

The Fighting Chance

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(A continued story.)

There was a pause. A curious and unaccustomed sensation had silenced Mortimer, something almost akin to shame. It astonished him a little. He did not quite understand why in the very moment of success over this stolid, shrewd young man and his thrifty Dutch instincts he should feel uncomfortable. Were not his services worth something? Had he not earned at least the right to borrow from this rich man who could afford to pay for what was done for him? Why should he feel ashamed? He had not been treacherous; he really liked the fellow. Why shouldn't he take his money?

"See here, old man," said Plank, extending a huge highly colored hand, "is all square between us now?"

"I think so," muttered Mortimer. But Plank would not relinquish his hand.

"Then tell me how to draw that check! Great heaven, Mortimer, what is friendship, anyhow, if it doesn't include little matters like this—little misunderstandings like this? I'm the man to be sensitive, not you. You have been very good to me, Mortimer. I could almost wish you in a position where the only thing I possess might square something of my debt to you."

A few minutes later while he was sitting in the check a dusty youth in riding clothes and spurs came in and found a seat by one of the windows, into which he dropped, and then looked about him for a servant.

"Hello, Fleetwood!" said Mortimer, glancing over his shoulder to see whose spurs were ringing on the polished floor.

Fleetwood saluted amiably with his riding crop, including Plank, whom he did not know, in a more formal salute.

"Will you join us?" asked Mortimer, taking the check which Plank offered and carelessly pocketing it without even a nod of thanks. "You know Beverly Plank, of course? What! I thought everybody knew Beverly Plank."

Mr. Fleetwood and Mr. Plank shook hands and resumed their seats.

"Ripping weather!" observed Fleetwood, replacing his hat and rebutting the glove which he had removed to shake hands with Plank. "Lot of jolly people out this morning. I say, Mortimer, do you want that roan hunter of mine you looked over? I mean King Dermid, because Marion Page wants him if you don't. She was out this morning, and she spoke of it again."

Mortimer, lifting a replenished glass, shook his head and drank thirstily in silence.

"Saw you at Westbury, I think," said Fleetwood politely to Plank as the two lifted their glasses to one another.

"I hunted there for a day or two," replied Plank modestly. "If it's that big Irish thoroughbred you were riding that you want to sell, I'd like a look in if Miss Page doesn't fancy him."

Fleetwood laughed and glanced amusedly at Plank over his glass. "It isn't that horse, Mr. Plank. That's Drumceall, Stephen Sward's famous horse." He interrupted himself to exchange greetings with several men who came into the room rather noisily, their spurs resounding across the oak floor. One of them, Tom O'Hara, joined them, slamming his crop on the desk beside Plank and spreading himself over an armchair, from the seat of which he forcibly removed Mortimer's feet without excuse.

"Drink? Of course I want a drink," he replied irritably to Fleetwood—"one, three, ten, several. Billy, whose weasel belled pinto was that you were kicking your heels into in the park? Some of the squadron men asked me—the major. Oh, beg pardon! Didn't know you were trying to stick Mortimer with him. He might do for the troop ambulance—inside. What? Oh, yes; met Mr. Plank—I mean Mr. Plank—at Shotover, I think. How d'ye do? Had the pleasure of potting your tame pheasants. Rotten sport, you know. What do you do it for, Mr. Plank?"

"What did you come for if it's rotten sport?" asked Plank so simply that it took O'Hara a moment to realize he had been snubbed.

"I didn't mean to be offensive," he drawled.

"I suppose you can't help it," said Plank very gently. "Some people can't, you know." And there was another silence, broken by Mortimer, whose entire bulk was tingling with a mixture of surprise and amusement over his protegee's developing ability to take care of himself. "Did you say that Stephen Sward is in Westbury, Billy?"

"No; he's in town," replied Fleet-

wood. "I took his horses up to hunt with. He isn't hunting, you know."

"I didn't know. Nobody ever seen him anywhere," said Mortimer. "I guess his mother's death cut him up."

Fleetwood lifted his empty glass and gently shook the ice in it. "That, and—the other business—is enough to cut any man up, isn't it?"

"You mean the action of the Lenox club?" asked Plank seriously.

"Yes. He's resigned from this club, too, I hear. Somebody told me that he has made a clean sweep of all his clubs. That's foolish. A man may be an ass to join too many clubs, but he's always a fool to resign from any of 'em. You ask the weatherwise what resigning from a club forecasts. It's the first ominous sign in a young man's career."

Under cover of a rapid fire exchange of pleasantries between Fleetwood and O'Hara, Plank turned to Mortimer, hesitating:

"I rather liked Sward when I met him at Shotover," he ventured. "I'm very sorry he's down and out."

"He drinks," shrugged Mortimer, diluting his mineral water with Irish whisky. "He can't let it alone. He's like all the Swards."

"Mortimer doesn't care for Sward, but he's an awfully good fellow, all the same," said Fleetwood, turning to Plank. "He's been an ass, but who hasn't? I like him tremendously, and I feel very bad over the mess he made of it after that crazy dinner I gave in my rooms. What? You hadn't heard of it? Why, man, it's the talk of the clubs."

