

The Fighting Chance

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(A continued story.)

"Some of these days," he said to himself, "I'll catch her tripping, and then there'll be a decent division of property or—there'll be a divorce." But, as usual, Mortimer found such practices more attractive in theory than in execution, and he was really quite contented to go on as things were going, if somebody would see that he had some money occasionally.

One of these occasions when he needed it was approaching. He had made a "killing" at Desmond's and had used the money to stop up the more threatening gaps in the tottering financial fabric known as his "personal accounts." The fabric would hold for awhile, but meantime he needed money to go on with. And Lella evidently had none. He tried everybody except Plank. He had scarcely the impudence to go to Plank just yet, but when completing the vicious circle he found his borrowing capacity exhausted and himself once more face to face with the only hope, Plank, he sat down to consider seriously the possibility of the matter.

Of course Plank owed him more than he could ever pay—the ungrateful parvenu—but what Plank had thought of that check transaction he had never been able to discover.

Somewhat or other he must put Plank under fresh obligations, and that might have been possible had not Lella invaded the ground, leaving nothing, now that Plank was secure in club life.

Of course the first thing that presented itself to Mortimer's consideration was the engineering of Plank's matrimonial ambitions. Clearly the man had not changed. He was always at Sylvia's heels. He was seen with her in public. He went to the Belwether house a great deal. No possible doubt but that he was as infatuated as ever. And Quarrier was going to marry her next November—that is, if he, Mortimer, chose to keep silent about a certain midnight episode at Sshotover.

Several times he called up Quarrier on the phone and made appointments to lunch with him, but these meetings never resulted in anything except luncheons which Mortimer paid for, and matters were becoming desperate.

So one day, after having lunched too freely, he sat down and wrote Plank the following note:

My Dear Beverly—You will remember that I once promised you my aid in securing what, to you, is the dearest object of your existence. I have thought I have pondered, I have given the matter deep and I may add without irreverence, prayerful consideration, knowing that the life's happiness of my closest friend depended on my judgment and wisdom and intelligence to secure for him the opportunity to crown his life's work by the acquisition of the brightest jewel in the diadem of old Manhattan.

"By George, that's wickedly good, though!" chuckled Mortimer, refreshing himself with his old standby, an apple, quartered and soaked in very old port. So he sopped his apple and swallowed it and picked up his pen again, chary of overdoing it:

All I say to you is, be ready! The time is close at hand when you may boldly make your avowal. But be ready! All depends upon the psychological moment. An instant too soon, an instant too late, and you are lost. And she is lost forever. Remember! Be faithful; trust in me, and wait. And the instant I say, "Speak!" pour out your soul, my dear friend, and be certain you are not pouring it out in vain.

L. M.

Writing about "pouring out" made him thirsty, so he fortified himself several times, and then, sealing the letter, went out to a letter box and stood looking at it.

"If I mail it I'm in for it," he muttered. After awhile he put the letter in his pocket and walked on.

"It really doesn't commit me to anything," he reflected at last, halting before another letter box. And as he stood there, hesitating, he glanced up and saw Quarrier entering the Lenox club. The next moment he flung up the metal box lid, dropped in his letter and followed Quarrier into the club.

Then events tumbled forward almost without a push from him. Quarrier was alone in a window corner, drinking vichy and milk and gleaning over the afternoon papers. He saw Mortimer and invited him to join him, and Mortimer, being thirsty, took champagne.

"I've been trying a new coach," said Quarrier in his colorless and rather

agreeable voice, and he went on leisurely explaining the points of the new mall coach which had been built in Paris after plans of his own, while Mortimer gulped glass after glass of chilled wine, which seemed only to make him thirstier. Meantime he listened, really interested, except that his fleshy head was too full of alcohol and his own project to contain additional statistics concerning coaching. Besides, Quarrier, who had never been overcordial to him, was more so now—enough for Mortimer to venture on a few tentative suggestions of a financial nature, and though, as usual, Quarrier was not responsive, he did not, as usual, get up and go away.

A vague hope stirred Mortimer that it might not be beyond his persuasive tongue to make this chilly, reticent young man into a friend some day—a helpful friend. Once or twice he thought Quarrier looked at him rather strangely, but he would show Quarrier that he was a friend—a good, staunch friend—and that Quarrier had long undervalued him. Waves of sentiment spread through and through him. His affection for Quarrier dampened his eyes, and still he blabbed on and on, gazing with brim-



Lella Mortimer.

ming eyes upon Quarrier, who sat back silent and attentive as Mortimer circled and blundered nearer and nearer to the crucial point of his destination.

