

The Fighting Chance

ROBERT W. CHAMBERS

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(A continued story.)

"I—would you—I should like to ask you to try some shooting at the Fells," stammered Plank, "next season if you would care to."

"You're very good. I should like to if I were going to shoot at all, but I fancy my shooting days are over for awhile."

"Over?"
"Business," nodded Seward, absently grave again. "I see no prospect of my idling for the next year or two."

"You are in—in Amalgamated Electric, I think," ventured Plank.

"Very much in," replied the other frankly. "You've read the papers and heard rumors, I suppose?"

"Some. I don't suppose anybody quite understands the attacks on Amalgamated."

"I don't—not yet. Do you?"

Plank sat silent; then his shrewd under lip began to protrude.

"I'm wondering," he began cautiously, "how much the Algonquin crowd understands about the matter?"

Seward's troubled eyes were on him as he spoke, watching closely, narrowly.

"I've heard that rumor before," he said.

"So have I," said Plank, "and it seems incredible." He looked warily at Seward. "Suppose it is true that the Algonquin Trust company is god-father to Intercountry. That doesn't explain why a man should kick his own door down when there's a bell to ring and servants to let him in—and out again too."

"I have wondered," said Seward, "whether the door he might be inclined to kick down is really his own door any longer."

"I, too," said Plank simply. "It may belong to a personal enemy—if he has any. He could afford to have an enemy, I suppose."

Seward nodded.

"Then hadn't you better—I beg your pardon! You have not asked me to advise you."

"No. I may ask your advice some day. Will you give it when I do?"

"With pleasure," said Plank, so warmly disinterested, so plainly proud and eager to do a service that Seward, surprised and touched, found no word to utter.

Plank rose, Seward attempted to stand up, but had trouble with his crutches.

"Please don't try," said Plank, coming over and offering his hand. "May I stop in again soon? Oh, you are off to the country for a month or two? I see. You don't look very well. I hope it will benefit you. Awfully glad to have seen you. I—I hope you won't forget me—entirely."

"I am the man people are forgetting," returned Seward, "not you. It was very nice of you to come. You are one of very few who remember me at all."

"I have very few people to remember," said Plank, "and if I had as many as I could desire I should remember you first."

Here he became very much embarrassed. Seward offered his hand again. Plank shook it awkwardly and went away on tiptoe down the stairs, which creaked decorously under his weight.

And that ended the first interview between Plank and Seward in the first days of the latter's decline.

The months that passed during Seward's absence from the city began to prove rather eventful for Plank. He was finally elected a member of the Patrons club without serious opposition; he had dined twice with the Kemp Ferralls; he and Major Belwether were seen together at the Calithness dance and in the Calithness box at the opera. Once a respectable newspaper reported him at Tuxedo for the week's end; his name, linked with the clergy, frequently occupied such space under the column headed "Ecclesiastical News" as was devoted to the progress of the new chapel, and many old ladies began to become familiar with his name.

At the right moment the Mortimers featured him between two fashionable bishops at a dinner. Mrs. Vendening, who adored bishops, immediately remembered him among those asked to her famous annual bal poudre, a celebrated yacht club admitted him to membership, a whole shoal of excellent minor clubs which really needed new members followed suit, and even the rockribbed Lenox, wearied of its own time honored immobility, displayed the preliminary fidgets which boded well for the stolid candidate.

Yes, he was doing well, for that despoic beauty, Sylvia Landis, whose capricious perversity had recently astonished those who remembered her in her first season as a sweet, reasonable

and unspotted girl, was always friendly with him. That must be looked upon as important, considering Sylvia's unassailable position and her kinship to the autocratic old lady whose kindly ukase had for generations remained the undisputed law in the social system of Manhattan.

At a ball at the Pages', to which Mrs. Mortimer took him, Plank met Sylvia. Her escort, Ferrall, nodded to him pleasantly. She leaned forward from Ferrall's arm, saying under her breath: "I have saved a dance for you. Please ask me at once. Quick! Do you want me?"

"I—I do," stammered Plank.

Ferrall, suspicious, stepped forward to exchange civilities, then turning to the girl beside him: "See here, Sylvia, you've dragged me all over this house on one pretext or another. Do you want any supper, or don't you? If you don't, it's our dance."

"No, I don't. No, it isn't. Kemp, you annoy me."

"That's a nice thing to say. Is it your delicately inimitable way of giving me my eongee?"

