

The Fighting Chance

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(A continued story.)

"Good evening, Gumble," said Fleetwood, entering, followed on tiptoe by Plank.

"Good evening, sir." A pause and in the unsteady voice of age: "Mr. Fleetwood, sir, Mr.—" A bow and the dim eyes peering up at Plank, who stood fumbling for his cardcase.

Fleetwood dropped both cards on the salver unsteadily extended. The butler ushered them into a dim room on the right.

"How is Mr. Seward?" asked Fleetwood, pausing on the threshold and dropping his voice.

The old man hesitated, looking down; then still looking away from Fleetwood: "Bravely, sir; bravely, Mr. Fleetwood."

"The Swards were always that," said the young man gently.

"Yes, sir. Thank you, Mr. Stephen—Mr. Seward," he corrected quaintly, "is indisposed, sir. It was a— a great shock to us all, sir." He bowed and turned away, holding his salver stiffly, and they heard him muttering under his breath: "Bravely, sir; bravely. A— a great shock, sir. Thank you."

The butler returned presently, saying that Mr. Seward was at home and would receive them in the library above, as he was not yet able to pass up and down stairs.

Seward was sitting in an armchair by the window, one leg extended, his left foot, stiffly cased in bandages, resting on a footstool.

"Why, Stephen," exclaimed Fleetwood, hastening forward, "I didn't know you were laid up like this!"

Seward offered his hand inquiringly; then his eyes turned toward Plank, who stood behind Fleetwood, and, slowly disengaging his hand from Fleetwood's sympathetic grip, he offered it to Plank.

"It is very kind of you," he said. "Gumble, Mr. Fleetwood prefers rye for some inscrutable reason. Mr. Plank?" His smile was a question.

"If you don't mind," said Plank, "I should like to have some tea—that is, if—"

"Tea, Gumble, for two. We'll tinkle in company, Mr. Plank," he added. "And the cigars are at your elbow, Billy," with another smile at Fleetwood.

"Now," said the latter after he had lighted his cigar, "what is the matter, Stephen?"

Seward glanced at his stiffly extended foot. "Nothing much." He reddened faintly. "I slipped. It's only a twisted ankle."

For a moment or two the answer satisfied Fleetwood; then a sudden, curious flash of suspicion came into his eyes. He glanced sharply at Seward, who lowered his eyes, while the red tint in his hollow cheeks deepened.

Neither spoke for awhile. Plank sipped the tea which Wands, the second man, brought. Seward brooded over his cup, head bent. Fleetwood made more noise than necessary with his ice.

"Why did you drop the Saddle club, Stephen?" asked Fleetwood.

"I'm not riding. I have no use for it," replied Seward.

"You've cut out the Proscenium club, too, and the Owl's Head and the Trophy. It's a shame, Stephen."

"I'm tired of clubs."

"Don't talk that way."

"Very well, I won't," said Seward, smiling. "Tell me what is happening out there." He made a gesture toward the window. "All the gossip the newspapers miss. I've talked Dr. Grisby to death; I've talked Gumble to death; I've read myself stupid. What's going on, Billy?"

So Fleetwood sketched for him a gay cartoon of events, caricaturing various episodes in the social kaleidoscope which might interest him. Politics was touched upon, and they spoke of the possibility of Ferrall going to the assembly, the sport of boss baiting having become fashionable among amateurs and providing a new amusement for the idle rich. So city state and national issues were run through lightly, business conditions noticed, the stock market speculated upon, and presently conversation died out, with a yawn from Fleetwood as he looked into his empty glass at the last bit of ice.

"Don't do that, Billy," smiled Seward.

"You haven't discoursed upon art, literature and science yet, and you can't go until you've adjusted the affairs of the nation for the next twenty-four hours."

"How soon will you be out?" inquired Fleetwood.

"Out? I don't know. I shall try to drive to the office tomorrow."

"Why the devil did you resign from all your clubs? How can I see you if I don't come here?" began Fleetwood impatiently. "I know, of course, that you're not going anywhere, but a man always goes to his club. You don't look well, Stephen. You are too much alone."

Seward did not answer. His face and body had certainly grown thinner since Fleetwood had last seen him. Plank, too, had been shocked at the change in him—the dark, hard lines under the eyes; the pallor, the curious immobility of the man, save for his fingers, which were always restless, now moving in search of some small object to worry and turn over and over, now nervously settling into a grasp on the arm of his chair.

"How is Amalgamated Electric?" asked Fleetwood abruptly.

"I think it's all right. Want to buy some?" replied Seward, smiling.

Plank stirred in his chair ponderously. "Somebody is kicking it to pieces," he said.

"Somebody is trying to," smiled Seward.

"Harrington," nodded Fleetwood. Seward nodded back. Plank was silent.

"Of course," continued Fleetwood tentatively, "you people need not worry with Howard Quarrier back of you."

Nobody said anything for awhile. Presently Seward's restless hands, moving in search of something, encountered a pencil lying on the table beside him, and he picked it up and began drawing initials and scrolls on the margin of a newspaper, and all the scrolls framed initials, and all the initials were the same, twining and twisting into endless variations of the letters S. L.

"Yes, I must go to the office tomorrow," he repeated absently. "I am better—in fact, I am quite well except for this sprain." He looked down at his bandaged foot; then his pencil moved listlessly again, continuing the endless variations on the two letters. It was plain that he was tired.

