

# The Fighting Chance

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(A continued story.)

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE park was very misty and damp and still that February morning. Far away on the wooded bridge path the dulled double gallop of horses sounded, now muffled in a hollow, now louder, jarring the rising ground, nearer, heavier, then suddenly checked to a tramble, as Sylvia drew bridle by the reservoir and, straightening in her saddle, raised her flushed face to the sky.



The dulled double gallop of horses sounded.

"Rain?" she asked as Quarrier, controlling his beautiful, restive horse, ranged up alongside of her. "Probably," he said, scarcely glancing at the sky, where, above the great rectangular lagoons, hundreds of sea gulls, high in the air, hung dapping, stemming some rushing upper gale unfelt below.

On their daily rides together it was her custom to discuss practical matters concerning their future, and it was his custom to listen until pressed for a suggestion, an assent or a reply.

Sparing words—cautions, chary of self commitment and seldom offering to assume the initiative—this was the surface character which she had come to recognize and acquiesce in. This was Quarrier as he had been developed from her hazy, preconceived ideas of the man before she had finally accepted him at Shotover the autumn before. She also knew him as a methodical man, exacting from others the orderly precision which characterized his own dealings. A man of education and little learning, of attainments and little cultivation, conversant with usages, formal, intensely sensitive to ridicule, incapable of humor.

This was Quarrier as she knew him or had known him. Recently she had, little by little, become aware of an indefinable change in the man. For one thing, he had grown more reticent. At times, too, his reserve seemed to have something almost surlily about it. Under his cold composure a hint of something concealed, watchful and very quiet.

Confidences she had never looked for in him nor desired. It appalled her at moments to realize how little they had in common and that only on the surface—a communion of superficial interest incident to the fulfillment of social duties and the pursuit of pleasure. Beyond that she knew nothing of him, required nothing of him. What was there to know? What to require?

Now that the main line of her route through life had been surveyed and carefully laid out, what was there more for her in life than to set out upon her progress? It was her own road. Presumptive leader already, logical leader from the day she married—leader, in fact, when the ukase, her future legacy, so decreed. It was a royal road laid out for her through the gardens and pleasant places. A road for her alone, and over it she had chosen to pass. What more was there to desire?

From the going of Sward all that he had aroused in her of love, of intel-



Billy Fleetwood. ligence, of wholesome desire and sane

curiosity—the intellectual restlessness, the capacity for passion, the renaissance of the simpler innocence—had subsided into the laissez faire of dull quiescence.

Riding there, head bent, her pulses timing the slow pacing of her horse, she presently became aware, without looking up, that Quarrier was watching her. She moved slightly in her saddle to look at him and for an instant fancied that there was something furtive in his eyes. Only for an instant, for he quietly picked up the thread of conversation where she had dropped it, saying that it had been raining for the last ten minutes and that they might as well turn their horses toward shelter.

Without reason, through and through her shot a shiver of loneliness—after loneliness and isolation. Without reason, because from him she expected nothing, required nothing, except what he offered—the emotionless reticence of indifference, the composure of perfect formality. What did she want, then—companions? She had them. Friends? She could scarcely escape from them. Intimates? She had only to choose one or a hundred attuned responsive to her every mood, every caprice. Lonely? With the men of New York crowding, shouldering, crushing their way to her feet? Lonely? With the women of New York struggling already for precedence in her favor—omen significant of the days to come, of those future years diamond linked in one unbroken, triumphant glitter.

"About that Amalgamated Electric company," she began without prelude. "Would you mind answering a question or two, Howard?"

"You could not understand it," he said, unpleasantly disturbed by her abruptness.

"As you please. It is quite true I can make nothing of what the newspapers are saying about it, except that Mr. Plank seems to be doing a number of things."

"Injunctions and other matters," observed Quarrier.

"Is anybody going to lose any money in it?"

"Who, for example?"

"Why—you, for example," she said, laughing.

"I don't expect to."

"Then it is going to turn out all right? And Mr. Plank and Kemp Ferrall and the major and—the other people interested are not going to be almost ruined by the Intercounty people?"

"Do you think a man like Plank is likely to be ruined, as you say, by Amalgamated Electric?"

