

The Fighting Chance

ROBERT W. CHAMBERS

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(A continued story.)

Although everybody had cynically used Plank, nobody had ever before found him a necessity.

"Go on," he said unsteadily. "If I can be of use to you, Seward, in God's name let me be, for I have never been necessary to anybody in all my life."

Seward rested his head on one clinched hand. "How much chance do you think I have?" he asked wearily. "Chance to get well?"

"Yes."

Plank considered for a moment, then, "You are not trying, Seward."

"I have been trying since—since March. In March Miss Landis spoke to me. I've made a better fight since."

Plank's serious face darkened. "Is she the only anchor you have?"

"Plank, I am not even sure of her. I have made a better fight since then. That is all I dare say. I know what men think about a man like me. I know they demand character, pride, self denial. But, Plank, I am driving faster and faster toward the breakers, and those anchors are dragging. For it is not in my case the physical failure to obey the will. It is the will itself that has been attacked from the first. That is the horror of it. And what is there behind the will power to strengthen it? Only the source of will power—the mind. It is the mind that cannot help me. What am I to do?"

"There is a spiritual strength," said Plank timidly.

"I have never dreamed of denying it," said Seward. "I have tried to find it through the accepted sources—accepted by me too. God knows that I desire to be decent. He must be aware, too, that all anchors save one have failed to hold me."

"You mean Miss Landis?"

"Yes. It may be weakness; it may be to my shame that the cables of pride and self respect, even the spiritual respect for the Highest, cannot hold me when this one anchor holds. She said that I might see her. I have waited a long time. I have taken my fighting chance again, and I've won out so far."

He looked up at Plank, curiously embarrassed.

"Your body is normal; your intelligence wholesome, balanced, sane, and I want to ask you if you think that perhaps without understanding how I have found in her or through her in some way the spiritual source that I think might help me to help myself?"

"You ask me if I believe it possible that she can be the medium?"

"Yes."

Plank said deliberately, "Yes, I do think so."

The silence was again broken by Plank: "Seward, you have asked me what I think. Now you must listen to the end. If you believed that through her—her love, marrying her—you stood the best chance in the world to win out, it would be cowardly to ask her to take the risk. As much as I care for you I had rather see you lose the fight than accept such a risk from her. Now you know what I think, but you don't know all. Seward, I say to you that if you are man enough to take her, take her! And I say that of the two risks she is running today the chance she might take with you is infinitely the lesser risk, for with you, if you continue slowly losing your fight, the mental suffering only will be hers. But if she closes this bargain with Quarrier, selling to him her body, the light will go out of her soul forever."

He rose, striding the length of the room once or twice, turned, holding out his broad hand.

"Goodby," he said. "Harrington is about due at my office. Quarrier will probably turn up tonight. I am not vindictive. I shall be just with them—as just as I know how, which is to be as merciful as I dare be. Goodby, Seward."

When he had gone Seward lay back in his chair, very still, eyes closed. A faint color had mounted to his face and remained there.

It was late in the afternoon when he went downstairs, using his crutches lightly. Gumble handed him a straw hat and opened the door, and Seward cautiously descended the stoop, stood for a few moments on the sidewalk, looking up at the blue sky, then wheeled and slowly made his way toward Washington square. The avenue was deserted. His own house appeared to be the only remaining house still open so all that old fashioned but respectable quarter.

A cab, driven smartly, passed through the park, the horses' feet slapping the asphalt till the echoes rattled back from the marble arch. He followed it idly with his eyes as Fifth

avenue, saw it suddenly halt in the middle of the street, saw a woman spring out, stand for a moment talking to her companion, then turn and look toward the square.

She stood so long and she was so far away that he presently grew tired of watching her. A dozen ragged urchins were prowling around the fountain, casting sidelong glances at a distant policeman. But it was not hot enough that evening to permit the children to splash in the water and the policeman drove them off.

"Poor little devils!" said Seward to himself and he rose, adjusted his crutches and started through the park with a vague idea of seeing what could be done.

As he lunged onward, the sun level in his eyes, he heard somebody speak behind him, but did not catch the words or apply the hand to himself. Then, "Mr. Seward!"

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(To be continued.)

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