

The Fighting Chance

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(A continued story.)

CHAPTER TEN

ABOUT 4 o'clock on the following afternoon Mrs. Mortimer's maid, who had almost finished drying and dressing her mistress' hair, was called to the door by a persistent knocking, which at first she had been hidden to disregard.

It was Mortimer's man, desiring to know whether Mrs. Mortimer could receive Mr. Mortimer at once on matters of importance.

"No," said Lella petulantly. "Tell Mullins to say that I cannot see anybody." And, catching a glimpse of the shadowy Mullins dodging about the dusky corridor: "What is the matter? Is Mr. Mortimer ill?"

But Mullins could not say what the matter might be, and he went away, only to return in a few moments bearing a scratchy note from his master, badly blotted and still wet, and Lella, with a shrug of resignation, took the blotched scrawl daintily between thumb and forefinger and unfolded it. Behind her the maid, twisting up the masses of dark, fragrant hair, read the note very easily over her mistress' shoulder. It ran, without preliminaries:

I'm going to talk to you whether you like it or not. Do you understand that? If you want to know what's the matter with me you'll find out fast enough. Fire that French girl out before I arrive.

She closed the note thoughtfully, folding and double folding it into a thick wad. The ink had come off, discoloring her finger tips. She dropped the soiled paper on the floor and held out her hands, plump fingers spread. And when the maid had finished removing the stains and had repolished the pretty hands her mistress sipped her chocolate thoughtfully, nibbled a bit of dry toast, then motioned the maid to take the tray and her departure, leaving her the cup.

A few minutes later Mortimer came in, stood a moment blinking around the room, then dropped into a seat, sullen, inert, the folds of his chin crowded out on his collar, his heavy abdomen cradled on his short, thick legs. He had been freshly shaved; linen and clothing were spotless, yet the man looked unclean.

Save for the network of purple veins in his face there was no color there; none in his lips. Even his flabby hands were the hue of clay.

"Are you ill?" asked his wife coolly.

"No, not very. I've got the jumps. What's that? Tea? Ugh! It's chocolate. Push it out of sight, will you? I can smell it."

Lella set the delicate cup on a table behind her.

"What time did you return this morning?" she asked, stifling a yawn.

"I don't know—about 5 or 6. How the devil should I know what time I came in?"

Sitting there before the mirror of her dresser she stole a second glance at his marred features in the glass. The loose mouth, the smeared eyes, the palsy-like tremors that twitched the hands where they tightened on the arms of his chair, became repulsive to the verge of fascination. She tried to look away, but could not.

"You had better see Dr. Grisby," she managed to say.

"I'd better see you; that's what I'd better do," he retorted thickly. "You'll do all the doctoring I want. And I want it, all right."

"Very well. What is it?"

He passed his swollen hand across his forehead.

"What is it?" he repeated. "It's the limit this time, if you want to know. I'm all in."

"Roulette?" raising her eyebrows, without interest.

"Yes, roulette too. Everything! They got me upstairs at Burbank's. The game's crooked. Every box, every case, every wheel, every pack is crooked, crooked, crooked, by God! he burst forth in a fever, struggling to sit upright, his hands always tightening on the arms of the chair. "It's nothing but a creeping joint, run by a bunch of handshakers! I—I!"

Stuttering, choking, stammering imprecations, his hoarse clamor died away after awhile. She sat there, head bent, silent, impassive, acquiescent under the physical and mental

strain to which she had never become thoroughly hardened. How many such scenes had she witnessed! She could not count them. They differed very little in detail and not at all in their ultimate object, which was to get what money she had. This was his method of reimbursing himself for his losses.

He made an end to his outburst after awhile. Only his dreadful fat breathing now filled the silence and, supposing he had finished, she found her voice with an effort:

"I am sorry. It comes at a bad time, as you know."

"A bad time?" he broke out violently. "How can it come at any other sort of time? With us all times are bad. If this is worse than the average it can't be helped. We are in it for keeps this time!"

"We?"

"Yes, we!" he repeated, but his face had grown ghastly and his uncertain eyes were fastened on hers in the mirror.

"What do you mean—exactly?" she asked, turning from the dresser to confront him.

He made no effort to answer. An expression of dull fright was growing on his visage, as though for the first time he had begun to realize what had happened.

She saw it and her heart quickened, but she spoke disdainfully: "Well, I am ready to listen—as usual. How much do you want?"

He made no sign. His lower lip hung loose. His eyes blinked at her.

"What is it?" she repeated. "What have you been doing? How much have you lost? You can't have lost very much. We hadn't much to lose. If you have given your note to any of those gamblers it is a shame—a shame! Leroy, look at me! You promised me, on your honor, never to do that again. Have you lied, after all the times I have helped you out, stripped myself, denied myself, put off tradesmen, faced down creditors? After all I have done, do you dare come here and ask for more—ask for what I have not got—with not one bill settled, not one servant paid since December?"