"I suppose that is why I haven't heard," said Plank simply. "My club life is still in the future."

"Oh!" said Fleetwood, with an involuntary stare, surprised, a trifle uncomfortable, yet somehow liking Plank, and not understanding why.

Mortimer continued a desultory discussion with O'Hara concerning a very private dinner which somebody told somebody that somebody had given to Quarrier and the Intercounty Electric people, which, if true, plainly indicated who was financing the Intercounty scheme and why Amalgamated stock had tumbled again yesterday and what might be looked for from the Algonquin Trust company's president.

"Amalgamated Electric doesn't seem to like it a little bit," said O'Hara. "Ferrall, Belwether and Sward are in it up to their necks, and if Quarrier is really the god in the machine and if he really is doing stunts with Amalgamated Electric and is also mixing feet with the Intercounty crowd, why, he is virtually paralleling his own road, and why, in the name of common sense, is he doing that? He'll kill it, that's what he'll do."

"He can afford to kill it," observed Mortimer, punching the electric button and making a significant gesture toward his empty glass as the servant entered. "A man like Quarrier can afford to kill anything."

"Yes, but why kill Amalgamated Electric? Why not merge? Why, it's a crazy thing to do; it's a devil of a thing to do, to parallel your own line!" insisted O'Hara. "That is dirty work. People don't do such things these days. Nobody tears up dollar bills for the pleasure of tearing."

"Nobody knows what Quarrier will do," muttered Mortimer, who had tried hard enough to find out when the first ominous rumors arose concerning Amalgamated, and the first fractional declines left the street speechless and stupefied.

O'Hara sat frowning and fingering his glass. "As a matter of fact," he said, "a little cold logic shows us that Quarrier isn't in it at all. No sane man would ruin his own enterprise when there is no need to. His people are openly supporting Amalgamated and hammering Intercounty, and, besides, there's Ferrall in it, and Mrs. Ferrall is Quarrier's cousin; and there's Belwether in it, and Quarrier is engaged to marry Sylvia Landis, who is Belwether's niece. It's a scrap with Harrington's crowd, and the wheels inside of wheels are like Chinese boxes. Who knows what it means? Only it's plain that Amalgamated is safe, if Quarrier wants it to be. And unless he does he's crazy."

Mortimer, squinting sideways at Plank and seeing him still occupied with Fleetwood, turned bluntly on O'Hara:

"See here, what do you mean by being nasty to Plank?" he growled. "I'm backing him. Do you understand?"

"It is curious," mused O'Hara coolly, "how much of a cad a fairly decent man can be when he's out of temper."

"You mean Plank or me?" demanded

Mortimer, darkening angrily.

"No; I mean myself. I'm not that way usually. I took him for a bouncer, and he's caught me with the goods on. I've been thinking that the men who bother with such questions are usually open to suspicion themselves. Watch me do the civil now. I'm ashamed of myself."

"Wait a moment. Will you be civil enough to do something for him at the Entrees? That will mean something."

"Is he up? Yes, I will," and, turning in his chair, he said to Plank: "Awfully sorry I acted like a bouncer just now after having accepted your hospitality at the Fells. I did mean to be offensive, and I'm sorry for that too. Hope you'll overlook it and be friendly."

Plank's face took on the dark red hue of embarrassment. He looked questioningly at Mortimer, whose visage remained noncommittal, then directly at O'Hara.

"I should be very glad to be friends with you," he said, with an ingenuous dignity that surprised Mortimer. It was only the native simplicity of the man, venerated and polished by constant contact with Mrs. Mortimer and now showing to advantage in the grain. And it gratified Mortimer, because he saw that it was going to make many matters much easier for himself and his protegee.

The tail glasses were filled and drained again before they departed to the cold plunge and dressing rooms above, whence presently they emerged in street garb to drive downtown and lunch together at the Lenox club, Plank as Fleetwood's guest.

Having O'Hara and Fleetwood to give him countenance, Mortimer managed to make Plank known personally to several governors of the club and to a dozen members, then left him to his fate, whence presently Fleetwood and O'Hara extracted him, fate at that moment being personified by a garrulous old gentleman, one Peter Calthness, who divided with Major Belwether the distinction of being the club bore, and together they piloted him to the billiard room, where he beat them handsly for a dollar a point at everything they suggested.

"You play almost as pretty a game as Stephen Sward used to play," said O'Hara cordially. "You've something of his cue movement—something of his infernal facility and touch. Hasn't he, Fleetwood?"

"I wish Sward were back here," said Fleetwood thoughtfully, returning his cue to his own rack. "I wonder what he does with himself—where he keeps himself all the while? What the devil is there for a man to do if he doesn't do anything? He's not go-

ing out anywhere since his mother's death. He has no clubs to go to, I understand. What does he do—go to his office and come back and sit in that shabby old brick house all day and blink at the bum portraits of his bum and distinguished ancestors?"

For awhile they talked of Sward and of his unfortunate story and the pity of it, and when the two men ceased:

"Do you know," said Plank mildly, "I don't believe he ever did it."

O'Hara looked up surprised, then shrugged. "Unfortunately he doesn't deny it, you see."

