The Fighting Chance

ROBERT W. CHAMBERS

(A continued story.)

CHAPTER TWELVE

SIWARD at his desk, over which the May sunshine streamed, his crutches laid against his chair, sat poring over the piles of papers left there by Beverly Plank some days before with a curt recommendation that he master their contents.

The curious persistence of youth in his features seemed unaccountable in view of the heavy marks imprinted there. In every movement, every turn of his head, there still remained much of that indefinable attractiveness which had always characterized his race—much of the unconscious charm usually known as breeding.

In men of Mortimer's fiber dissipation produced coarser symptoms—distended veins and sagging flesh—where in Siward it seemed to bruise and harden, driving the color of blood out of him and leaving the pallor of marble and the bluish shadows of it staining the hollows. Only the eyes had begun to change radically; something in them had been quenched.

That he could never hope to become immune he had learned at last when he had returned, physically wholesome, from his long course of training under a famous Irish specialist on the Hudson.

He had been a fool. He had imagined that he could control himself and practice the moderation that other men practiced when they chose. The puerile restraint annoyed him; his implied inability to master himself humiliated him, the more so because secretly he was horribly afraid in the remote depths of his heart.

Exactly how it happened he did not remember except that he had gone downtown on business and had lunched with several men. There was claret. Later he remembered another cafe farther uptown and another more brilliantly lighted. Gumble had found him again, this time in the area, and this time the same ankle, not yet strong, had been broken.

Through the waning winter days as he lay brooding in bitterness, realizing that it was all to do over again, Plank's shy visits became gradually part of the routine. But it was many days before Siward perceived in the big, lumbering, pink fisted man anything to attract him beyond the faintly amused curiosity of one man for another who is in process of establishing himself as the first of a race.

As for reciprocation in other forms except the most superficial or of permitting a personal note to sound ever so discreetly, Siward tolerated no such idea. Even the tentative advances of Plank hinting on willingness and perhaps ability to help Siward in the Amalgamated tangle were pleasantly ignored. Unpaid services rendered by men like Plank were impossible; any obligation to Plank was utterly out of the question. Meanwhile they began to like one another—at least Siward often found himself looking forward with pleasure to a visit from Plank. There had never been any question of the latter's attitude toward Siward.

Plank began to frequent the house, but never informally. It is doubtful whether he could have practiced informality in that house event at Siward's invitation.

One very bad night Plank came to the house and was admitted by Gumble. Wands, the second man, stood behind the aged butler. Both were apparently frightened.

That something was amiss appeared plainly enough, and Plank, instinctively producing a card, dropped it on a table and turned to go. It may have been that the old butler recognized the innate delicacy of the motive or it may have been a sudden confidence born of the necessities of the case, for he asked Plank to see his young master.

It was a bad night outside, and it was a bad night for Siward. The master was at bay. Fear had him by the throat. He sat there clutching the arms of his chair, his broken leg in its plaster casing extended in front of him, and when he saw Plank enter he glared at him.

Hour after hour the two men sat there, the one white with rage, but helpless; the other stolid, inert, deaf to demands for intercession with the archvice, dumb under pleadings for a compromise. He refused to interfere with the butler, and Siward insulted him. He refused to go and find the decanters himself, and Siward deliberately cursed him.

Once toward morning Siward feigned sleep, and Plank, heavy head on his breast, feigned it too. Then Siward bent over stealthily and opened a drawer in his desk, and Plank was on his feet like a flash, jerking the morphine from Siward's fingers.

The doctor arrived at daylight, responding to Plank's summons by telephone, and Plank went away with the morphine and Siward's revolver bulging in the side pockets of his dinner coat.

He did not come again for a week. A short note from Siward started him toward lower Fifth avenue.

There was little said when he came into the room.

"Hello, Plank! Glad to see you."

"Hello! Are you all right?"

"All right. Much obliged for pulling me through. Wish you'd pull me through this Amalgamated Electric knothole, too, some day."

"Do—do you mean it?" ventured Plank, turning red with delight.

"Mean it? Indeed I do—if you do. Sit here. Ring for whatever you want, or perhaps you'd better go down to the sideboard. I'm not to be trusted with the odor in the room just yet."

"I don't care for anything," said Plank.

"Whenever you please, then. You know the house, and you don't mind my being unceremonious, do you?"

