

The Fighting Chance

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(A continued story.)

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

If a man's grief does not awaken his dignity, then he has none. In that event grief is not even respectable. And so it was with Leroy Mortimer when Lydia at last turned on him. If you cross an Aurora too long and too persistently it runs away. And before it goes it scratches.

Lydia Nyse left Saratoga when the financial stringency began to make it impossible for her to remain. She told Mortimer without the slightest compunction that she was going.

He did not believe her, and he gave her the new big yellow and black car. She sold it the same day to a book-maker, an old friend of hers; with draw several jewels from limbo—gems which Mortimer had given her—and gathered together everything for which if he turned ugly she might not be criminally liable.

She had never liked him. She had long disliked him. So she wrote a note to the governors of the Patrons club saying that both Quarrier and Mortimer were aware that the guilt of her escapade could not be attached to Sward; that she knew nothing of Sward, had accepted his wager without meaning to attempt to win it, had never again seen him and had on the impulse of the moment made her entry in the wake of several men. She added that when Quarrier, as governor, had concurred in Sward's expulsion he knew perfectly well that Sward was not guilty, because she herself had so informed Quarrier. Since then she had also told Mortimer, but he had taken no steps to do justice to Sward, although he (Mortimer) was still a governor of the Patrons club.

This being about all she could think of to make mischief for two men whose recent companionship had nourished and irritated her, she shipped her trunks by express, packed her jewel case and valise and met Desmond at the station.

Desmond had business in Europe. Lydia had as much business there as anywhere, and, although she had been faithful to Mortimer for a comparatively short time, within that time Desmond already had sworn at her and struck her. So she was quite ready to follow Desmond anywhere in this world or the next. And that, too, had not made her the more considerate toward Mortimer.

When the latter returned from the races to find her gone the last riddled props to what passed for his manhood gave way, and the rotten fabric came crashing into the mud.

Creditors with sharp noses scented the whirlwind afar off and hemmed him in with unsettled accounts, mostly hers. Somebody placed a lien on his horses, a deputy sheriff began to follow him about, all credit ceased as by magic, and men crossed the street to avoid meeting with an old companion in direst need.

Still, alternately stupefied by his own grief and maddened into the necessity for action, he packed a suit case, crawled out of the rear door, totted across country and found a farmer to drive him twenty miles over a sandy road to a local railroad crossing, where he managed to board a train for Albany.

At Albany as he stood panting and sweating on the long concrete platform which paralleled track No. 1 he saw a private car, switched from a Boston and Albany train, shunted to the rear of the Merchants' express.

The private car was lettered in gold on the central panel, "Algonquin." He boarded the Pullman coupled to it forward, pushed through the vestibule, shoved aside the Japanese steward and darky cook, forcing his way straight into the private car. Quarrier, reading a magazine, looked up in astonishment. For a full moment neither spoke. Then Mortimer dropped his suit case, sat down in an armchair opposite Quarrier and leisurely mopped his reeking face and neck.

"Scotch and lithia!" he said hoarsely. The Japanese steward looked at Quarrier, then, at that gentleman's almost imperceptible nod, went away to execute the commission.

He executed a great many similar commissions during the trip to New York. When they arrived there at 5 o'clock Quarrier offered Mortimer his hand and held the trembling, puffy fingers as he leaned closer, saying with cold precision and emotionless emphasis something that appeared to require the full concentration of Mortimer's half drugged faculties.

And when at length Mortimer strove away in a hansom Quarrier's Japanese steward went with him—perhaps to carry his suit case—a courtesy that did credit to Quarrier's innate thoughtfulness and consideration for others. He was very considerate. He even called Anathia up on the telephone and talked with her for ten minutes. Then he telephoned to Plank's office, learned that Harrington was already there, telephoned the garage for a car which he always kept ready in town and presently went bowling away to a conference on which the last few hours had put an entirely new aspect.

It had taken Plank only a few minutes to perceive that something had occurred to change a point of view which he had believed it impossible for Quarrier to change. Something had gone wrong in his own careful calculations—some cog had slipped, some rivet given way, some bed plate cracked. And Harrington evidently had not been aware of it, but Quarrier knew it. There was something wrong.

It was too late now to go tinkering in the dark for trouble. Plank understood that. Coolly, as though utterly unaware that the machinery might not stand the strain, he started it full speed. And when he stopped it at last Harrington's grist had been ground to atoms and Quarrier had looked on without comment. There seemed to be little more for them to do except to pay the miller.

