

The Fighting Chance

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(A continued story.)

"Is that a threat?" inquired Quarrier, showing the edges of his well kept teeth. "Is this intimidation, Mr. Seward? Do I understand that you are proposing to bespatter others with scandal unless I am frightened into going to the governors with the funny excuse you attempt to offer me? In other words, Mr. Seward, are you bent on making me pay for what you believe you know of my private life? Is it really intimidation?"

And still Seward stared into his half veiled, sneering eyes, speechless. "There is only one name used for this kind of thing," added Quarrier, taking a quick involuntary step backward to the door as the blaze of fury broke out in Seward's eyes.

"Good God, Quarrier," whispered Seward with dry lips, "what a cur you are! What a cur!"

And long after Quarrier had passed the door and disappeared in the corridor, Seward stood there, frozen motionless under the icy waves of rage that swept him.

Toward midnight, seated in his chair by the window, a deathly lassitude weighing his heart, he heard the steps of people on the stairway, the click of the ascending elevator, gay voices calling good night, a ripple of laughter, the silken swish of skirts in the corridor, doors opening and closing; then silence creeping throughout the house on the receding heels of departure. For a long while he sat there listening.

The cool wind from the ocean blew his curtains far into the room, where they belled out, fluttering, floating, subsiding, only to rise again in the freshening breeze. He sat watching their silken convolutions, stupidly, for a while, then rose and closed his window, and raised the window on the south for purposes of air.

As he turned to adjust his transom, something white thrust under the door caught his eye, and he walked over and drew it across the sill. It was a sealed note. He opened it, reading it as he walked back to the droplight burning beside his bed:

Did you not mean to say goodby? Because it is to be goodby for a long, long time—for all our lives—as long as we live—as long as the world lasts and longer. Goodby—unless you care to say it to me.

He stood studying the note for a while. Presently, lighting a match, he set fire to it and carried it blazing to the grate and flung it in, watching the blackened ashes curl up, glow, whiten and fall in flakes to the hearth. Then he went out into the corridor and traversed the hall to the passage which led to the bay window. There was nobody there. Moving swiftly, he walked the length of the corridor and, halting at her door, knocked once.

After a moment the door swung open. He stepped forward into the room, closing the door behind him, and confronted the tall girl standing there silhouetted against the lamp behind her.

"You are insane to do this!" she whispered. "I let you in for fear you'd knock again!"

"I went to the bay window," he said. "You went too late. I was there an hour ago. I waited. Do you know what time it is?"

"Come to the bay window," he said, "if you fear me here."

"Do you know it is nearly 3 o'clock?" she repeated. "And you leave at 6."

"Shall we say goodby here?" he asked coolly.

"Certainly, I dare not go out. And you—do you know the chances we are running? You must be perfectly mad to come to my room. Do you think anybody could have seen—heard you?"

"No. Good night." He offered his hand. She laid both of hers in it. He could scarcely distinguish her features where she stood dark against the brilliant light behind her.

"Goodby," he whispered, kissing her hands where they lay in his.

"Goodby." Her fingers closed convulsively, retaining his hands. "I hope—I think that you"—Her head was drooping. She could not control her voice.

"Goodby, Sylvia," he said again. It was quite useless—she could not speak, and when he took her in his arms she clung to him, quivering, and he kissed the wet lashes and the hot, trembling lips and the smooth little hands crushed to his breast.

"We have a year yet," she gasped. "Dear, take me by force before it ends. I—I simply cannot endure this. I told you to take me—to tear me from myself. Will you do it? I will love you—truly, truly! Oh, my darling, my darling! Don't—don't give me up! Can't you do something for us? Can't you?"

"Will you come with me now?"

"How can?"

"Will you?"

A sudden sound broke out in the night—the distant pealing of the lodge gate bell. Startled, she shrank back; somebody in the adjoining room had sprung to the floor and was opening the window.

"What is it?" she motioned, with whitening lips. "Quick, oh, quick, before you are seen! Grace may come! I—I beg of you to go!"

As he stepped into the corridor he heard below a sound at the great door and the stirring of the night watchman on post. At his own door he turned, listening to the movement and whispering. Ferrail, in dressing gown and slippers, stepped into the corridor. Below the chains were rattling as the wicket swung open. There was a brief parley at the door, sounds of retreating steps on the gravel outside, sounds of approaching steps on the stairway.

