

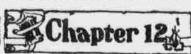
By ROBERT W. CHAMBERS,

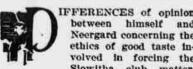
Author of "THE FIGHTING CHANCE," Etc.

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SYNOPSIS OF PRECEDING CHAPTERS.

CHAP, I-Returning from Manila, Captain Ssiwyn, formerly of the army, is welcome home by his sister, Nina Gerard, her wealthy husband Austin, and their numerous chilo, ren. Elicen Erroll, ward of Nina and Austin, is part of their household. Selwin has been divorced, without guilt on his part, by his wife, Alixe, who is now the wife of Jack Ruthven, with whom she ran away from Selwyn, II—Elleen, who is very fond of hebrother, Gerald, desplie the young man's neglect of her, makes friends with Selwy, III—Gerald is worried about young Erroll's mingling in the fast set. Gerald is employed by Julius Neergard, a reale state operator in a large way. Selwyn promises Enteen ne will look after her brother. He telis hel about Roots Lansing, his army chum in Manila, who is coming to New York. In the park Elicen and Selwyn ride past Alixe. IV—Elleen's deceased father was an archaeolegist, and she has inherited some of his scholarly qualities. Selwyn heips Gerald to settle a gambling debt and determines to undertake his reformation. V—Alixe and Selwyn meet and discuss their altered relations. He is introduced to Mrs. Rosamund Fane, leader of the fast set and Alixe is closest friend. He appeals to Alixe to help him keep Gerald from gambling. VI—The friend-ship of Kileen and Selwyn progresses. VII—Gerald promises Selwyn he will stop gambling. Neergard discloses to Selwyn, who is interested in his office, a plan to control the Slowitha Country club by by bying up farms essential to the club's existence. The plan does not appeal to Selwyn, and he consults Austin, who demounces Neergard and his methods. VII—At night in his room Selwyn answers a knock at his door. IX—The caller is Alixe, who is very unhappy with Ruthven and went their old love flashes up, but at the mention of Elicen he knows that it is past resurrection. X—Rosamund distresses Elicen by telling her society is gossiping about Alixe and Selwyn as past power and who has again lost heavily, a promise not to play again at her house. XI—Al SYNOPSIS OF PRECEDING CHAPTERS.





Neergard concerning the ethics of good taste involved in forcing the Slowitha club matter.

Gerald's decreasing attention to business and increasing intimacy with the Fane-Ruthven coterie began to make Selwyn very uncomfortable. The boy's close relations with Neergard worried him most of all and, though Neergard finally agreed to drop the Slowitha matter as a fixed policy in which Selwyn had been expected to participate at some indefinite date, the arrangement seemed only to cement the man's confidential companionship with Ger-

This added to Selwyn's restlessness, unsatisfactory one. Gerald for the first time remained reticent, and when Selwyn, presuming on the cordial un- dirty"derstanding between them, pressed



Boots Lansing.

him a little the boy turned sullen, and

times cordial and lovable, but he was ed what we know you to be. So"no longer frank or even communica-

together frequently now. They often its method." lunched uptown. Whether they were in each other's company evenings Sel- cordially. too, for he was slowly coming to the temper." conclusion that he did not like Neergard, that he would never sign articles of partnership with him and that Selwyn. I dare say we are up against even his formal associateship with the it hard." company was too close a relation for his own peace of mind. But on Gerald's account he stayed on. He did sister's sake as well as for his own.

Matters drifted that way through early spring. He actually grew to dislike both Neergard and the business of Neergard & Co., for no particular reason perhaps, but in general, though he did not yet care to ask himself to be more precise in his unuttered criti-But Neergard broke his word