"Tomorrow," said Quarrier, rising to go. It was on the edge of Plank's lips to say "Today," but he was silent, knowing that Harrington would speak for him. And the old man did, without words, turning his iron visage on Quarrier with the silent dignity of despair. But Quarrier coldly demanded a day before they reckoned with Plank. And Plank, profoundly disturbed, shrugged his massive shoulders in contemptuous assent.

So Quarrier and Harrington went away, the younger partner taking leave of the older with a sneer for an outworn prop which no man could ever again have use for. Old and beaten, that was all Harrington now stood for in Quarrier's eyes. The least of his villainies might now finish him with a club where he swayed in his loosened saddle or leave him to that horseman on the pale horse watching him yonder on the horizon.

For now, whether Harrington lived or died, he must be counted as nothing in this new struggle darkly outlining its initial strategy in Quarrier's brain. What was coming was coming between himself and Plank alone. The result must be attained swiftly, with secrecy and with the aid of no man. For he did not count Mortimer a man.

At the door of Major Belwether's house Sylvia's maid received Quarrier smilingly, saying that her mistress was not at home, but that Mrs. Mortimer was—which saved Quarrier the necessity of asking for a private conference with Lella, which was exactly what he had come for. But her first unguarded words on receiving him as he rose at her entrance into the darkened drawing room changed that plan, too—changed it all so utterly and so much for the better that he almost smiled to think of the crudity of human combinations and inventions as compared to the masterly machinations of fate. Lella said, laughing: "Oh, you are too late, Howard. We are dining with Mr. Plank at Riverside Inn. What in the world are you doing in town so suddenly?"

"A business telegram. I might have come down with you and Sylvia if I had known. Is Plank dining with you alone?"

"I haven't seen him," smiled Lella evasively. "He will tell us his plans of course when he comes."

"Oh!" said Quarrier, dropping his eyes and glancing furtively toward the curtained windows. At the instant a hansom drove up. Sylvia sprang out, ran lightly up the low steps, and the silent, shrouded house rang with the clamor of the bell.

Lella looked curiously at Quarrier, who sat motionless, head partly averted, as though listening to something heard by him alone. He believed perhaps that he was listening to the voice of fate again, and it may have been so, for already for the third time all his plans were changing to suit this new ally of his—this miraculous fate which was shaping matters for him as he waited. Sylvia had started upstairs like a fragrant whirlwind, but her flying feet halted at Lella's constrained voice from the drawing room, and she spun around and came into the darkened room like an April breeze.

"Lella! They'll be here at a quarter to 7—"

Her breath seemed to leave her body as a shadowy figure rose in the uncertain light and confronted her.

"Yes?"

He said, "Didn't you recognize the car outside?"

She had not even seen it, so excited, so deeply engaged had she been with the riotous tumult of her own thoughts. And still her hurt, unbelieving gaze widened to dismay as she stood there halted on the threshold, and still his eyes, narrowed, held her under their expressionless inspection.

"When did you come? Why?" she asked in an altered voice.

"I came on business. Naturally, being here, I came to see you. I understand you are dining out?"

(To be continued.)

STATE NEWS NOTES

The Electoral College of Coquille County named a full ticket of eight in the race at the coming election.

The county court at Coquille has authorized a reward of \$100 for the recovery of Roy Perkins, who is supposed to have been murdered.

So far this season 75 cars of prunes, pears and peaches have been shipped from The Dalles east in car lots, while 14,000 boxes of fruit have been shipped east by express.

According to advance figures from the office of the county assessor Medford will have an assessed valuation of \$6,000,000 when the roll is completed as against \$2,600,000 last year.

The first permanent laying of steel on the Southern Pacific Company's Natron-Klamath Falls cutoff began last week when 350 feet of 90-pound steel rails were placed.

The Athena council voted down a proposed ordinance prohibiting the sale of near beer and spirituous, vinous or malt liquors that are not in toxicating by a vote of 3 to 2.

The proposed frontier and wild west show for Pendleton is now a certainty and plans will be rapidly pushed forward to make the first annual occasion a great success so that the permanency of the affair will be assured.

The rate of growth of yellow pine in Oregon is a subject of which the forest service is making a special study this summer. This important tree has already been studied to some extent in the southwest, in California, and in Montana, but up to the present time little definite information has been obtained about its growth in Oregon.

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