"I heard," said Fleetwood, lighting a cigarette, "that he did deny it; that he said, no matter what his condition was, he couldn't have done it. If he had been bound to take his word of honor. But he couldn't give that, you see. And after they pointed out to him that he had been in no condition to know exactly what he did do, he shut up. And they dropped him, and he's falling yet."

"Lord! I wish Sward were back here. He was a good deal of a man, after all, Tom."

They were unconsciously using the past tense in discussing Sward, as though he were dead, either physically or socially.

"In one way he was always a singularly decent man," mused O'Hara.

"How exactly do you mean?"

"Oh, about women!"

"I believe it too. If he did take that Vyse girl into the Patrons it was his limit with her, and I believe his limit with any woman. He was absurdly decent that way. He was, indeed. And now look at the reputation he has. Isn't it funny? Isn't it now?"

"What sort of an effect do you suppose all this business is going to have on Sward?"

"It's had one effect already," replied Fleetwood. "Ferrall says he looks sick, and Belwether says he's going to the devil, but that's the sort of thing the major is likely to say. By the way, wasn't there something between that pretty Landis girl and Sward? Somebody—some gossiping somebody—talked about it somewhere recently."

"I don't believe that, either," said Plank in his heavy, measured, passionless voice as they descended the steps of the white portico and looked around for a cab.

"As for me, I've got to hustle," observed O'Hara, glancing at his watch. "I'm due to shine at a function about 5. Are you coming uptown, either of you fellows? I'll give you a lift as far as Seventy-second street, Plank."

"Tell you what we'll do," said Fleetwood, impulsively, turning to Plank.

"We'll drive downtown, you and I, and we'll look up poor old Sward. Shall we? He's probably all alone in that God forsaken red brick family tomb. Shall we? How about it, Plank?"

O'Hara turned impatiently on his heel with a gesture of adieu, climbed into his electric hansom and went buzzing away up the avenue.

"I'd like to, but I don't think I know Mr. Sward well enough to do that," said Plank diffidently. He hesitated, coloring up. "He might misunderstand my going with you—as a liberty—which perhaps I might not have ventured on had he been less—less unfortunate."

Again Fleetwood warmed toward the roddy, ponderous young man beside him. "See here," he said, "you are going as a friend of mine if you care to look at it that way."

"Thank you," said Plank. "I should be very glad to go in that way."

The Sward house was old only in the comparative Manhattan meaning of the word, for in New York nothing is really very old except the faces of the young men.

Decades ago it had been considered a big house, and it was still so spoken of—a solid, dingy, red brick structure, cubical in proportions, surmounted by heavy chimneys, the depth of its sunken windows hinting of the thickness of wall and foundation. Window curtains of obsolete pattern, all alike and all drawn, masked the blank panes.

Three massive wistaria vines, the gnarled stems as thick as tree trunks, crawled upward to the roof, dividing the facade equally and furnishing some relief to its flatness, otherwise unbroken except by the deep reveals of window and door. Two huge and unsymmetrical catalpa trees stood sentinels before it, dividing curb from asphalt, and from the centers of the shriveled brown grass plots flanking the stoop under the basement windows two aged Rose of Sharon trees bristled naked to the height of the white marble capitals of the faking pillars supporting the stained portico.

"Nice old family mausoleum," commented Fleetwood, descending from the hansom, followed by Plank.

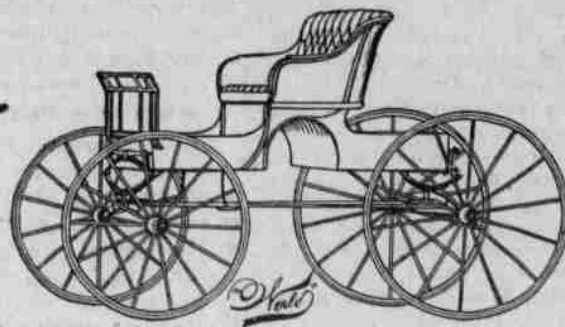
The door was opened by a very old man wearing the black swallowtail clothes and choker of an old time butler, spotless, quite immaculate, but cut after a fashion no young man remembers.

(To be continued.)

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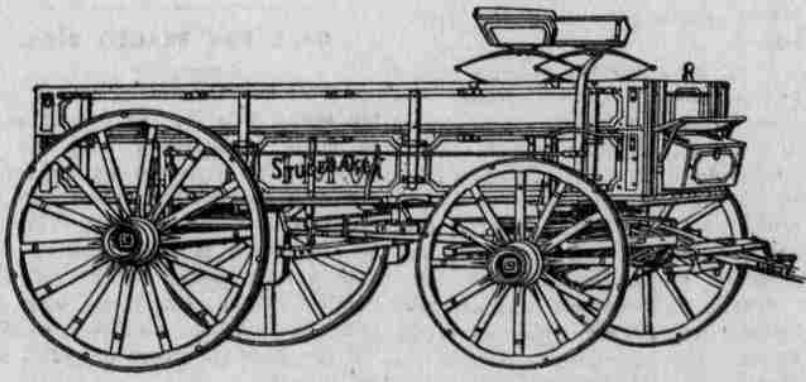
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