"What's that? A telegram?" said Ferrail sharply. "Here, give it to me. Wait! It isn't for me. It's for Mr. Seward!"

Seward's glazed eyes stared and stared at the scrawled and inky message:

Your mother is very ill. Come at once.

The signature was the name of their family physician, Grisby.

CHAPTER EIGHT

BY January the complex social mechanism of the metropolis was whirling smoothly again. The last ultra fashionable December lingerer had returned from the country. Those of the same caste outward bound for a southern or exotic winter had departed, and the glittering machine, every part assembled, refurbished, repolished and connected, having been given preliminary speed tests at the horse show and a tuning up at the opera, was now running under full velocity, and its steady, subdued whir quickened the clattering pulse of the city, keying it to a sublimely syncopated ragtime.

It was an open winter in New York and financially a prosperous one, and that meant a brilliant social season. Three phenomena particularly characterized that metropolitan winter—the reckless rage for private gambling through the mediums of bridge and roulette; the incorporation of a company known as the Intercounty Electric company, capitalized at a figure calculated to disturb nobody and so far without any avowed specific policy other than that which served to decorate a portion of its charter which otherwise might have remained ornately and comparatively blank; the third phenomenon was the retirement from active affairs of Stanley S. Quarrier, the father of Howard Quarrier, and the election of the son to the presidency of the great Algonquin Loan and Trust company, with its network system of dependent, subsidiary and allied corporations.

The day that the newspapers gave this interesting information to the western world Leroy Mortimer, on being bluntly notified that he had overdrawn his account with the Algonquin Loan and Trust, began telephoning in every direction until he located Beverly Plank at the Saddle club, an organization of wealthy men and sufficiently exclusive not to compromise Plank's possible chances for something better. Mortimer crawled out of his hansom, saying that the desk clerk would pay, and entered the reading room, where Plank sat writing a letter.

Beverly Plank had grown stouter since he had returned to town from Black Fells, but the increase of weight was evenly distributed over his six feet odd, which made him only a trifle more ponderous and not abnormally fat. But Mortimer had become enormous. Rolls of flesh crowded his mottled ear lobes outward and bulged above his collar. Cushions of it padded the backs of his hands and fingers. Shaving left his heavy, distended face congested and unpleasantly shiny. But he was as minutely groomed as ever, and he wore that satiated air of prosperity which had always been one of his most important assets.

The social campaign inaugurated by Leila Mortimer in behalf of Beverly Plank had so far received no serious reverses. His box at the horse show, of course, produced merely negative results. His box at the opera might mean something some day. His name was up at the Lenox and the Patrons. He had endowed a ward in the new pavilion of St. Berold's hospital. He had presented a fine Gainsborough. "The Countess of Wythe," to the Met-

ropolitan museum, and it was rumored that he had consulted several bishops concerning a new chapel for that huge bastion of the citadel of faith looming above the metropolitan wilderness in the north.

Meanwhile he was doggedly doleful. His huge house, facing the wintry park midway between the squat palaces of the wealthy pioneers and the outer hundreds, remained magnificently empty save for certain afternoon conferences of very solemn men, fellow directors and associates in business and financial matters—save for the periodical presence of the Mortimers.

"Things are moving all the same," said Mortimer as he entered the reading room of the Saddle club. "Quarrier and Belwether have listened more respectfully to me since they read that column about you and the bishops and that chapel business."

Plank turned his heavy head, with a disturbed glance around the room. "Can't you be careful?" he said. "There was a man here a moment ago." He picked up his unfinished letter, folded and pocketed it, touched an electric bell, and when a servant came, "Take Mr. Mortimer's order," he said, supporting his massive head on his huge hands and resting his elbow on the writing desk.

"I've got to cut out this morning bracer," said Mortimer, eying the servant with indecision, but he gave his order nevertheless and later accepted a cigar, and when the servant had returned and again retired he half emptied his tall glass, refilled it with mineral water and, settling back in the padded armchair, said: "If I manage this thing as it ought to be managed you'll go through by April. What do you think of that?"

