

The Fighting Chance

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(A continued story.)

"I guess you'd better go, Stephen," he said at length.
"Up the river to Mulqueen's?"
"Yes. Let's try it, Steve. You'll be on your feet in two weeks. Then you'd



Dr. Grisby.

better go—up the river—to Mulqueen's."

"I—I'll go if you say so. But I can't go now."

"I didn't say go now. I said in two weeks."

"Perhaps."

"Will you give me your word?" demanded the doctor sharply.

"No, doctor."

"Why not?"

"Because I may have to be here on business. There seems to be some sort of crisis coming which I don't understand."

"There's a crisis right here, Steve, which I understand!" snapped Dr. Grisby.

"Face it like a man! Face it like a man! You're sick—to your bones, boy—sick, sick! Fight the fight, Steve! Fight a good fight! There's a fighting chance! On my soul of honor there is, Steve, a fighting chance for you! Now, now, boy! Buckle up tight! Tuck up your sword sleeve! At 'em, Steve! Oh, my boy, my boy, I know; I know!"

The little man's voice broke, but he steadied it instantly with a snap of his nutcracker jaws and scowled on his patient and shook his little withered fist at him.

His patient lay very still in the shadow.

"I want you to go," said the doctor harshly, "before your self control goes. Do you understand? I want you to go before your decision is undermined; before you begin to do devious things, sly things, cheating things, slinking things—anything and everything to get at the thing you crave. I've given you something to fight with, and you won't take it faithfully. I've given you free rein in tobacco and tea and coffee. I've helped you as much as I dare to weather the nights. Now, you help me, do you hear?"

"Yes, I will."

"You say so; now do it. Do something for yourself. Do anything. If you're sick of reading—and I don't blame you, considering the stuff you read—get people down here to see you; get lots of people. Telephone 'em. You've a telephone there, haven't you? There it is by your elbow. Use it. Call up people. Talk all the time."

"Yes, I will."

"Good! Now, Steve, we know what's the matter physically, don't we? Of course we do. Now, then, what's the matter mentally?"

"Mentally?" repeated Siward under his breath.

"Yes, mentally. What's the trouble? Stocks? Bonds? Lawsuits? Love?"

The slightest pause and a narrowing of the glint eyes behind the lenses.

"Love?" he repeated harshly. "Which is it, boy? They're all good to let alone."

"Business," said Siward. But, being a Siward, he was obliged to add "partly."

"Business—partly," repeated the doctor. "What's the matter with business—partly?"

"I don't know. There are rumors. Harrington is pounding me—apparently. That Intercounty crowd is acting ominously too. There's something underhand somewhere." He bent his head and fell to plucking at the faded brocade on the arm of his chair, muttering to himself: "Somewhere, somehow, something underhand. I don't know what. I really don't."

"All right; all right," said the doctor testily. "Let it go at that. Business symptoms admitted, what about the

'partly,' Stephen? What about it, eh? What about it?"

But Siward fell silent again.

"Eh? Did you say something? No? Oh, very well, very well, sir! Perfectly correct, Stephen. You have not earned the right to admit further symptoms. No, sir, you have not earned the right to admit them to anybody, not even to yourself, nor to her!"

"She has refused me," Siward said simply.

The little doctor, after an incredulous stare, began chattering with wrath.

"Refused you! Pah! Pooh! That's nothing. That signifies absolutely nothing. It's meaningless. It's a detail. You get well, do you hear? You go and get well; then try it again. Then you'll see. And if she is an idiot—in the event of her irrational persistence in an incredible and utterly indefensible attitude—he choked up, then fairly barked at Siward—

"Take her anyway, sir! Run off with her! Dominate circumstances, sir! Take charge of events! But you can't do it till you've clapped yourself into prison for life! And God help you if you let yourself escape!"

Siward smiled again, a worn, pallid smile.

"I can stand it while you are here, doctor, but when I'm alone it's hard. One of those crises is close now. I've a bad night ahead—a bad outlook. Couldn't you?"

"No."

"Just enough to—"

"No, Stephen."

"Enough to dull it just a little? I don't ask for enough to make me sleep, not even to make me doze. You have your needle, haven't you, doctor?"

"I dare not help you any more that way."

"Not this once?"

"Not this once."

There was a dead silence, broken at last by the doctor with a violent gesture toward the telephone. "Talk to the girl. Why don't you talk to the girl. If she's worth a hill o' beans she'll help you to hang on. What's she for if she isn't for such moments? Tell her you need her voice. Tell her you need her faith in you. Good night."

Siward lay still for a long while after the doctor had gone. More than an hour had passed before he slowly sat up and groped for the telephone book, opened it and searched in a blind, hesitating way until he found the number he was looking for.