"No," said Plank.

"Good!" rejoined Siward, laughing. "I expect the same friendly lack of ceremony from you."

But that for Plank was impossible. All he could do was to care the more for Siward without crossing the border line so suddenly made free. All he could do was to sit there, rolling and unrolling his gloves into wads with his clumsy, highly colored hands, and gaze consciously at everything in the room except Siward.

On that day at Plank's shy suggestion they talked over Siward's business affairs for the first time. After that day, and for many days, the subject became the keynote to their intercourse, and Siward at last understood that this man desired to do him a service absolutely and purely from a disinterested liking for him and as an expression of that liking; also he was unexpectedly made aware of Plank's serenely unerring business sagacity.

As for the quid pro quo, Siward had insisted from the first on a business arrangement. The treachery of Major Belwether through sheer fright had knocked the keystone from the syndicate, and the dam which made the golden pool possible collapsed, showering Plank's brokers, who worked patiently with buckets and mops.

The double treachery of Quarrier was now perfectly apparent to Plank. Siward, true to his word, held his stock in the face of ruin. Kemp Ferrall, furious with the major and beginning to suspect Quarrier, came to Plank for consultation.

Then the defense formed under Plank. Legal machinery was set in motion, meeting followed meeting, until Harrington cynically showed his hand and Quarrier smiled his rare smile, and the fight against Intercounty was on in the open, preceded by a furious clamor of charge and countercharge in the columns of the daily press.

That Quarrier had been guilty of something or other was the vague impression of that great news reading public, which, stunned by the reiteration of figures in the millions, turns to the simpler pleasures of a murder trial. Besides, whatever Quarrier had done was no doubt done within the chalk marked courts of the game, though probably his shoes may have become a little dusty.

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Siward, at his desk, the May sunshine pouring over him, sat conning the heaps of typewritten sheets, striving to see between the lines some sign of fortune for his investments. Gumble knocked presently. Siward raised his perplexed eyes.

"Miss Page, sir."

"Oh!" said Siward doubtfully. Then, "Ask Miss Page to come up."

Marion strolled in a moment later, exchanged a vigorous hand shake with Siward, pulled up a chair and dropped into it. She was in riding habit and boots, faultlessly groomed, as usual, her smooth pale hair sleek in its thick knot, collar and tie immaculate as her gloves.

"Well," she said, "any news of your ankle, Stephen?"

"I inquired about my ankle," said Siward, amused, "and they tell me it is better, thank you."

"Sit a horse pretty soon?" she asked, dropping one leg over the other and balancing the riding crop across her knee.

"Not for awhile. You have a fine day for a gallop, Marion," looking askance at the sunshine filtering through the first green leaves of the tree outside his window.

"It's all right—the day. Where are your cigarettes, Stephen? Oh, I see. Don't try to move—don't be silly."

She leaned over the desk, her fresh young face close to his, and reached for the cigarettes. The clean cut head, the sweetness of her youth and femininity, boyish in its allure, were very attractive to him—more so perhaps because of his isolation from the atmosphere of women.

"It's all very well, Marion, your coming here, and it's all very sweet of you, and I enjoy it immensely," he said. "I'm horribly afraid somebody will talk about you."

"What would you do then?"

"I?" he asked, disturbed. "What could I do?"

"Why, I suppose," she said slowly, "you'd have to marry me."

"Then," he rejoined, with a laugh, "I should think you'd be scared into prudence by the prospect."

"I am not frightened," she said gravely.

Gravity fell upon him too. In this young girl's eyes there was no evasion. For a long while he had felt vaguely that matters were not perfectly balanced between them. At moments even he had felt an indefinable uneasiness in her presence. The situation troubled him, too, and, though he had known her from childhood and had long ago learned to discount her vagaries of informality, his common sense could not countenance this defiance of social usage, sure to involve even such a privileged girl as she in some unpleasantness.

"I'd be very glad to marry you—if you cared to," she said.

"Marion!"

"Yes?"

"Oh—I—it is—of course it's a joke."

"No; I'm serious."

"But I—but you don't love—can't be in love with me!" he stammered.

"I am."

Gloved hands tightening on either end of her riding crop, she bent her knee against it, balancing there, looking straight at him.

"I meant to tell you so," she said, "if you didn't tell me first. So I was rather tired waiting. So I've told you."