"No. But Kemp and the major—"

"I think the major is out of danger," replied Quarrier, looking at her with the new, sullen narrowing of his eyes.

"I am glad of that. Is Kemp—and the others?"

"Ferrall could stand it if matters go wrong. What others?"

"Why—the other owners and stockholders?"

"What others? Who do you mean?"

"Mr. Sward, for example," she said in an even voice, leaning over to pat her horse's neck with her gloved hand.

"Mr. Sward must take the chances we all take," observed Quarrier.

"But, Howard, it would really mean ruin for him if matters went badly. Wouldn't it?"

"I am not familiar with the details of Mr. Sward's investments."

"Nor am I," she said slowly.

She spoke about other things. He responded in his usual reserved manner. Presently she turned her horse, and Quarrier wheeled his, facing a warm, fine rain slanting thickly from the south.

His silk, Vandyke beard was all wet with the moisture. She noticed it, and unbidden arose the vision of the gun-room at Shotover—Quarrier's soft beard wet with rain, the phantoms of people passing and repassing, Sward's straight figure swinging past, silhouetted against the glare of light from the billiard room. And here she made an effort to efface the vision, shutting her eyes as she rode there in the rain, but clearly against the closed lids she saw the phantoms passing—specters of dead hours, the wreath of an old happiness masked with youth and wearing Sward's features!

She saw herself beside him among the cushions; tasted again the rose petals that her lips had stripped from the blossoms; saw once more the dawn of something in his steady eyes; felt his arm about her, his breath—

Her horse, suddenly spurred, bounded forward through the rain, and she rode breathless, with her lips half part-

ed, as if afraid, turning her head to look behind—as though she could outride the phantom clinging to her stirrup, masked like youth, wearing the shadowy eyes of love!

An hour later, fresh from her bath, luxuriant in loose and filmy lace, her small white feet shod with silk, she lunched alone, cradled among the cushions of her couch.

Twice she strolled through the rooms leisurely, summoned by her maid to the telephone, the first time to chat with Grace Ferrall, who, it appeared, was a victim of dissipation, being still abed, and out of humor with the rainy world; the second time to answer in the negative Marion's suggestion that she motor to Lakewood with her for the week's end before they closed their house.

Scuntering back again, she slipped her milk and vichy, tasted the strawberries, tasted a big black grape, discarded both and lay back among the cushions, her naked arms clasped behind her head, and, dropping one knee over the other, stared at the ceiling.

The room was very still and dim, but the clamor in her brain unnerved her, and she sat up among the cushions, looking vacantly about her with the blue, confused eyes, the direct, unseeing gaze of a child roused by a half heard call.

The call—low, imperative, sustained—continued softly persistent against her windows, the summons of the young year's rain.

She went to the window and stood among the filmy curtains, looking out into the mist. A springlike aroma penetrated the room. She opened the window a little way, and the sweet, virile odor enveloped her.

A thousand longings rose within her. Unnumbered wistful questions stirred her, sighing, unanswered. Every breath was drawing her backward, nearer, nearer to the source of memory. Ah, the cliff chapel in the rain! The words of a text mumbled dully—the yearly service for those who died at sea. And she, seated there in the chapel dusk thinking of him who sat beside her and how he feared a heavier, stealthier, more secret tide crawling, purring about his feet!

Always, always at the end of everything, he! Always, reckoning step by step, backward through time, he, the source, the inception, the meaning of all!

Unmoored at last, her spirit awaking, enveloped in memories of him, she gave herself to the flood, overwhelmed as tide on tide rose, rushing over her, body, mind and soul.

She closed her eyes, leaning there heavily amid the cloudy curtains. She moved back into the room and stood staring at space through wet lashes. The hard, dry pulse in her throat hurt her till her under lip, freed from the tyranny of her small teeth, slipped free, quivering rebellion.

She had been walking her room to and fro, to and fro, for a long time before she realized that she had moved at all.

And now impulse held the helm. A blind, unreasoning desire for relief hurried into action on the wings of impulse.

There was a telephone at her elbow. No need to hunt through lists to find

a number she had known so long by heart, the three figures which had reiterated themselves so often, monotonously insistent, slyly persuasive, repeating themselves even in her dreams, so that she awoke at times shivering with the vision in which she had listened to temptation and had called to him across the wilderness of streets and men.