"Yes, thank you," nodded Miss Landis coolly. "You may go now."

"You're spoiled, that's what's the matter," retorted Ferrall wrathfully. "I thought I was to have this dance. You said—"

"I said 'perhaps,' because I didn't see Mr. Plank coming to claim it. Thank you, Kemp, for finding him."

Her nod and smile took the edge from her malice. Ferrall, who really adored dancing, glared about for anybody to dance with.

Sylvia, standing beside Plank, looked up at him with her confident and friendly smile.

"You don't care to dance, do you? Would you mind if we sat out this dance?"

"If you'd rather," he said, so wistfully that she hesitated; then with a little shrug laid one hand on his arm, and they swung out across the floor together into the scented whirl.

Plank, like many heavy men, danced beautifully, and Sylvia, who still loved dancing with all the ardor of a schoolgirl, permitted a moment or two of keen delight to sweep her dreamily from her purpose. But that purpose must have been a strong one, for she returned to it in a few minutes and, looking up at Plank, said very gently that she cared to dance no more.

Her hand resting lightly on his arm, it did not seem possible that any pressure of hers was directing them to the conservatory, yet he did not know where he was going, and she was familiar with the house, and they soon entered the conservatory, where, in the shadow of various palms, various youths looked up impatiently as they passed and various maidens sat up very straight in their chairs.

Threading their dim way into the farther recesses, they found seats among thickets of forced lilacs overhung by early wistaria. A spring-like odor hung in the air. Some where a tiny fountain grew musical in the semidarkness.

"Marion told me you had been asked," she said. "We have been so friendly. You've always asked me to dance whenever we have met, so I thought I'd save you one. Are you flattered, Mr. Plank?"

He said he was, very pleasantly, perfectly undeceived and convinced of her purpose—a purpose never even tacitly admitted between them, and the old loneliness came over him again—not resentment, for he was willing that she should use him. Why not? Others used him, everybody used him, and if they found no use for him they let him alone. Mortimer, Fleetwood, Belwether—all, all had something to exact from him. It was for that he was tolerated. He knew it. He had slowly and unwillingly learned it. His intrusion among these people, of whom he was not one, would be endured only while he might be turned to some account. The hospital used him, the clergy found plenty for him to do for them, the museum had room for other pictures of his. Who among them all had ever sought him without a motive? Who among them all had ever found unselfish pleasure in him? Not one.

He wished she would come to her point, but he dared not lead her to it too brusquely, because her purpose and her point were supposed to be absolutely hidden from his thick and credulous understanding. It had taken him some time to make this clear to himself. Passing from suspicion through chagrin and overwounded feeling to dull certainty that she, too, was using him, harmlessly enough from her standpoint, but how bitterly from

his, he alone could know.

The flutter of her fan meant impatience to learn from him what she had come to him to learn and then, satisfied, to leave him alone again amid the peopled solitude of clustered lights. He wished she would speak. He was tired of the sadness of it all.

Whenever in his isolation, in his utter destitution of friendship, he turned guilelessly to meet a new advance, always, sooner or later, the friendly mask was lifted enough for him to divine the cool, fixed gaze of self-interest inspecting him through the damask silks.

Sylvia was speaking now, and the plummy fan was under savant control, waving graceful accompaniment to her soft voice, punctuating her sentences at times, at times making an emphasis or outlining a gesture.

It was the familiar sequence—topics that led to themes which adroitly skirted the salient point; returned capriciously, just avoiding it—a subtly charming pattern of words which required so little in reply that his smile and nod were almost enough to keep her arid and his accompaniment afloat.

It began to fascinate him to watch the delicacy of her strategy, the coquetting with her purpose; her naive advance to the very edges of it, the airy retreat, the innocent detour, the elaborate and circuitous return. And at last she drifted into it so naturally that it seemed impossible that fatuous man could have the most primitive suspicion of her premeditation.

And Plank, now recognizing his cue, answered her. "No, I have not heard that he is in town. I stopped to see him the other day, but nobody there knew how soon he intended to return from the country."

"I didn't know he had gone to the country," she said without apparent interest.

And Plank was either too kind to terminate the subject or too anxious to serve his turn and release her, for he went on, "I thought I told you at Mrs. Ferrall's that Mr. Seward had gone to the country."

"Perhaps you did. No doubt I've forgotten."

