

# The Fighting Chance

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(A continued story.)

"Very well, Howard," she said, recognizing in him the cowardice which she had always suspected to be there.

She bade him good night. He touched her hand, but made no effort to kiss her. She laughed a little to herself, watching him striding toward the elevator.

She turned leisurely, her slim hands balanced lightly on her narrow hips, and strolled into the second dressing room, where Mrs. Vendening sat sullenly indulging in that particular species of solitaire known as "The Idiot's Delight."

"Well?" inquired Mrs. Vendening, looking up at the tall, pale girl she was chaperoning so carefully during their sojourn in town. "What did Howard Quarrier want?"

"He knows, I think, but he hasn't yet informed me."

"I'll tell you one thing, Agatha," said Mrs. Vendening, gathering up the packs for a new shuffle. "Grace Ferrall doesn't fancy Howard's attention to you, and she's beginning to say so. When you go back to Shotover you'd better let him alone."

"I'm not going back to Shotover," said Agatha.

"What?"

"No, I don't think so. However, I'll let you know tomorrow. It all depends—but I don't expect to." She turned as her maid tapped on the door. "Oh, Captain Voucher. Are you at home to him?" flipping the pasteboard on to the table among the scattered cards.

"Yes," said Mrs. Vendening aggressively, "unless you expect him to flop down on his knees tonight. Do you?"

"I don't—tonight. Perhaps tomorrow. I don't know. I can't tell yet." And to her maid she nodded that they were at home to Captain Voucher.

Quarrier had met him, too, just as he was leaving the hotel lobby. They exchanged the careful salutations of men who had no use for one another. On the Englishman's clean cut face a deeper hue settled as he passed; on Quarrier's not a trace of emotion, but when he entered his motor he sat bolt upright, stiff backed and stiff necked, his long gray gloved fingers moving restlessly over his pointed beard.

The night was magnificent. Myriads of summer stars spangled the heavens. Plank, driving his big motor northward through the night, Lella Mortimer beside him, twice mistook the glimmer of a firefly for the distant lamp of a motor, which amused Lella, and her clear young laughter floated back to the ears of Sylvia and Seward, curled up in their corners of the huge tonneau. But they were too profoundly occupied with each other to heed the sudden care free laughter of the young matron, though in these days her laughter was infrequent enough to set the more merciless tongues wagging when it did sound.

Plank had never seen fit to speak to her of her husband's scarcely veiled menace that day he had encountered him in the rotunda of the Algonquin Trust company. His first thought was to do so—to talk it over with her, consider the threat and the possibility of its seriousness, and then come to some logical and definite decision as to what their future relations should be. Again and again he had been on the point of doing this when alone with Lella—uncomfortable, even apprehensive, because of their frank intimacy. But he had never had the opportunity to do so without deliberately dragging in the subject by the ears in all its ugliness and implied reproach for her imprudence and seeing that dreadful, vacant change in Lella's face which the mere mention of her husband's name was sure to bring turn into horror unspeakable.

A man not prone to fear his fellows, he now feared Mortimer, but that fear struck him only through Lella or had so reached him until the days of his closing struggle with Quarrier. That threat of Mortimer's to involve Plank with Lella in one common ruin, that boast that he was able to do so could not be ignored as a possible weapon if Quarrier should by any chance learn of it.

In all his life he had taken Lella into his arms but once, had kissed her but once. But that once had been enough to arm Mortimer with danger from head to foot. Some prying servant had either listened or seen—perhaps a glimmer of a mirror had betrayed them. At all events whoever had seen or heard had informed Mortimer, and now the man was equipped, the one and only man in all the world who could with truth accuse Plank, the only man of whom he stood in honest fear.

And it was characteristic of Plank

that never for one moment had it occurred to him that the sheer fault of it all lay with Lella; that it was her imprudence alone that now threatened herself and the man she loved—that threatened his very success in life as long as Mortimer should live.

All this Plank, in his thorough, painstaking review of the subject, had taken into account, and he could not see how it could possibly bear upon the matters now finally to be adjusted between Quarrier and himself, because Quarrier was in New York and Mortimer in Saratoga, and unless the latter had already sold his information the former could not strike at him through knowledge of it.

And yet a curious reluctance, a hesitation inexplicable—unless overwork explained it—had come over him when Seward had proposed their dining together on the very eve of his completed victory over Quarrier.

It seemed absurd, and Plank was too stolid to entertain superstitions, but he could not, even with Lella laughing there beside him, shake off the dull instinct that all was not well; that Quarrier's attitude was still the attitude of a dangerous man; that he (Plank) should have had this evening in his room alone to study out the matters he had so patiently plodded through in the long hours while Seward slept.

Yet not for one instant did he dream of shifting the responsibility—if responsibility entailed blame—on Seward, who, against Plank's judgment and desire, had on the very eve of consummation drawn him away from that sleepless vigilance which must forever be the price of a business man's safety.

Lella, gay and excited as a school-girl, chattered on ceaselessly to Plank; all the silence, all the secrecy of the arid years turning to laughter on her red lips, pouring out in broken phrases of delight, words strung together for the sheer pleasure of speech and the happiness of her lot to be with him unrestrained.

"And would you believe it, Beverly," she said, "I formed the habit at Shotover of walking across the boundary and strolling into your greenhouse and deliberately helping myself. And every time I did it I was certain one of your men would march me out."

He laughed, but did not tell her that his men had reported the first episode and that he had instructed them that Mrs. Mortimer and her friends were to do exactly as they pleased at the Fells. However, she knew it, because a garrulous gardener, proud of his service with Plank, had informed her.

"Beverly," she said, "you are a dear. If people only knew what I know!" He began to turn red. She could see it even in the flickering lamp shot darkness. And she teased him for awhile, very gently, even tenderly, and their voices grew lower in a half serious badinage that ended with a quiet, indrawn breath, a sigh and silence.

And now the river swept into view, a darkly luminous sheet set with reflected stars. Mirrored lights gleamed in it. Sudden bright yellow flashes zigzagged into its somber depths. The foliage edged it with a deeper gloom, over which, on the heights, twinkled the multicolored lights of Riverside Inn.

Up the broad, gentle grade they sped, curving in and out among the clumps of trees and shrubbery, then on a level, sweeping in a great circle up to the steps of the Inn.

Now all about them from the brilliantly lighted verandas the gay tumult broke out like an uproarious welcome after the swift silence of their journey. The stir of jolly people keen for pleasure, the clatter of crockery, the coming and going of waiters, of guests, of haughtiness, coupes, victorias and scores of motor cars wheeling and turning through the blinding glare of their own headlights.

Somewhere a gypsy orchestra, full of fitful crescendos and throbbing suspensions of caprice, furnished resonant accompaniment to the joyous clamor. The scent of fountain spray and flowers was in the air.

"I didn't know you had telephoned for a table," said Seward as a head waiter came up smiling and bowing to Plank. "I confess in the new excitement of things I clean forgot it. What a man you are to think of other people!"

Plank reddened again, muttering something evasive, and went forward with Lella.

Sylvia, moving leisurely beside Seward, who was walking slowly, but confidently, without crutches, whispered to him, "I never really liked Mr. Plank before I understood his attitude toward you."

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