Midway in one of his linguistic ellipses Quarrier leaned forward and caught his arm in a grip of steel. Another man had entered the room. Mortimer, made partly conscious by the pain of Quarrier's viselike grip, was sober enough to recognize the impropriety of his continuing aloud the veiled story he had been constructing with what he supposed to be a cunning as matchless as it was impenetrable.

Later he found himself upstairs in a private cardroom, facing Quarrier across a table, and still talking and quenching his increasing thirst. He knew now what he was telling Quarrier. He was unweaving the parable. He was stripping metaphor from a carefully precise story. He used Sivard's name presently; presently he used Sylvia's name. A moment later—or was it an hour?—Quarrier stopped him, coldly, without a trace of passion, demanding corroborative detail. And Mortimer gave it, wagging his head and one fat forefinger as emphasis.

"You saw that?" repeated Quarrier, deadly white of a sudden.

"Yes, and I—"

"At 3 in the morning?"

"Yes, an' I waut!"

"You saw him enter her room?"

"Yes, an' I waut' terna'y thish to you, because I'm your fr'en'. Don' wau' anny fr'en's mine get fooled on women. See? Thash how I feel. I respect the sect. See? Women, lovely women. See? Respect' sect. Gimme y'han, buzzer—er—brother Quarrier. Your m' fr'en'; I'm your fr'en'. I know how it is. Gotter wife m'own. Rotten one. Stings. Takes money outter m' pockets. Dam' 'stravaganat. Rulin me. Say, old boy, what about dividend due 'morrow on Orange County Eclectic—mean Erlectic—no—mean 'Letric! Damn!—Wasser masser tongue?"

Opening his fond and foggy eyes and finding himself alone in the card-

room he began to cry, and a little later, attempting to push the electric button, he fell over a lounge and lay there, his shirt front soiled with wine, one fat leg trailing to the floor, not the ideal position for slumber perhaps, but what difference do attitudes and postures and poses make when a gentleman, in the sacred seclusion of his own club, is wooing the drowsy goddess with blasts of vulture music through his em-purpled nose?

In the meantime, however, he was due to dine at the Belwether house, and when 8 o'clock approached and he had not returned to dress Lella called up Sylvia Landis on the telephone:

"My dear, Leroy hasn't returned, and I suppose he's forgotten about the bridge. I can bring Mr. Plank, if you like."

"Very well," said Sylvia, adding, "if Mr. Plank is there may I speak to him a moment?"

So Lella rose, setting the receiver on the desk, and Plank came in from the library and settled himself heavily in the chair.

"Did you wish to speak to me, Miss Landis?"

"Is that you, Mr. Plank? Yes. Will you dine with us at 8? Bridge afterward, if you don't mind."

"Thank you."

"And, Mr. Plank, you had a note from me this morning?"

"Yes."

"Please disregard it."

"If you wish."

"I do. It is not worth while." And as Plank made no comment, "I have no further interest in the matter. Do you understand?"

"No," said Plank doggedly.

"I have nothing more to say. I am sorry. We dine at 8," concluded Sylvia hurriedly.

Plank hung up the receiver and sat eyeing it for awhile in silence. Then his jaw began to harden and his under lip protruded and he folded his great hands, resting them in front of him on the edge of the desk, brooding there, with eyes narrowing like a sleepy giant at prayer.

When Lella entered in her evening wraps she found him there, so immersed in reverie that he failed to hear her, and she stood a moment at the doorway, smiling to herself, thinking how pleasant it was to come down ready for the evening and find him there, as though he belonged where he sat and was part of the familiar environment.

Recently she had grown younger in a smooth skinned, full lipped way—so much younger that it was spoken of.

"Beverly," she said, "I am ready."

Plank stood up, dazed from his reverie, and walked toward her. His white tie had become disarranged. She raised her hands, halting him, and pulled it into shape for him, consciously innocent of the intimacy.

"Thank you," he said. "Do you know how pretty you are this evening?"

"Yes. I was very happy at my mirror. Do you know, the withered years seem to be dropping from me like leaves from an autumn sapling. And I feel young enough to say so poetically. Did Sylvia try to flirt with you over the wire?"

"Yes, as usual," he said drily, de-

scending the stairs beside her.