"Is he at home?"

"—"

"Would you ask him to come to the telephone?"

"—"

"Please say to him that it is a—a friend. Thank you."

In the throbbing quiet of her room she heard the fingers of the prying rain busy at her windows, the ticking of the small French clock, very dull, very far away—or was it her heart?

"Who is it?"

Her voice left her for an instant. Her dry lips made no answer.

"Who is it?" he repeated in his steady, pleasant voice.

"It is I."

There was absolute silence, so long that it frightened her, but before she could speak again his voice was sounding in her ears, patient, unconvinced.

"I don't recognize your voice. Who am I speaking to?"

"Sylvia."

There was no response, and she spoke again:

"I only wanted to say good morning. It is afternoon now. Is it too late to say good morning?"

"No. I'm badly rattled. Is it you, Sylvia?"

"Indeed it is. I am in my own room. I—I thought—"

"Yes; I am listening."

"I don't know what I did think. Is it necessary for me to telephone you a minute account of the mental processes which ended by my calling you up out of the vasty deep?"

The old ring in her voice, hinting of the laughing undertone, the same trailing sweetness of inflection—could he doubt his senses any longer?

"I know you now," he said.

"I should think you might. I should very much like to know how you are—if you don't mind saying?"

"Thank you. I seem to be all right. Are you all right, Sylvia?"

"Shamefully and outrageously well! What a season food! My body's eye is in rags—madness, but I'm that disagreeable remark! But I'll come to the point branch, you of course. We all do. Doesn't anybody ever see you any more?"

She heard him laugh to himself unpleasantly—then, "Does anybody want to?"

"Everybody, of course! You know it. You always were spoiled to death."

"Yes—to death."

"Stephen?"

"Yes?"

"Are you becoming cynical?"

"I? Why should I?"

"You are! Stop it! Mercy on us! If that is what is going on in a certain house on—over Fifth avenue, facing

the corner of certain streets, it's time somebody dropped in to—"

"To—what?"

"To the rescue! I've a mind to do it myself. They say you are not well, either."

"Who says that?"

"Oh, the usual little ornithological cockatrice—or, rather, cantatrice. Don't ask me, because I won't tell you. I always tell you too much anyway. Don't I?"

"Do you?"

"Of course I do. Everybody spoils you, and so do I."

"Yes—I am rather in that way, I suppose."

"What way?"

"Oh—spoiled."

"Stephen!"

"Yes?"

And in a lower voice, "Please don't say such things—will you?"

"No."

"Especially to me."

"Especially to you. No, I won't, Sylvia."

And, after a hesitation, she continued sweetly:

"I wonder what you were doing, all alone in that old house of yours, when I called you up?"

"I? Let me see. Oh, I was superintending some packing."

"Are you going off somewhere?"

"I think so."

"Where?"

"I don't know, Sylvia."

"I decline to be snubbed. I'm shameless, and I wish to be informed. Please tell me."

"I'd rather not tell you."

"Very well. Goodbye! But don't ring off just yet, Stephen. Do you think that some time you would care to see—any people—I mean when you begin to go out again?"

"Who, for example?"

"Why, anybody?"

"No; I don't think I should care to. I'm rather too busy to go about, even if I were inclined to."

"Are you really busy, Stephen?"

"Yes—waiting. That is the very hardest sort of occupation, and I'm obliged to be on hand every minute."

"But you said that you were going out of town."

"Did I? Well, I did not say it exactly, but I am going to leave town."

"For very long?" she asked.

"Perhaps. I can't tell yet."

"Stephen, before you go, if you are going for a very, very long while—perhaps you will—you might care to say goodbye."

"Do you care to have me?"

"Yes, I do."

There was a silence, and when his voice sounded again it had altered.

"I do not think you would care to see me, Sylvia. I—they say I am—I have changed—since my—since a slight illness. I am not over it yet, not cured—not very well yet, and a little tired, you see—a little shaken. I am leaving New York to—to try once more to be cured. I expect to be well—one way or another—"

"Stephen, where are you going? Answer me!"

"I can't answer you."

"Is your illness serious?"

"A—it is—it requires some—some care."

(To be continued.)

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