Plank's phlegmatic features flushed. "I'm more obliged to you than I can say," he began, but Mortimer silenced him with a gesture. "Don't interrupt! I'm going to put you through the Patrons club by April. That's thirty yards through the center. D'ye see, you dunder-headed Dutchman? It's solid gain, and it's our ball. The Lenox will take longer. They're a 'holier-than-thou' bunch of nincompoops, and it always horrifies them to have any man elected, no matter who he is."

Plank looked out of the window, his shrewd blue eyes closing in retrospection.

"Another thing," continued Mortimer thickly, "the Kemp Ferrails are disposed to be decent. I don't mean in asking you to meet some intellectual second raters, but in doing it handsomely."

"I want to say," began Plank, speaking the more slowly because he was deeply in earnest, "that all this you are doing for me is very handsome of you, Mortimer. I'd like to say, to convey to you something of how I feel about the way you and Mrs. Mortimer"—

"Oh, Leila has done it all."

"Mrs. Mortimer is very kind, and you have been so too. I—I wish there was something, some way to—"

"To what?" asked Mortimer so bluntly that Plank flushed up and stammered:

"To be—to do a—to show my gratitude."

"How? You're scarcely in a position to do anything for us," said Mortimer, brutally staring him out of countenance.

"I know it," said Plank, the painful flush deepening.

Mortimer, frowning and growling over his cigar, was nevertheless stealthily intent on the game which had so long absorbed him. His wits, clogged, dulled by excesses, were now aroused to a sort of gross activity through the menace of necessity. At last Plank had given him an opening. He recognized his chance.

"There's one thing," he said deliberately, "that I won't stand for, and that's any vulgar misconception on your part of my friendship for you. Do you follow me?"

"I don't misunderstand it," protested Plank, angry and astonished. "I don't—"

"As though," continued Mortimer menacingly, "I were one of those needy social tipsters, one of those shabby, pandering toots who—"

"For heaven's sake, Mortimer, don't talk like that! I had no intention—"

"—one of those contemptible, parasitic leeches," persisted Mortimer, getting redder and hoarser, "who live on men like you. Confound you, Plank, what the devil do you mean by it?"

"Mortimer, are you crazy to talk to me like that?"

"No, I'm not, but you must be! I've a mind to drop the whole cursed business! I've every inclination to drop it! If you haven't horse sense enough—if you haven't innate delicacy sufficient to keep you from making such a break!"

"I didn't. It wasn't a break, Mortimer. I wouldn't have hurt you—"

"You did hurt me! How can I feel the same again? I never imagined you thought I was that sort of a social mercenary. Why, so little did I dream

that you looked on our friendship in that light that I was—on my word of honor—I was just now on the point of asking you for \$3,000 or \$4,000 to carry me to the month's end and square my bridge balance."

"Mortimer, you must take it! You are a fool to think I meant anything by saying I wanted to show my gratitude. Look here; be decent and fair with me. I wouldn't offer you an affront—would I—even if I were a cad? I wouldn't do it now just when you're getting things into shape for me. I'm not a fool anyway. This is in deadly earnest, I tell you, Mortimer, and I'm getting angry about it. You've got to show your confidence in me. You've got to take what you want from me as you would from any friend."

(To be continued.)

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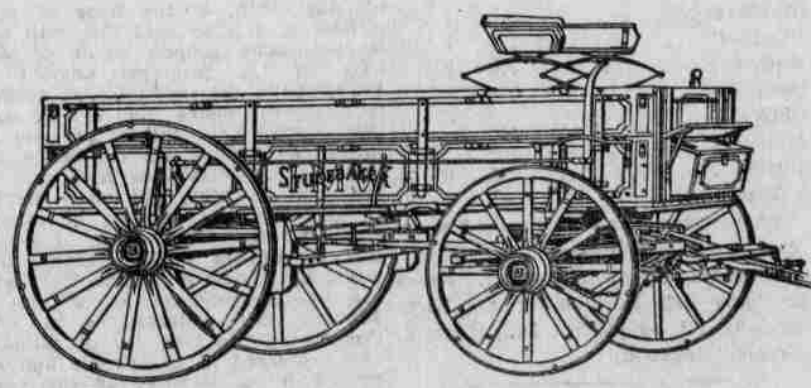
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