safely take her into any club in New York. I bet her she couldn't. I never dreamed of trying. Besides, she was your—dinner partner," he added, with a shrug.

"Quarrier," said Seward earnestly, "what happened in the club lobby I don't exactly know, because I was not in a condition to know. I admit it; that was the trouble with me. When I left Fleetwood's rooms I left with a half dozen men. I remember crossing Fifth avenue with them, and the next thing I remember distinctly was loud talking in the club lobby and a number of men there and a slim young fellow in Inverness and top hat in the center of a crowd whose face was the face of that girl Lydia Vyse. And

that is absolutely all. But I couldn't do more than deny that I took her there unless I told what I knew, and of course that was not possible, even in self defense. But it was for you to admit that I was right, and you did not. You dared not! You let another man blunder into your private affairs and fall a victim to circumstantial evidence which you could have refuted, and it was up to you to say something. And you did not! And now what are you going to do? The Lenox club has taken this thing up. A man can't stand too much of that sort of thing. What am I to do? I can't defend myself by betraying my accidental knowledge of your petty private affairs. So I leave it to you. I ask you what are you going to do?"

"Do you mean"—Quarrier's voice was not his own, and he brought it harshly under command—"do you mean that you think it necessary for me to say I knew her? What object would be attained by that? I did not take her to the Patrons."

"Nor did I. Ask her how she got there. Learn the truth from her, man!"

"What proof is there that I ever met her before I took her into supper at Fleetwood's?"

"Proof! Are you mad? All I ask of you is to say to the governors what I cannot say without using your name."

"You wish me," asked Quarrier telly, "to deny that you made that wager? I can do that."

"You can't do it! I did make that bet."

"Oh! Then what is it you wish me to say?"

"Tell them the truth. Tell them you know I did not take her to the club. You need not tell them why you know it. You need not tell them how much you know about her, whose brougham she drove home in. I can't defend myself at your expense—intrude myself behind your dirty little romance. What could I say? I denied taking her to the club. Then Major Belwether confronted me with my wager. Then I shut up. And so did you, Quarrier—so did you, seated there among the governors between Leroy Mortimer and Belwether. It was up to you, and you did not stir!"

"Stir!" echoed the other man, exasperated. "Of course I did not stir. What did I know about it? Do you think I care to give a man like Mortimer a hold on me by admitting I knew anything? Or Belwether, do you think I care to have that man know anything about my private and personal business? Did you expect me to say that I was in a position to prove anything one way or another? And," he added, with increasing harshness, "how do you know what I might or might

not prove? If she went to the Patrons club, I did not go with her; I did not see her; I don't know whether or not you took her."

"I have already told you that I did not take her," said Seward, turning whiter.

"You told that to the governors too. Tell them again if you like. I decline to discuss this matter with you. I decline to countenance your unwarranted intrusion into what you pretend to believe are my private affairs. I decline to confer with Belwether or Mortimer. It's enough that you are inclined to meddle." His cold anger was stirring. He rose to his full, muscular height, slow, menacing, his long pale fingers twisting his silky beard. "It's enough that you meddle!" he repeated. "As for the matter in question, a dozen men, including myself, heard you make a wager, and later I myself was a witness that the terms of that wager had been carried out to the letter. I know absolutely nothing except that Mr. Seward; nor, it appears, do you, for you were drunk at the time, and you have admitted it to me."

"I have asked you," said Seward, rising and very grave, "I have asked you to do the right thing. Are you going to do it?"

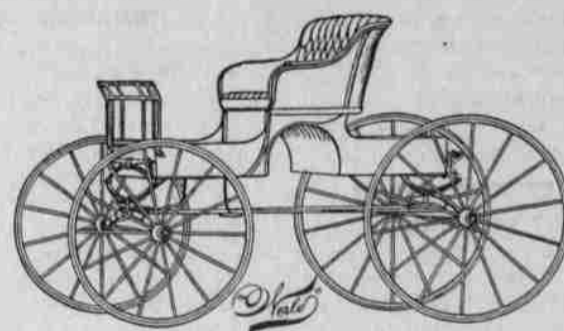
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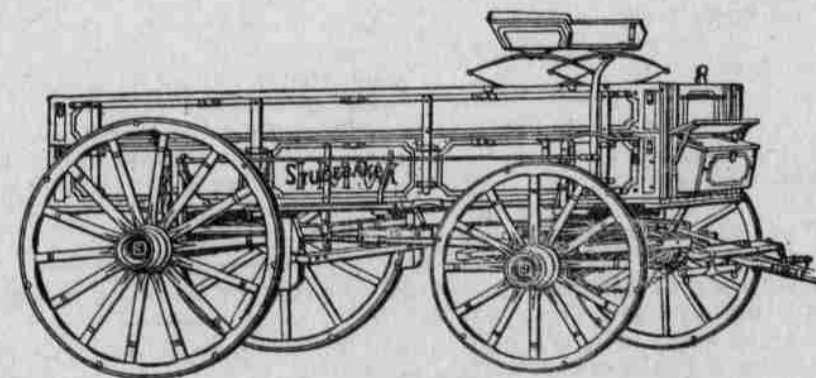
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