Fleetwood rose and made his adieu almost affectionately. Plank moved forward on tiptoe, bulky and noiseless, and Seward held out his hand, saying something amiably formal.

"Would you like to have me come again?" asked Plank, red with embarrassment, yet so naively that at first Seward found no words to answer him; then:

"Would you care to come, Mr. Plank?"

"Yes."

Seward looked at him curiously, almost cautiously. His first impressions of the man had been summed up in one contemptuous word. Besides, barring that, what was there in common between himself and such a type as Plank? He had not even troubled himself to avoid him at Shotover. He had merely been aware of him when Plank spoke to him.

Perhaps Plank had changed, perhaps Seward had, for he found nothing offensive in the bulky young man now—nothing particularly attractive, either, except for a certain simplicity, a certain direct candor in the heavy blue eyes which met his squarely.

"Come in for a cigar when you have a few moments idle," said Seward slowly.

"It will give me great pleasure," said Plank, bowing.

And that was all. He followed Fleetwood down the stairs. Wands held their coats and bowed them out into the falling shadows of the winter twilight.

Seward, sitting beside his window, watched them enter their noisome and drive away up the avenue. A cell flush had settled over his cheeks, the aroma of spirits hung in the air, and he looked across the room at the decanter. Presently he drank some of his tea, but it was lukewarm, and he pushed the cup from him.

"Gumble, are you there?" he asked carelessly.

The butler entered from the hallway. "Yes, sir."

"You may leave that decanter."

But the old servant may have misunderstood, for he only bowed and shuffled off downstairs with the decanter, either heedless or deaf to his master's sharp order to return.

Lamp-light brought out sharply the physical change in Seward—the angular shadows flat under the cheek bones,

the hard, slightly swollen flesh in the bluish shadows around the eyes. The mark of the master vice was there—its stamp in the swollen, worn out hollows; its imprint in the fine lines at the corners of his mouth; its sign unusual in the faintest relaxation of the under lip, which had not yet become a looseness.

For the last of the Swards had at last stepped into the highway which his doomed forebears had traveled before him.

"Gumble!" he called irritably.

A quavering voice, an unsteady step, and the old man entered again. "Mr. Stephen, sir?"

"Bring that decanter back. Didn't you hear me tell you just now?"

"Sir?"

"Didn't you hear me?"

"Yes, Mr. Stephen, sir."

There was a silence.

"Gumble!"

"Sir?"

"Are you going to bring that decanter?"

The old butler bowed and ambled from the room, and for a long while Seward sat sullenly listening and scoring the edges of the paper with his trembling pencil. Then the lead broke short, and he flung it from him and pulled the bell. Wands came this time, a lank, sandy, silent man, grown gray as a rat in the service of the Swards. He received his master's orders and withdrew, and again Seward waited, biting his under lip and tearing bits from the edges of the newspaper with fingers never still, but nobody came with the decanter, and after awhile his tense muscles relaxed. Something in his very soul seemed to snap, and he sank back in his chair, the hot tears blinding him.

He had got as far as that. Moments of self pity were becoming almost as frequent as scorching intervals of self contempt.

So they all knew what was the matter with him. They all knew—the doctor, the servants, his friends. Had he not surprised the quick suspicion in Fleetwood's glance when he told him he had slipped and sprained his ankle? What if he had been drunk when he fell—fell on his own doorstep, carried into the old Seward house by old Seward servants, drunk as his forefathers? It was none of Fleetwood's business. It was none of the servants' business. It was nobody's business except his own.

The tears dried in his hot eyes. He jerked the old fashioned bell savagely, and after a long while he heard servants whispering together in the passageway outside his door.

Dr. Grisby came into the room from the outer shadows of the hall.

He was very small, very meager, very bald and clean shaven, with a face like a nut cracker, and the brown wig he wore was atrocious and curled forward over his colorless ears. He wore

steel rimmed spectacles, each glass divided into two lenses and he stood on tiptoe to look out through the upper lenses on the world and always bent almost double to use the lower or reading lenses.

"What's all this racket?" said the little old doctor harshly. "Got colic? Got the toothache? I'm ashamed of you, Stephen! Look up! Look at me! Out with your tongue! Well, now, what the devil's the trouble?"

"You know," muttered Seward, abandoning his wrist to the little man, who seated himself beside him. Dr. Grisby scarcely noted the pulse. The delicate pressure had become a strong carass.

"Know what?" he grunted. "How do I know what's the matter with you? Hey? Now, now, don't try to explain, Steve. Don't fly off the handle. All right; grant that I do know what's bothering you. I want to see that ankle first. Here, somebody! Light that gas. Why the mischief don't you have the house wired for electricity, Stephen? It's wholesome. Gas isn't Lamps are worse sir. Do as I tell you." And he went on loquaciously, grumbling and muttering and never ceasing his talk, while Seward, wincing as the dressing was removed, lay back and closed his eyes.

Half an hour later Gumble appeared to announce dinner.

"I don't want any," said Seward. "Eat!" said Dr. Grisby harshly. "I—don't care to."

"Eat, I tell you! Do you think I don't mean what I say?" So he ate his broth and toast, the doctor curtly declining to join him. He ate hurriedly, closing his eyes in aversion. Even the iced tea was flat and distasteful to him.

And at last he lay back, white and unstrung, the momentarily deadened desperation glimmering under his half closed eyes. And for a long while Dr. Grisby sat, doubled almost in two, cuddling his bony little knees and studying the patterns in the faded carpet.

(To be continued.)

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