"Lella, I—I've got to tell you—"

"What?" she demanded, appalled by the change in his face. If he was overdoing it, he was overdoing it realistically enough.

"I—I've used Plank's check!" he mumbled and moistened his lips with his tongue.

She stared back at him, striving to comprehend. "Plank's?" she repeated slowly. "Plank's check? What check? What do you mean?"

"The one he gave you last night to pay his bridge losses and forgot to fill in."

"The one he— But you couldn't! How could you. It was not filled in."

"I filled it."

Her dawning horror was reacting on him, as it always did, like a fierce tonic, and his own courage came back in a sort of sullen desperation.

"You—you are trying to frighten me, Leroy," she stammered. "You are trying to make me do something—give you what you want—force me to give you what you want! You can't frighten me. The check was made out to me—to my order. How could you have used it, if I had not indorsed it?"

"I indorsed it. Do you understand that?" he said savagely.

"No, I don't. Because if you did it's forgery."

"I don't give a — what you think it is!" he broke in fiercely. "All I'm worried over is what Plank will think. I didn't mean to do it. I didn't dream of doing it. When I saw that check in my hands I thought I'd use it temporarily—merely as moral collateral to flash at Burbank—something to back my I O U's. So I filled it in."

"For how much?" she asked, not daring to believe him, but he ignored the question and went on, "I filled it and indorsed it and—"

"How could you indorse it?" she interrupted coolly, now unconvinced again and suspicious.

"I'll tell you if you'll stop that fool tongue a moment. The check was made to 'L. Mortimer,' wasn't it? So I wrote 'L. Mortimer' on the back. Now do you know? If you are L. Mortimer, so am I. Lella begins with L; so does Leroy, doesn't it? I didn't imitate your two-words-to-a-page autograph. I put my own fist to a check made out to one L. Mortimer, and I don't care what you think about it as long as Plank can stand it. Now put up your nose and howl, if you like."

But under her sudden pallor he was taking fright again, and he began to bolster up his courage with bluster and noise as usual.

"How! all you like," he jeered. "I won't alter matters or square accounts with Plank. What are you staring at? Do you suppose I'm not sorry? Do you fancy I don't know what a fool I've been? What are you turning white for? What?"

"How much have you?"—She choked, then, resolutely. "How much have you—taken?"

"Taken!" he broke out with an oath. "What do you mean? I've borrowed about \$20,000. Now yelp! Eh? What? No yelps? Probably some weeps then. Turn 'em on and run dry, I'll wait." And he managed to cross one bulky leg over the other and lean back, affecting resignation, while Lella, bolt upright in her low chair, every curved outline rigid under the flowing silken wrap, stared at him as though stunned.

"Well, we're good for it, aren't we?" he said threateningly. "If he's going to turn ugly about it, here's the house?"

"My—house?"

"Yes, your house! I suppose you'd rather raise something on the house than have the thing come out in the papers."

"Do you think so?" she asked, staring into his bloodshot eyes.

"Yes, I do. I'm sure of it!"

"You are wrong."

"You mean that you are not inclined to stand by me," he demanded.

"Yes, I mean that."

"You don't intend to help me out?"

"I do not intend to—not this time."

He began to show his big teeth and that nervous snickering "tick" twitched his upper lip.

"How about the divorce courts?" he sneered. "Do you want to figure in them with Plank?"

"I don't want to," she said steadily, "but you cannot frighten me by that threat."

"Oh! Can't frighten you! Perhaps you think you'd marry Plank when I get a decree? Do you? Well, you won't for several reasons. First, because I'll name other correspondents and that will make Plank sick; second, because Plank wants to marry somebody else and I'm able to assist him. So where do you come out in the shuffle?"

"I don't know," she said under her breath and rested her head against the back of the chair, as though suddenly tired.

"Well, I know. You'll come out smirched, and you know it," said Mortimer, gazing intently at her. "Look here, Lella. I didn't come here to threaten you. I'm no blackmailer. I'm no criminal. I'm simply a decent sort of a man, who is pretty badly scared over what he's done in a moment of temptation. You know I had no thought of anything except to borrow enough on my I O U's to make a killing at Burbank's. I had to show them something big, so I filled in that check, not meaning to use it, and before I knew it I'd indorsed it and was plunging against it. Then they stacked everything on me—by God, they did, and if I had not been in the condition I was in I'd have stopped payment. But it was too late when I realized what I was against. Lella, you know I'm not a bad man at heart. Can't you help a fellow?"