"And really you don't love her any more?" she queried.

"Scarcely." His voice was low and rather disagreeable, and she looked up.

"I wish I knew what you and Sylvia find to talk about so frequently, if you're not in love."

But he made no answer, and they drove away to the Belwether house, a rather wide, old style mansion of brown stone, with a stoop dividing its ugly facade, and a series of unnecessary glass doors blocking the vestibule.

A drawing room and a reception room flanked the marble tiled hall. Behind these the dining room ran the width of the rear.

There were half a dozen people there lounging informally between the living room on the second floor and Sylvia's apartments in the rear—the residue from a luncheon and bridge party given that afternoon by Sylvia to a score or so of card-mad women. A few of these she had asked to remain for an informal dinner and a desperate game later—the sort of people she knew well enough to lose to heavily or win from without remorse—Grace Ferrall, Marion Page, Agatha Calhoun. Trusting to the telephone that morning, she had secured the Mortimers and Quarrier, falling three men, and now the party, with Plank as Mortimer's substitute, was complete, all thorough gamblers—sex mattering nothing in the preparation.

In Sylvia's boudoir Grace Ferrall and Agatha Calhoun sat before the fire; Sylvia, at the mirror of her dresser, was correcting the pallor incident to the unbroken dissipation of a brilliant season; Marion, with her inevitable cigarette, wandered between Sylvia's quarters and the library, where Quarrier and Major Belwether were sitting in low voiced confab.

Lella, greeted gayly from the boudoir, went in. Plank entered the library, was mauled effusively by the major, returned Quarrier's firm hand shake and sat down with an inquiring smile.

"Oh, yes, we're out for blood tonight," twittered Major Belwether, grasping Quarrier's arm humorously and shaking it to emphasize his words—a habit that Quarrier thoroughly disliked. "Sylvia had a lot of women here playing for the season score, so I suggested she keep the pick of them for dinner and call in a few choice ones to make a night of it."

"It's agreeable to me," said Plank, still looking at Quarrier with the same inquiring expression, which that gentleman presently chose to understand.

"I haven't had a chance to look into that matter," he said carelessly. "Some day when you have time to go over it—"

"I have time now," said Plank. "There's nothing to go over. There's no reason for any secrecy. All I wrote you was that I proposed to control the stock of Amalgamated Electric and that I wished your advice in the matter."

"I could not give you any advice offhand on such an extraordinary suggestion," returned Quarrier coldly. "If you know where the stock is you'll understand."

"Do you mean what it is quoted at or who owns it?" interrupted Plank.

"Who owns it. Everybody knows where it has dropped to, I suppose. Most people know, too, where it is held."

"Yes, I do."

"And who is manipulating it," added Quarrier indifferently.

"Do you mean Harrington's people?"

"I don't mean anybody in particular, Mr. Plank."

"Oh," said Plank, staring "I was sure you couldn't have meant Harrington, because," he went on deliberately, "there are other theories floating about that mysterious pool, one of which I've proved."

Quarrier looked at him out of his velvet lidded eyes.

"What have you proved?"

"I'll tell you if you'll appoint an interviewer."

"I'll come, too," began Belwether, who had been listening, loose mouthed and intent. "We're all in it—Howard, Kemp Ferrall and I—"

"And Stephen Steward," observed Plank, so quietly that Quarrier never even raised his eyes to read the stolid face opposite.

Presently he said: "Do you know anybody who can deliver you any considerable block of Amalgamated Electric at the market figures?"

"I could deliver you several blocks, if you care to bid," said Plank bluntly.

Belwether grew red, then pale. Quarrier stiffened in his chair, but his eyes were only skeptical. Plank's under lip had begun to protrude again. He swung his massive head, looking from Belwether back to Quarrier.

"Pool or no pool," he continued, "you Amalgamated people will want to see the stock climb back into the branches from which somebody shook it out, and I propose to put it there. That is all I had meant to say to you, Mr. Quarrier. I'm not averse to saying it here to you, and I do. There's no secrecy about it. Figure it out for yourself how much stock I control and who let it go. Settle your family questions and put your house in order, then invite me to call and I'll do it. And I have an idea that we are going to stand on our own legs again and recover our self respect and our fighting capacity, and I rather think we'll stop this holdup business and that our intercounty friend will let go the sand bag and pocket the jimmy and talk business across the line fence."



"I could deliver you several blocks if you care to bid," said Plank bluntly.

(To be continued.)

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