

The Fighting Chance

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(A continued story.)

"I only mentioned it," she said carelessly. "You had an opportunity to make Howard pay you back. What are you going to do?"

"Do?"
"Of course. You are going to do something, I suppose. You haven't yet told me how you intend to make Howard return the money you lost through his juggling with your stock."

"I don't exactly know myself," admitted Mortimer, still overflashed. "I mean to put it to him squarely as a debt of honor that he owes. I asked him whether to invest. He never warned me not to. He is morally responsible."

She nodded.
"I'll tell him so, too," blustered Mortimer, shaking himself into an upright posture and laying a pudgy clenched fist on the table. "I'm not afraid of him! He'll find that out too. I know enough to stagger him. Not that I mean to use it. I'm not going to have him think that my demands on him for my own property resemble extortion. I've half a mind to shake that money out of him in one way or another."

He struck the table and looked at her for further sign of approval.
"I'm not afraid of him," he repeated. "I wish to God he were here, and I'd tell him so."

She said coolly, "I was wishing that too."

For awhile they sat silent, preoccupied, avoiding each other's direct gaze. When she rose he started, watching her in a dazed way as she walked to the telephone.

"Shall I?" she asked quietly, turning to him, her hand on the receiver.

"Wait. W-what are you going to do?" he stammered.

"Call him up. Shall I?"

A dull throb of fright pulsed through him.

"You say you are not afraid of him, Leroy?"

"No!" he said, with an oath. "I am not. Go ahead!"

She unhooked the receiver. After a second or two her low, even voice sounded. There came a pause. She rested one elbow on the walnut shelf, the receiver tight to her ear. Then:

"Mr. Quarrier, please. Yes, Mr. Howard Quarrier. No, no name. Say it is on business of immediate importance. Very well, then; you may say that Miss Vyse insists on speaking to him. Yes, I'll hold the wire."

She turned, the receiver at her ear, and looked narrowly at Mortimer.

"Won't he speak to you?" he demanded.

"I'm going to find out. Hush a moment!" and in the same calm, almost childish voice: "Oh, Howard, is that you? Yes, I know I promised not to do this, but that was before things happened. Well, what am I to do when it is necessary to talk to you? Yes, it is necessary. I tell you it is necessary. I am sorry it is not convenient for you to talk to me, but I really must ask you to listen. No, I shall not write. I want to talk to you tonight—now! Yes, you may come here if you care to. I think you had better come, Howard, because I am liable to continue ringing your telephone until you are willing to listen. No, there is nobody here. I am alone. What time? Very well; I shall expect you. Goodby."

She hung up the receiver and turned to Mortimer:

"He's coming up at once. Did I say anything to scare him particularly?"

"One thing's sure as preaching," said Mortimer. "He's a coward, and I'm glad of it," he added naively, relighting his cigar, which had gone out.

"If he comes up in his motor he'll be here in a few minutes," she said. "Suppose you take your hat and go out. I don't want him to think what he will think if he walks into the room and finds you waiting. You have your key, Leroy. Walk down the block, and when you see him come in give him five minutes."

Her voice had become a little breathless, and her color was high. Mortimer, too, seemed apprehensive. Things had suddenly begun to work themselves out too swiftly.

"Do you think that's best?" he faltered, looking about for his hat. "Tell Merkle that nobody has been here if Quarrier should ask him. Do you think we're doing it in the best way, Lydia? By God! It smells of a put up job to me. But I guess it's all right. It's better for me to just happen in, isn't it? Don't forget to put Merkle wise."

He descended the stairs hastily. Merkle, the butler, held his hat and gloves and opened the door for him.

Once on the street his impulse was to flee—get out, get away from the

whole business. A sullen shame was pumping the hot blood up into his neck and cheeks. An electric hansom flew noiselessly past him. He shrank back into the shadow of a porte cochere. The hansom halted before the limestone basement house. A tall figure left it, stood a moment in the middle of the sidewalk, then walked quickly to the front door. It opened and the man vanished.

The hansom still waited at the door. Mortimer, his hands shaking, looked at his watch by the light of the electric bulbs flanking the gateway under which he stood.

There was not much time in which to make up his mind, yet his fright was increasing to a pitch which began to enrage him with that coward's courage which it is impossible to reckon with.

Fumbling with his latchkey, but with sense enough left to make no noise, he let himself in, passed silently through the reception hall and up to the drawing room floor, where for a second he stood listening. Then something of the perverted sportsman sent the blood quivering into his veins. He had him. He had run him down! The game was at bay.

An inrush of exhilaration steadied him. He laid his hand on the banister and mounted, gloves and hat brim crushed in the other hand. When he entered the room, he pretended to see only Lydia.

"Hello, little girl," he said, laughing, "are you surprised to—"

At that moment he caught sight of Quarrier, and the start he gave was genuine enough. Never had he seen in man's visage such white concentration of anger.

"Rather unexpected, isn't it?" said Mortimer, staring at Quarrier.

"Is it?" returned Quarrier in a low voice.

"I suppose so," sneered Mortimer. "Did you expect to find me here?"

"No. Did you expect to find me?" asked the other, with emphasis unmistakable.

"What do you mean?" demanded Mortimer hoarsely. "What the devil do you mean by asking me if I expected to find you here? If I had, I'd not have traveled down to your office to-day to see you; I'd have come here for you. Naturally people suppose that an engaged man is likely to give up this sort of thing."

Quarrier, motionless, white to the lips, turned his eyes from one to the other. He looked at Lydia, and his lips moved. "You asked me to come," he said.

"No; you offered to. I wished to talk to you over the wire, but"—her lip curled, and she shrugged her shoulders—"you seemed to be afraid of something or other."

"I couldn't talk to you in my own house, with guests in the room."

"One moment," interposed Mortimer blandly. "As long as I traveled down town to see you and find you here so unexpectedly I may as well take advantage of this opportunity to regulate a little matter. You don't mind our talking shop for a moment, Lydia? Thank you. It's just a little business matter between Mr. Quarrier and myself, a matter concerning a few shares of stock which I once held in one of his companies bought at par and tumbled to ten and—What is the fraction, Quarrier? I forget."

Quarrier thought deeply for a moment; then he raised his head, looking full at Mortimer, and under his silky beard an edge of teeth glimmered. "Did you wish me to take back those shares at par?" he asked.

"Exactly! I knew you would! I knew you'd see it in that way!" cried Mortimer heartily. "Confound it all, Quarrier, I've always said you were that sort of man; that you'd never let a friend in on the top floor and kick him clear to the cellar. As a matter of fact, I sold out at 10%. Wait! Here's a pencil. Lydia, give me that pad on your desk. Here you are, Quarrier. It's easy enough to figure out how much you owe me. Lydia, would you mind hunting up that check book I left here before din?"

He had made a mistake. The girl flushed. He choked up and cast a startled glance at Quarrier. But Quarrier if he heard made no motion of understanding. Perhaps it had not been necessary to convince him of the conspiracy.

When he had finished his figures he reviewed them, tracing each total with his pencil's point; then quietly handed the pad to Mortimer, who went over it and nodded that it was correct.

Lydia rose. Quarrier said, without looking at her: "I have a blank check with me. May I use one of these

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pens?"

So he had brought a check! Had he supposed that a check might be necessary when Lydia called him up? Was he prepared to meet any demand of hers, too, even before Mortimer ap-

peared on the scene?

"As long as you have a check with you, Howard," said Lydia quietly, "suppose you simply add to Mr. Mortimer's amount what you had intended to offer me."

He stared at her without answering.

(To be continued.)



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