And one morning before he left his gard. Haw! Haw!" rooms at Mrs. Greeve's lodgings to go

die der der der der die die die der der die der die der die der die der de downtown Percy Draymore called him up on the telephone, and, as that verfed young man's usual rising hour was notoriously nearer noon than 8 o'clock, it surprised Selwyn to be asked to remain in his rooms for a little while until Draymore and one or two friends

could call on him personally concern-

ing a matter of importance. First there was Percy Draymore, overgroomed for a gentleman, fat, good humored and fashionable-one of the famous Draymore family noted solely for their money and their tight grip on it; then came Sanxon Orchil, the famous banker and promoter, small, urbane, dark, with that rich, almost oriental, coloring which he may have inherited from his Cordova ancestors, who found it necessary to dehumanize their names when Rome offered them the choice, with immediate eternity as

Then came a fox faced young man, Phoenix Mottly, elegant arbiter of all pertaining to polo and the hunt-slim legged, hatchet faced and more prosentable in the saddle than out of it. He was followed by Bradley Harmon, with his washed out coloring of a consumptive Swede and his corn colored beard, and, looming in the rear like an amlable brontosaurus, George Fane, whose swaying neck carried his head as a camel carries his, nodding as be walks.

"We heard last night," said Dray-"how that fellow-how Neergard had been tampering with our farmers-what underhand tricks he has been playing us, and I frankly admit to you that we're a worried lot of near sports. That's what this dismal between himself and matinee signifies, and we've come to ask you what it all really means."

"Why did you not call on Mr. Neergard?" asked Selwyn coolly. Yet he was taken completely by surprise, for he did not know that Neergard had gone ahead and secured options on his own responsibility, which practically amounted to a violation of the truce between them. "I know nothing about it. I did not know that Mr. Neergard had acquired control of the property. I don't know what he means to do with it. And, gentlemen, may I ask why you feel at liberty to come to me instead of going to Mr. Neergard?"

"A desire to deal with one of our own kind, I suppose," returned Draymore bluntly. "And, for that matter," and one day in early spring he had a he said, turning to the others, "we long conference with Gerald-a most might have known that Captain Selwyn could have had no hand in and no knowledge of such an underbred and

Harmon plucked him by the sleeve, but Draymore shook him off, his little piggish eyes sparkling.

"What do I care?" he sneered, losing his temper. "We're in the clutches of a vulgar, skinflint Dutchman, and he'll wring us dry whether or not we curse him out. Didn't I tell you that Philip Selwyn had nothing to do with it? If he had, and I was wrong, our journey here might as well have been made to Neergard's office, for any man who will do such a filthy thing"-

"One moment, Draymore," cut in Selwyn, and his voice rang unpleasantly. "If you are simply complaining because you have been outwitted, go ahead, but if you think there has been any really dirty business in this matter go to Mr. Neergard. Otherwise, being his associate, I shall not only decline to listen, but also ask you to leave my apartments."

"Captain Selwyn is perfectly right," observed Orchil coolly. 'Do you think, Draymore, that it is very good taste in you to come into a man's place and begin slanging and cursing a member of his firm for crooked work?

him a little the boy turned sullen, and "Besides," added Mottly, "it's not Selwyn let the matter drop very quick- crooked; it's only contemptible." And to Selwyn, who had been restlessly fac-But neither tact nor caution seemed ing first one, then another: "We came to serve now. Gerald, more and more -it was the idea of several among usengrossed in occult social affairs of to put the matter up to you, which which he made no mention to Selwyn, was rather foolish, because you couldn't was still amiable and friendly, even at have engineered the thing and remain-

"Wait!" said Selwyn brusquely. "I tive, and Selwyn, fearing to arouse do not admit for one moment that there him again to sullenness or perhaps is anything dishonorable in this deal, even to suspicious defiance, forbore to nor do I accept your right to question press him beyond the most tentative it from that standpoint, because I advances toward the regaining of his personally have not chosen to engage in matters of this-ah-description, is Gerald and Neergard left the office no reason for condemning the deal or

"Every reason!" said Orchil, laughing "Every reason, Captain Selwyn did not know, for Gerald no wyn, Thank you; we know now exactly longer volunteered information as to where we stand. It was very good of his whereabouts or doings. And all you to let us come, and I'm sorry some this hurt Selwyn and alarmed him, of us had the bad taste to show any

> "He means me," added Draymore, offering his hand; "goodby, Captain

"Because we've got to buy in that property or close up the Siowitha," added Mottly, coming over to make his not like to leave the boy alone for his adieus. "By the way, Selwyn, you

ought to be one of us in the Slowitha." "Thank you, but isn't this rather an awkward time to suggest it?" said Selwyn good humoredly.