"It is only a fancy," he said, scarcely knowing what he was saying.

"I don't think so, Stephen."

But he could not meet her candor, and he sat silent, miserable, staring at the papers on his desk.

After awhile she drew a deep, even breath and rose to her feet.

"I'm sorry," she said simply.

"Marion—I never dreamed that"—

"You should dream truer," she said. There was a suspicion of mist in her clear eyes. She turned abruptly to the window and stood there for a few moments, looking down at her brougham waiting in front of the house. "It can't be helped, can it?" she said, turning suddenly.

He found no answer to her question.

"Goodby!" she said, walking to him, with outstretched hand. "It's all in a lifetime, Steve, and that's too short for a good clean friendship like ours to die in. I don't think I'd better come again. Look me up for a gallop when you're fit, and you might drop me a line to say how you're getting on. Is it all right, Stephen?"

"All right," he said hoarsly.

Their hands tightened in a crushing clasp. Then she swung on her spurred heel and walked out, leaving him haggard, motionless.

first feared that he read in Siward's drawn and sullen face a premonition of the ever dreaded symptoms.

"Quarrier has telephoned asking for a conference at last," he said abruptly, sitting down beside Siward.

"Well," inquired Siward, "how do you interpret that—favorably?"

"I am inclined to think he is a bit uneasy," said Plank cautiously. "Harrington made a secret trip to Albany last week. It looks to me as though there were going to be a ghost of a chances for an investigation. Suppose I meet Quarrier?"

"All right. Did he suggest a date?"

"At 4 this afternoon. I think," observed Plank, laying his half consumed cigar on the silver tray, "that I'd better go downtown and see what our pregiacial friend Quarrier wants. Siward, he is a bad man and crafty—every inch of him."

"Oh, come, now! Only characters in fiction have no saving qualities. You never heard of anybody in real life being entirely bad."

"No, I didn't, and Quarrier isn't. For example, he is kind to valuable animals—I mean his own."

"Good to animals! The bad man's invariable characteristic!" laughed Siward. "I'm fond to 'em too. What else is he good to?"

"Everybody knows that he hasn't a poor relation left—not one. He is loyal to them in a rare way. He filled one subsidiary company full of them. It is known downtown as the 'Home For Destitute Nephews.'"

"Seriously, Plank, the man must have something good in him."

"Because of your theory?"

"Yes. I believe that nobody is entirely bad. So do the great masters of fiction."

Plank said gravely: "He is a good son to his father. That is perfectly true—kind, considerate, dutiful, loyal. The financial world is perfectly aware that Stanley Quarrier is today the most unscrupulous old scoundrel who ever crushed a refinery or debauched a railroad, and his son no more believes it than he credits the scandalous history of the Red Woman of Wall street."

Siward had never before seen Plank aroused, and he said so, smiling.

"That is true," said Plank earnestly. "I waste little temper over my likes and dislikes. But what I know and what I legitimately infer concerning the younger Quarrier is enough to rouse any man's anger. I won't tell you what I know. I can't. It has nothing to do with his financial methods, nothing to do with his business. But it is bad—bad all through! The blow his father struck at the integrity of the bench the son strikes at the very keystone of all social safeguard. I must go now. Goodby. Take care of that ankle. Any books I can send you—anything you want? No? All right. And don't worry over Amalgamated Electric, for I really believe we are beginning to frighten them badly."

It was exactly 4 o'clock when Plank was ushered into Quarrier's private suit in the great marble Algonquin Loan and Trust building, the upper stories of which were all golden in the sun against a sky of sapphire.

Quarrier was alone, gloved and hatted, as though on the point of leaving. He showed a slight surprise at seeing Plank, as if he had not been expecting him, and the manner of offering his hand subtly emphasized it as he came forward with a trace of inquiry in his greeting.

"You said 4 o'clock, I believe?" observed Plank bluntly.

"Ah, yes. It was about that—ah—matter—ah— I beg your pardon, can you recollect?"

"I don't know what it is you want. You requested this meeting," said Plank, yawning.

"Mr. Plank," Quarrier said, "there should be some way for us to come together. Have you considered it?"

"No, I haven't," replied Plank.

(To be continued.)

Miss Dunsmore went to Salem on the Wednesday morning boat. She will return this evening.