

The Fighting Chance

ROBERT W. CHAMBERS

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(A continued story.)

"Men of my sort sometimes demand in others what they themselves are lacking in," said Steward, laughing. "Sylvia, look at this jolly crowd! Look at all those tables! It seems an age since I have done anything of this sort. I feel like a boy of eighteen—the same funny, quickening fascination in me toward everything gay and bright and alive!" He looked around at her, laughing. "As for you," he said, "you look about sixteen. You certainly are the most beautiful thing this beautiful world ever saw."

"Schoolboy courtship!" she mocked him, lingering as he made his slow way through the crowded place. "Mr. Plank," as they arrived and seated themselves, "Mr. Steward has just admitted that he uses crutches only because they are ornamental. Lella, isn't this air delicious? All sorts of people, too, aren't there, Mr. Plank? Such curious looking women, some of them—quite pretty, too, in a certain way. Are you hungry, St—Mr. Steward?"

"Are you, St—Mr. Steward?" mimicked Lella promptly.

"I am," said Steward, laughing at Sylvia's significant color and noting Plank's direct gaze as the waiter filled Lella's slender stemmed glass. And "nothing but apollinaris," he said coolly as the waiter approached him. But, though his voice was easy enough, a dull patch of color came out under the cheek bones.

"That is all I care for, either," said Sylvia, with elaborate carelessness.

Plank and Lella immediately began to make conversation. Steward, his eyes bent on the glass of mineral water at his elbow, looked up in silence at Sylvia questioningly.

There was something in her face he did not quite comprehend. She made as though to speak, looked at him, hesitated, her lovely face eloquent under the impulse. Then, leaning toward him, she said:

"And thy ways shall be my ways."

"Sylvia, you must not deny yourself just because I"—

"Let me. It is the happiest thing I have ever done for myself."

"But I don't wish it."

"Ah, but I do!" she said, the low, excited laughter scarcely fluttering her lips. "Listen, I never before in all my life gave up anything for your sake only this one little pitiful thing."

"I won't let you!" he breathed. "It is nonsense to"—

"You must let me! Am I to be on friendly terms with—with your mortal enemy?" She was still smiling, but now her sensitive mouth quivered suddenly.

He sat silent, considering her, his restless fingers playing with his glass in which the harmless bubbles were breaking.

"I drink to your health, Stephen," she said under her breath. "I drink to your happiness, too, and to your fortune and to all that you desire from fortune." And she raised her glass in the starlight, looking over it into his eyes.

"All I desire from fortune?" he repeated significantly.

"All—almost all!"

"No, all," he demanded.

But she only raised the glass to her lips, still looking at him as she drank.

They became unreasonably gay almost immediately, though the beverage scarcely accounted for the delicate intoxication that seemed to creep into their veins. Lella exchanged glance after glance with Plank. Steward, alternately the leader in it all, then the enchanted listener, bewitched, enthralled, felt care slipping from his shoulders like a mantle and sadness exhaling from a heart that was beating strongly, steadily, fearlessly—as a heart should beat in the breast of him who has taken at last his fighting chance. He took it now under her eyes for honor, for manhood and for the ideal which had made manhood no longer an empty term muttered in desperation by a sick body and a mind too sick to control it.

Yes, at last the lifelong battle was on. He knew it. He knew, too, whatever his fate with her or without her he must always go on with the battle for the safeguarding of that manhood the consciousness of which she had aroused.

All he knew was that, through the medium of his love for her, whatever

in him of the spiritual remained or had been generated, was now awake, alive, strong, vital, indestructible—an impalpable current flowing from a same intelligence, through medium of her, back to the eternal truth, returning always, always, to the deathless source from whence it came.

Lingering over the fruit, the champagne breaking in the glasses standing on the table between them, rim to rim, Lella and Plank had fallen into a low, desultory, yet guarded exchange of words and silences.

Sylvia sprang up and pushed her chair into the farther corner against the balcony rail, where no light fell except the radiance of the stars. Here Steward joined her, dragging his chair around so that it faced her as she leaned back, tilted against a shadowy column.

In the darkness his hand encountered hers on the wooden rail, and the tremor of the contact silenced her. She freed one finger, then let it rest with its slender fellow prisoners. There was no use in trying to speak just then—utterly useless her voice in the soft, rounded throat imprisoned by the swelling pulses that tightened and hammered and tightened.

