

The Fighting Chance

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(A continued story.)

Her fingers tightened around the receiver whitened to the delicate nails under the pressure. Mute, struggling with the mounting impulse, voice and lip unsteady, she still spoke with restraint:

"You say you require care? And what care have you? Who is there with you? Answer me!"

"Why, everybody—the servants. I have care enough."

"Oh, the servants! Have you a physician to advise you?"

"Certainly—the best in the world. Sylvia, dear—Sylvia, I didn't mean to give you an impression!"

"Stephen, I will have you truthful with me! I know perfectly well you are ill. I—if I could only—if there was something, some way—Listen: I am—I am going to do something about it, and I don't care very much what I do!"

"What sweet nonsense!" he laughed, but his voice was no steadier than hers.

"Will you drive with me?" she asked impulsively, "some afternoon?"

"Sylvia, dear, you don't really want me to do it. Wait, listen: I—I've got to tell you that—that I'm not fit for it. I've got to be honest with you. I am not fit, not in physical condition to go out just yet. I've really been ill for weeks. Plank has been very nice to me. I want to get well. I mean to try very hard. But the man you know—is changed."

"Changed?"

"Not in that way!" he said in a slow voice.

"How, then?" she stammered, all a thrill.

"Nerve gone almost. Going to get it back again, of course. Feel a million times better already for talking with you."

"Do—does it really help?"

"It's the only panacea for me," he said, too quickly to consider his words.

"The only one?" she faltered. "Do you mean to say that your trouble—illness—has anything to do with—"

"No, no! I only—"

"Has it, Stephen?"

"No!"

"Because I thought!"

"Sylvia, I'm not that sort! You mustn't talk to me that way. There's nothing to be sorry for about me. Any man may lose his nerve and, if he is a man, go after it and get it back again. Every man has a fighting chance. You said it yourself once—that a man mustn't ask for a fighting chance; he must take it. And I'm going to take it and win out one way or another."

"What do you mean by 'another,' Stephen?"

"I—Nothing. It's a phrase."

"What do you mean? Answer me?"

"It's a phrase," he said again; "no meaning, you know."

"Stephen, Mr. Plank says that you are lame."

"What did he say that for?" demanded Seward wrathfully.

"I asked him. Kemp saw you on crutches at your window, so I asked Mr. Plank, and he said you had discarded your crutches too soon and had fallen and lamed yourself again. Are you able to walk yet?"

"Yes, of course."

"Outdoors?"

"A—no, not just yet."

"In other words, you are practically bedridden."

"No, no! I can get about the room very well."

"You couldn't go downstairs for an hour's drive, could you?"

"Can't manage that for awhile," he said hastily.

"Oh, the vanity of you, Stephen Seward! The vanity! Ashamed to let me see you when you are not your complete and magnificently attractive self! Silly, I shall see you! I shall drive down on the first sunny morning and sit outside in my victoria until you can't stand the temptation another instant. I'm going to do it. You cannot stop me. Nobody can stop me. I desire to do it, and that is sufficient. I think, for everybody concerned. If the sun is out tomorrow I shall be out too! I am so tired of not seeing you! Let central listen! I don't care. I don't care what I am saying. I've endured it so long—I—There's no use! I am too tired of it, and I want to see you. Can't we see each other without—without—thinking about things that are settled once and for all?"

"I can't," he said.

"Then you'd better learn to! The idea of you telling me you had lost your nerve! You've got to get it back—and help me find mine! Yes, it's gone, gone, gone! I lost it in the rain somewhere today. Does the scent of the rain come in at your window? Do

you remember— There, I can't say it! Goodby, goodby! You must get well, and I must too. Goodby!"

The fruit of her imprudence was happiness—an excited happiness, which lasted for a day. The rain lasted, too, for another day, then turned to snow, choking the city with such a fall as had not been seen since the great blizzard.

Sylvia, at her escritoire, chin cradled in her hollowed hand, sat listlessly inspecting her mail.

She turned her head, looking wearily across the room at the brightly burning fire beside which Mrs. Ferrall sat, nibbling mint paste, very serious over one of those books that "everybody was reading."

"What is the matter?" demanded Mrs. Ferrall, withdrawing her finger



Gumble.

from the pages and plumping the closed book down on her knee.

"I have been imprudent," said Sylvia in a low voice.

"You mean—Mrs. Ferrall looked at her keenly—"that he has been here?"

"No, I telephoned him, and I asked him to drive with me."

"Oh, Sylvia, what nonsense! Why on earth do you stir yourself up by that sort of silliness at this late date? What use is it? Can't you let him alone? Are you Stephen Seward's keeper?"

"I felt as though I were for awhile. He is ill."

"With an illness that, thank God, you are not going to nurse through life. Don't look at me that way, dear. I'm obliged to speak harshly; I'm obliged to harden my heart to such a monstrous idea."

"Grace, I cannot endure!"

"You must! Are you trying to drug your silly self with romance so you won't recognize truth when you see it? There was no earthly reason for you to talk to Stephen. No disinterested impulse moved you. It was a sheer perverse, sentimental restlessness, the delicate, meddlesome devilry of your race. And if that poison is in you it's well for you to know it."

"It is in me," said Sylvia, staring at the fire.



"It is in me," said Sylvia.

are unable to understand marital treachery. Otherwise you'd make it lively for us all."

"It is true," said Sylvia deliberately, "that I could not be treacherous to anybody. But I am wondering—I am asking myself just what constitutes treachery to myself. I was in love with him. You knew it."

"You liked him," insisted Grace patiently.

"No; loved him. I know. Dear, your theories are sound in a general way, but what is a girl going to do about it when she loves a man? Could you tell me?"