"I'm quite sure I did, because I remember saying that he looked very ill, and you said, rather sharply, that he had no business to be ill. Do you remember?"

"Yes," she said slowly. "Is he better?"

"I hope so."

"You hope so," with the controlled emphasis of impatience.

"Yes. Don't you, Miss Landis? When I saw him at his home he was lame—on crutches—and he looked rather ghastly, and all he said was that he expected to leave for the country. I asked him to shoot next year at Black Fells, and he seemed bothered about business and said it might keep him from taking any vacation."

"He spoke about his business?"

"Yes, he—"

"What is the trouble with his business? Is it anything about Amalgamated and Intercountry?"

"I think so."

"Is he worried?"

Plank said deliberately, "I should be if my interests were locked up in Amalgamated Electric."

"Could you tell me why that would worry you?" she asked, smiling persuasively across at him.

"No," he said, "I can't tell you."

"Because I wouldn't understand?"

"Because I myself don't understand."

She thought awhile, brushing the rose velvet of her mouth with the fan's edge, then, looking up confidently: "Mr. Seward is such a boy. I'm so glad he has you to advise him in such matters."

"What matters?" asked Plank bluntly.

"Why, in—in financial matters."

"But I don't advise him."

"Why not?"

"Because he hasn't asked me to, Miss Landis."

"He ought to ask you. He must ask you. Don't wait for him, Mr. Plank. He is only a boy in such things."

And, as Plank was silent: "You will, won't you?"

"Do what—make his business my business without an invitation?" asked Plank so quietly that she flushed with annoyance.

"If you pretend to be his friend, is it not your duty to advise him?" she asked impatiently.

"No; that is for his business associates to do. Friendship comes to grief when it crosses the frontiers of business."

"That is a narrow view to take, Mr. Plank."

"Yes, straight and narrow. The boundaries of friendship are straight and narrow. It is best to keep to the trodden path—best not to walk on the grass or trample the flowers."

"I think you are sacrificing friendship for an epigram," she said, careless of the undertone of contempt in her voice.

"I have never sacrificed friendship." He turned and looked at her pleasantly. "I never made an epigram consciously, and I have never offered a friend more than I had to offer in return. Have you?"

The flush of hot displeasure stained her cheeks.

"Are you really questioning me, Mr. Plank?"

"Yes. You have been questioning me rather seriously, have you not?"

"I did not comprehend your definition of friendship. I did not agree with it. I questioned it, not you. That is all."

Plank rested his head on one big hand and stared at the clusters of dim blossoms behind her, and after awhile he said, as though thinking aloud:

"Many have taken my friendship for granted and have never offered their own in return. I do not know about Mr. Seward. There is nothing I can do for him, nothing he can do for me. If there is to be friendship between us it will be disinterested, and I would rather have that than anything in the world, I think."

There was a pause, but when Sylvia would have broken it his gesture committed her to silence, with the dignity one might use in checking a persistent child.

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"You question my definition of friendship, Miss Landis. I should have let your question pass, however keenly it touched me, had it not also touched him. Now I am going to say some things which lie within the straight and narrow bounds I spoke of. I never knew a man I cared for as much as I care for Mr. Seward. I know why too. He is disinterested. I do not believe he wastes very many thoughts on me. Perhaps he will. I want him to like me if it's possible. But one thing you and I may be sure of—if he does not care to return the friendship I offer him he will never accept anything else from me, though he might give at my request, and that is the sort of a man he is, and that is why he is every inch a man, and so I like him, Miss Landis. Do you wonder?"

She did not reply.

"Do you wonder?" he repeated sharply.

"No," she said.

"Then"—He straightened up, and the silent significance of his waiting attitude was plain enough to her.

But she shook her head impatiently, saying: "I don't know whose dance it is, and I don't care. Please go on. It is—is pleasant. I like Mr. Seward; I like to hear men speak of him as you do. I like you for doing it. If you should ever come to care for my friendship that is the best passport to it—your loyalty to Mr. Seward."

"No man can truthfully speak otherwise than I have spoken," he said gravely.

"No, not of these things. But you know w—what is—usually said when his name comes up among men."

"Do you mean about his habits?" he asked simply.

"Yes. Is it not an outrage to drag in that sort of thing? It angers me intensely, Mr. Plank. Why do they do it? Is there a single one among them qualified to criticize Mr. Seward? And, besides, it is not true any more, is it, what was once said of him with—some truth? Is it?"

(To be continued.)

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