Fane burst into a sonorous laugh and wagged his neck, saying: "Not at all! Not at all! Your reward for having the decency to stay out of the deal is an invitation from us to come in and be squeezed into a jelly by Mr. Neer-

And so, one by one, with formal or

informal but evidently friendly leavetaking, they went away. And Selwyn followed them presently, walking until he took the subway at Forty-second street for his office.

He went into his own office, pocketed his mail and still wearing hat and gloves came out again just as Gerald was leaving Neergard's office.

He walked leisurely into Neergard's office and seated himself.

"So you have committed the firm to the Slowitha deal?" he inquired coolly. Neergard looked up and then past him: "No, not the firm. You did not seem to be interested in the scheme, so went on without you. I'm swinging t for my personal account." "Is Mr. Erroll in it?"

"I said that it was a private matter." replied Neergard, but his manner was

"I thought so; it appears to me like matter quite personal to you and characteristic of you, Mr. Neergard. And, that being established, I am now ready to dissolve whatever very loose ties have ever bound me in any assoclation with this company and yourself."

Neergard's close set black eves shifted a point nearer to Selwyn's. The sweat on his nose glistened.

"Why do you do this?" he asked slowly. "Has anybody offended you?" "Do you really wish to know?"

"Yes, I certainly do, Captain Selwyn." "Very well. It's because I don't like your business methods, I don't likeseveral other things that are happening in this office. It's purely a difference of views, and that is enough explanation, Mr. Neergard."

"I think our views may very easily coincide."

"You are wrong; they could not. I ought to have known that when I came back here. And now I have only to thank you for receiving me, at my own request, for a six months' trial, and to admit that I am not qualified to cooperate with this kind of a firm."

said Neergard angrily, "That." "amounts to an indictment of the firm. If you express yourself in that manner outside, the firm will certainly resent

"My personal taste will continue to govern my expressions, Mr. Neergard, and I believe will prevent any further business relations between us. And, as we never had any other kind of relatious, I have merely to arrange the details through an attorney."

Neergard looked after him in sience. The tiny beads of sweat on his nose united and rolled down in a big shining drop, and the sneer etched on his broad and brightly mottled features deepened to a snarl when Selwyn had disappeared.

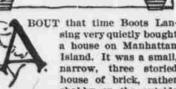
For the social prestige which Selwyn's name had brought the firm he had patiently endured his personal dislike and contempt for the man after he found he could do nothing with him in any way.

He had accepted Selwyn purely in the hope of social advantage and with the knowledge that Selwyn could have done much for him after business hours, if not from friendship, at least from interest or a lively sense of benefits to come. For that reason he had invited him to participate in the valuable Siowitha deal, supposing a man but you don't seem to realize it as comparatively poor as Selwyn You're morbid, I'm afraid." would not only jump at the opportunity, but also prove sufficiently grateful later. And he had been amazed and disgusted at Selwyn's attitude. But he had not supposed the man would isn't it enough to subdue a man's spirsever his connection with the firm if its occasionally?" he, Neergard, went ahead on his own tated him. It meant, instead of selfish isn't enough to spoil life for a man. or snobbish indifference to his own I've wanted to tell you so for a long social ambitions, an enemy to block time." his entrance into what he desired-the society of those made notorious in the columns of the daily press.

He was fairly on the outer boundary a needy gentleman inside was already compromised and practically pledged family life, no children." to support him, for his meeting with Jack Ruthven through Gerald had proved of greatest importance. He had lost gracefully to Ruthven and In doing it had taken that gentleman's to exploit the club, from which Ruthven of course would resign in time to escape any assessment himself.