"If you marry him," said Mrs. Fer-

raill quietly, "your life will become a hell."

"Yes. But would it make life any easier for him?" asked Sylvia.

"How—to know that you had been dragged down?"

"No; I mean could I do anything for him?"

"No woman ever did. That is a sentimental falsehood of the emotional. No woman ever did help a man in that way. Sylvia, if love were the only question and if you do truly love him, I—well, I suppose I'd be fool enough to advise you to be a fool. Even then you'd be sorry. You know what your future may be. You know what you are fitted for. What can you do without Howard? In this town your role would be a very minor one without Howard's money, and you know it."

"Yes, I know it."

"And your sacrifice could not help that doomed boy?"

Sylvia nodded assent.

"Then is there any choice? Is there any question of what to do?"

Sylvia looked out into the winter sky, through the tops of snowy trees. Everywhere the stark, deathly rigidity of winter! Under it, frozen, lay the rain that had scented the air. Under her ambition lay the ghosts of yesterday.

"No," she said, "there is no question of choice. I know what must be."

For a week or more the snow continued. Colder, gloomier weather set in, and the impending menace of Ash Wednesday redoubled the social pace, culminating in the Westervelt ball on the eve of the forty days, and Sylvia had not yet seen Seward or spoken to him again across the wilderness of streets and men.

In the first relaxation of Lent she had instinctively welcomed an opportunity for spiritual consolation and a chance to take her spiritual bearings, not because of bodily fatigue, for in the splendor of her youthful vigor she did not know what that meant.

To St. Berold's she went in cure of her soul. She was fond of Father Curtis, who, if he were every inch a priest, was also every foot of his six feet a man—simple, good and brave.

However, she found little opportunity, save at her brief confession, for a word with Father Curtis. It was fashionable to adore Father Curtis, and for that reason she shrank from venturing any demand upon his time, and nobody else at St. Berold's appealed to her.

Agatha Calhoun was there a great deal, looking like a saint in her subdued plumage and very devout, dodging nothing, neither confession nor Quarrier's occasionally lifted eyes, though their gaze, meeting, seemed lost in dreamy devotion or drowned in the contemplation of the spiritual and remote.

Plank came docilely from his Dutch Reformed church to sit beside Lella. As for Mortimer, once a vestryman, he never came at all. There was a new set of men among whom he had recently drifted, to the unfeigned disgust of gentlemen like Major Belwether—"club" men in the commoner and more sinister interpretation of the word.

Mortimer stayed out at night very frequently now; also he appeared to

make his money go further or was luckier at his "card killings," because he seldom attempted to bully Lella, being apparently content with his allowance.

Once or twice Plank saw him with an unusually attractive girl belonging to a world very far removed from Lella's. Somebody said she was an actress when she did anything at all—one Lydia Vyse, somewhat celebrated for an audacity not too delicate. But Plank was no more interested than any man who can't afford to endanger his prospects by a closer acquaintance with that sort of pretty woman.

Meanwhile Mortimer kept away from home, wife and church, and Plank frequented them, so the two men did not meet very often, and the less they met the less they found to say to one another.

Though the opera was over, theaters unfashionable, formal functions suspended and dances ended, the pace still continued at a discreet and decorous trot, and those who had not fled to California or Palm Beach remained to pray and play bridge with an unctious most edifying.

And all this while Sylvia had not seen Seward.

Sylvia was changing. The characteristic amiability, the sensitive reserve, the sweet composure which the world had always counted on in her, had become exceptions and no longer the rules which governed the caprice and impulse always latent. An indifference so pointed as to verge on insolence amazed her intimates at times. A sudden, flushed impatience startled the habits of her shrine. There was a new, unseeing hardness in her eyes, in her attitude the faintest hint of cynicism. For the first time a slight sense of fear tinged the general admiration.

In public her indifference and growing impatience with Quarrier had not reached the verge of bad taste, but in private she was scarcely at pains to conceal her weariness and inattention. That he noticed it was evident even to her, who carelessly ignored the consequences of her own attitude.

At the M-careme dance given by the Slova Hunt, Quarrier, who was M. F. H., led the cotillon with agreeable precision and impersonal accuracy, favoring her at intervals. She returned to town next morning with Grace Ferrall, irritable, sulky, furious with herself. All hot with self contempt, she lay back in the comfortably upholstered corner of the brougham, staring straight before her, sullen red mouth unresponsive to the occasional inconsequent questions of Grace Ferrall.

"After awhile," observed Grace, "people will begin to talk about the discontented beauty of your face."

Sylvia's eyebrows bent still farther inward.

"A fretful face, but rather pretty," commented Grace maliciously. "It won't do, dear. Your role is dignified comely. Oh, dear! Oh, my!" She stifled a yawn behind her faultlessly gloved hand. "Oh, dear, how I do yawn! And Lent only half over! Sylvia, what are you staring at? Oh, I see."

They had driven south to Washington square, where Mrs. Ferrall had desired to leave a note, and were now re-

turning. Sylvia had leaned forward to look at Seward's house, but with Mrs. Ferrall's first word she sank back, curiously expressionless and white, for she had seen a woman entering the front door and had recognized her as Marion Page.

"Well, of all indiscretions!" breathed Grace, looking helplessly at Sylvia.

"She has courage," said Sylvia, very white.

"Courage! Do you mean foolhardiness?"

"No; courage—the courage I lacked. I knew he was too ill to leave his room, and I lacked the courage to go and see him."

"You mean alone?"

"Certainly alone."

"You dare tell me you ever contemplated?"

"Oh, yes. I think I should have done it yet, but—but Marion!"

Suddenly she bent forward, resting her face in her hands, and between the fingers a bright drop ran, glistened and fell.

(To be continued.)

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