Years seemed to fall away from her, slipping back, back into girlhood, into childhood, drawing not her alone on the gliding tide, but carrying him with her. An exquisite languor held her. Drifting deliciously, her eyes sometimes meeting his, sometimes lost in the magic of her reverie, she lay there in her chair, her unresisting fingers locked in his.

Odd little thoughts came hovering in to her reverie—thoughts that seemed distantly familiar, the direct, unconscious impulses of a child. To feel was once more the only motive for expression; to think fearlessly was once more inherent; to desire was to demand—unlock her lips, naively, and ask for what she wished.

Under the spell she turned her blue gaze on him, and her lips parted without a tremor.

"What do you offer for what you ask? And do you still ask it? Is it me you are asking me for? Because you love me? And what do you give—love?"

"Weigh it with the—other," he said.

"I have—often—every moment since I have known you. And what a winter!" Her voice was almost inaudible.

"What a winter—without you?"

"That hell is ended for me too, Sylvia, I know what I ask. And I ask, I know what I offer. Will you take it?"

"Yes," she said.

He rose, blindly. She stood up, pale, wide eyed, confronting him, stammering out the bargain:

"I take all—all, every virtue, every vice of you. I give all—all, all I have been, all I am, all I shall be! Is that enough? Oh, if there were only more to give! Stephen, if there were only more!"

Her hands had fallen into his, and they looked each other in the eyes.

Suddenly through the hush of the enchanted moment a sullen sound broke, the sound of a voice they knew, threateningly raised, louder and louder, growling, profanely menacing.

Aghast, they turned in the darkness, peering toward the lighted space beyond. Leroy Mortimer, his face shockingly congested, stood unsteadily balancing there, confronting his wife, who sat staring at him in horror. At the same instant Plank rose and laid a hand on Mortimer's shoulder, but Mortimer shook him off with a warning oath.

"You and I will settle with each other tomorrow!" he said thickly, pointing a puffy finger at Plank. "You'll find me at the Algonquin Trust. Do you hear? That's where you'll settle this matter—in the president's office!" He stood swaying and leaning at Plank, repeating loudly: "In Quarrier's office! Understand? That's where you'll settle up! See!"

Lella, white face quivering, shrank as though he had struck her, and he turned on her again, grinning: "As for you, you come home! And that'll be about all for yours."

"Are you insane to make a scene like this?" said Plank.

But Mortimer swung on him insultingly and said: "That's about all from you! Lella, are you coming?"

He stepped heavily toward her, but Plank's sudden crushing grip was on his fat arm above the elbow, and he emitted a roar of surprise and pain.

"Don't touch him! Don't, in heaven's name!" stammered Lella as Plank, releasing him, stepped back beside her chair. "Can't you see that I must go with him? I—I must go!" She cast one terrified glance around her, where

scores of strange faces met hers, and at every table people were standing up to see better.

Plank, who had dropped Mortimer's arm as the latter emitted his bellow of amazement, stepped toward him again, dropping his voice as he spoke.

"You go! Do you hear?" he said quietly. "I'll do what you ask me tomorrow. I will do what you ask if you'll go now."

"You come! Do you hear?" snarled Mortimer, turning on his wife, who had already risen. "If you don't I'll make a row here that you'll never hear the end of as long as you live. And there'll be nothing to talk over in Quarrier's office if I do!"

Lella looked at Plank, rose and moved swiftly toward the veranda steps, her head resolutely lowered, the burning shame flaming in her face. Mortimer cast one triumphant glance at Plank, then waddled unsteadily after his wife.

"Hold on," he growled; "I've a car here! I'll drive you back—wait! Here it is! Here we are!" And to Quarrier's machinist he said: "You get into the tonneau. I want to show Mrs. Mortimer what night driving is. Do you hear? I tell you I'm going to drive this machine and show you how!"

Lella scarcely heard him. She obeyed the impulse of his hand on her arm and mounted to the seat, staring straight ahead of her with dazed and straining eyes that saw nothing.

Then Mortimer clambered to his seat and without an instant's warning opened up and seized the wheel.

Unprepared, the machinist attempted to swing aboard, missed his footing in the uncertain light and fell sprawling on the gravel. Plank saw him from the veranda and instantly vaulted the rail to the lawn below.

"You d—n fool!" yelled Mortimer, looking around. "What do you think you'll do?" And he clapped on full speed as Plank made a leap for the car and missed.

Mortimer laughed and turned his head to look back, and the next instant something seemed to wrench the steering wheel from his roots. There was a blinding glare of light, a scream, and the great machine bounded into the air full length, turned completely over and lay across a flower bed, partly on one side.

(To be continued.)

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