He had never telephoned to her. He had never written her except once in reply to her letter in regard to his mother's death—that strange, timid, formal letter in which, grief stunned as he was, he saw only the formality and had answered it more formally still. And that was all that had come of the days and nights by that northern sea—a letter and its answer and silence.

And, thinking of these things, he shut the book wearily and lay back in the shadow of the faded curtain, closing his sunken eyes.

CHAPTER NINE

HIS world and his city had almost ceased to think of Siward. But there were two people who had not forgotten him—Howard Quarrier and Beverly Plank—and one other, a third, who could not yet forget him if she would, but as yet she had not tried very desperately.

The day that Siward left New York to visit everybody's friend, Mr. Mulqueen, in the country, Plank called on him for the second time in his life and was presently received in the south drawing room, the library being limited to an informality and intimacy not for Mr. Plank.

Siward, still lame and using unskillfully two shiny new crutches, came down the stairs and stumbled into the drawing room, which, in spite of the somber, clustering curtains, was brightly illuminated by the winter sunshine reflected from the snow in the street.

Plank was shocked at the change in him—at the ghost of a voice, listlessly formal; at the thin, nerveless hand offered; startled so that he forgot his shyness and retained the bony hand tightly in his and instinctively laid his other great cushionlike paw over it, holding it imprisoned, unable to speak, unconscious, in the impulse of the moment, of the liberty he permitted himself and which he had never dreamed of taking with such a man as Siward.

The effect on Siward was composite—his tired voice ceased; surprise, inability to understand, tinged with instinctive displeasure, were succeeded by humorous curiosity, and very slowly it became plain to him that this beefy young man liked him, was naively concerned about him, felt friendly toward him and was showing it as spontaneously as a child.

"I thought I'd come," began Plank, growing redder and redder as he began to realize the enormity of familiarity committed only on the warrant of impulse. "You don't look well."

"It was good of you to think of me," said Siward. "Come up to the library if you've a few minutes to spare an invalid. Please go first. I'm a trifle lame yet."

"I—I am sorry," muttered Plank; "very, very sorry."

At first, in the library, Plank was awkward and silent, finding nothing to say and nowhere to dispose of his hands until Siward gave him a cigar to occupy his fingers.

Siward rang for tea, although the hour was early. After a little while either the toast or the tea appeared to act on Plank as a lingual laxative, for he began suddenly to talk, which is characteristic of bashful men, and Siward gravely helped him on when he floundered and turned shy. After a little matters went very well with them, and Plank, much more at ease than he had ever dared to hope he could be with Siward, talked and talked, and Siward, his crutches across his knees, lay back in his armchair, chatting with that winning informality so becoming to men who are unconscious of their charm.

Watching Plank, it occurred to him gradually that this great, cumbersome creature was not a shrewd, thrifty, self-made and self-finished adult at all—only a big, wistful, lonely boy without comrades and with nowhere to play.

Plank spoke of himself after awhile, sounding the personal note with tentative timidity. Siward gravely encouraged him, and in a little while the outlines of his crude autobiography appeared, embodying his eventless boyhood in a Pennsylvania town, his career at the high school, the dawning desire for college equipment, satisfied by his father, who owned shares in the promising Deepvale Steel Plank company; the unhappy years at Harvard—hard years, for he learned with difficulty; solitary years, for he was not sought by those whom he desired to know. Then he ventured to speak of his father's growing interest in steel, the merging and absorbing of independent plants, his own entry upon the scene on the death of his father, and—the rest—material fortune and prosperity, which perhaps might stand substitute as a social sponsor for him; stand perhaps for something of what he lacked in himself, which only long residence amid the best, long formed habits for the best or a long inheritance of the best could give. Did Siward think so? Was the best beyond his reach? Was it hopeless for such a man as he to try? And why?

"Is it worth while?" repeated Plank, flushing heavily. "It is worth while to me. I wish to be able to go where such men as you go; be permitted, asked, desired to be part of what you



Beverly Plank.

always have been part of. Is it a great deal I ask? Tell me, Mr. Siward—for I don't know—is it too much to expect?"

"I don't think it is a very high ambition," said Siward, smiling. "What

you ask is not very much to ask of life, Mr. Plank."

Plank laughed a little, and his squared jaws relaxed; then after a few moments' thought:

"It is curious that what you cast away from you so easily I am waiting for with all the patience I have in me. And yet it is always yours to pick up again whenever you wish, and I may never live to possess it."

He was so perfectly right that Siward said nothing—in fact, he could have no particular interest or sympathy for a man's quest of what he himself did not understand the lack of.

He was, now that he knew Plank, contented to accept him anywhere he met him, but Plank's upward evolution upon the social ladder were of no interest to him, and his naive snobbery was becoming something of a bore.

So Siward directed the conversation into other channels, and Plank, accepting another cup of tea, became very communicative about his stables and his dogs.

(To be continued.)

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