His manner, completely changed,

had become the resentful and fretful appeal of the victim of plot and circumstance. All the savage brutality had been eliminated. The sneer, the truculent attempts to browbeat, the pitiful swagger, the cynical justification, all were gone. It was really the man himself now, normally scared and repentant; the frightened, overfed pensioner on his wife's bounty, not the human beast maddened by fear and dissipation, half stunned, half panic-stricken, driven by sheer terror into a role which even he shrank from—had shrunk from all these years. For, leech and parasite that he was, Mortimer, however much the dirty acquisition of money might tempt him in theory, had not yet brought himself to the point of attempting the practice, even when in sorest straits and bitterest need. He didn't want to do it. He wished to get along without it, partly because of native inertia and an aversion to the mental nimbleness that he would be required to show as a lawbreaker, partly because the word "blackmail" stood for what he did not dare suggest that he had come to, even to himself. His distaste was genuine. There were certain things which he didn't want to commit, and extortion was one of them. He could at a pinch lie to his wife or try to scare her into giving him money. He could when necessary "borrow" from such men as Plank, but he had never cheated at cards, and he had never attempted to blackmail anybody except his wife—

which, of course, was purely a family matter and concerned nobody else.

His policy of alternately frightening, dragging and supplicating Lella had carried him so far, and though it was true that this was a more serious situation than he had ever yet faced he was convinced that his wife would pull him out somehow, and how that was to be accomplished he did not very much care as long as he was pulled out safely.

"What this household requires," he said, "is economy." He spread his legs, denoting the Aubusson carpet with his boot heels, and glanced askance at his wife. "Economy," he repeated, furtively wetting his lips with a heavily coated tongue. "That's the true solution. Economical administration in domestic matters. Retrenchment, Lella, retrenchment. Fewer foldersols."

Lella's head was lowered. He could not see her expression, but he had always been confident of his ability to talk himself out of trouble, so he rambled on in pretense of camaraderie, carrying favor, as he believed, ingratiating himself with the coarse blunt ness that served him among some men, even among some women.

"We'll fix it somehow," he said reassuringly. "Don't you worry, Lella. I've confidence in you, little girl. You've got me out of sticky messes before, eh? Well, we've weathered a few, haven't we?"

Even the horrible parody on wedded loyalty left her silent, unmoved, dark eyes brooding, and he began to grow a little restless and anxious as his jocularity increased without a movement in either response or aversion from his wife.

"You needn't be scared if I'm not," he said reproachfully. "The house is worth two hundred and fifty thousand and there's only fifty on it now. If

that fat Dutch skindint, Plank, shows his tusks we can clap on another fifty." And as she made no sound or movement in reply: "As far as Plank goes, haven't I done enough for him to square it? What have we ever got out of him except a thousand or two now and then when the cards went against me? If I took it, it was practically what he owes me. And if he thinks it's too much—look here, Lella, I've a trick up my sleeve. I can make good any time I wish to. I'm in a position to marry that man to the girl he's mad about—stark, raving mad."

Mrs. Mortimer slowly raised her head and looked at her husband.

"Leroy, are you mad?"

"I? Not much!" he exclaimed gleefully. "I can make him the husband of the most run after girl in New York—if I want to. And at the same time I can puncture the most arrogant, the most cold blooded, selfish, purse proud, inflated airpump that ever sat at the head of a directors' table. O-ho! Now you're staring, Lella. I can do it. I can make good. What are you worrying about? Why, I've got a hundred ways to square that check, and each separate way is a winner."

He rose, shook out the creases in his trousers and adjusted the squat gold fob which ornamented his protruding waistcoat.

"So you'll fix it, won't you, Lella?" he said, apparently oblivious that he had expressed himself as able to adjust the matter in a hundred equally edifying and satisfactory manners.

She did not answer. He lingered a moment at the door, looking back with an ingratiating leer, but she paid him no attention and he took himself off, confident that her sulkiness could not result in anything unpleasant to anybody except herself.

Nor did it, as far as he could see. The days brought no noticeable change in his wife's demeanor toward him. Plank, when he met him, was civil enough, though it did occur to Mortimer that he saw very little of Plank in these days.

"Ungrateful beggar," he thought bitterly. "His toadying to Belwether now. I can't do anything more for him, so I don't interest him."

And for awhile he wore either a truculent, aggrieved air in Plank's presence or the meeker demeanor of a martyr, sentimentally misunderstood, but patient under the affliction.

Then there came a time when he needed money. During the few days he spent circling tentatively and apprehensively around his wife he learned enough to know that there was money to be had from her at present. No doubt the money she raised to placate Plank—if she had placated him in that fashion—was a strain on her resources, whatever those resources were.

One thing was certain, Plank had not remained very long in ignorance of the check drawn against his balance, if indeed, as Mortimer feared, the bank itself had not communicated with Plank as soon as the check was presented for payment. Therefore Plank must have been placated by Lella—how, Mortimer was satisfied not to know.

(To be continued.)



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