Neergard's progress had now reachsimple-to wallow among the wealthy until satiated, then to marry into that agreeable community and found the house of Neergard. And to that end on Fifth avenue, but held it in the name of the firm, as though it had been acquired for purposes merely specula-

Chapter 13



sing very quietly bought house on Manhattan Island. It was a small, narrow, three storied house of brick, rather shabby on the outside

and situated on a modest block between Lexington and Park avenues. where the newly married of the younger set were arriving in increasing numbers, prepared to pay the penalty for all love matches.

It was an unexpected move to Selwyn; he had not been aware of Lansing's contemplated desertion, and that morning, returning from his final interview with Neergard, he was astonished to find his comrade's room bare of furniture and a hasty and ex-

clamatory note on his own table: Phil! I've bought a house! Come and

floors and unpapered walls! It's the hap-plest day of my life! DOOTS! House Owner!

And Selwyn, horribly depressed, went down after a solitary luncheon and found Lansing sitting on a pile of dusty rugs, ecstatically inspecting the eracked ceiling.

"I'm going to have the entire thing done over, room by room, when I can

afford it. Look there. Phil! That's to be your room." "Thanks, old fellow-not now." "Why, yes! I expected you'd have your room Phil"-"It's very good

of you, Boots,

but I can't do

Lansing faced "Won't Found Lansing sit-ting on a pile of him: you?" dusty rugs. Selwyn, smil-

ing, shook his head, and the other knew it was final. "Well, the room will be there, fur-

nished the way you and I like it. When you want it make smoke signals or wigwag."

"I will, thank you, Boots." Lansing said unaffectedly, "How soon do you think yof can afford a house

"I don't know. You see, I've only my income now." "Plus what you make at the office." "I've left Neergard."

"What!" "This morning; for good."

"The deuce!" he murmured, looking at Selwyn; but the latter volunteered no further information, and Lansing. having given him the chance, cheer fully switched to the other track.

"Shall I see whether the Air Line has anything in your line, Phil? No? Well, what are you going to do?" "I don't exactly know what I shall

If I had capital-enough-I think I'd start in making bulk and dense powders-all sorts; gun cotton, nitro powders"-

"You mean you'd like to go on with your own invention-chaosite?"

"I'd like to keep on experimenting with it if I could afford to. Perhaps I But it's not yet a commercial possibility-if it ever is to be. I wish I could control it; the ignition is simultaneous and absolutely complete, and there is not a trace of ash, not an unburned or partly burned particle. But it's not to be trusted, and I don't know what happens to it after a year's storage.

'Anyway," said Lansing, "you've nothing to worry over." "No, nothing," assented Selwyn listlessly.

After a silence Lansing added, "But you do a lot of worrying all the same,

Selwyn flushed up and denied it. "Yes, you do! I don't believe you realize how much of the time you are out of spirits," "Does it impress you that way,

asked Selwyn, mortified, "because I'm really all right?" "Of course you are, Phil. I know it,

"You've been talking to my sister!" "What of it? Besides, I knew there

was something the matter." "You know what it is too, And

"No," said Lansing, "if you mean -mistake-two years ago. That

And as Selwyn said nothing: "For heaven's sake, make up your mind to enjoy your life! You are fitted to en-Get that absurd notion out of now, though still very far outside. But your head that you're done for, that you've no home life in prospect, no

> "Do you mean to say, Boots, that you think a man who has made the ghastly mess of his life that I have

ought to feel free to marry?" "Think it! Man, I know it. Cermeasure. And, though Ruthven him- tainly you ought to marry if you wish, self was a member of the Slowitha, but, above all, you ought to feel free Neergard had made no error in taking to marry. That is the essential equiphim secretly into the deal where to- ment of a man. He isn't a man if he gether they were now in a position feels that he isn't free to marry. He may not want to do it, he may not be In love. That's neither here nor there. The main thing is that he is free as a man should be to take any good oppored this stage. His programme was tunity, and marriage is included in the list of good opportunities."

Sitting there in the carpetless room piled high with dusty, linen shrouded furniture, Selwyn looked around, an

he had already bought a building site involuntary smile twitching his mouth. "What about your marrying," he said, "after this talk about mine? What about it, Boots? Is this new house the first modest step toward the matrimony you laud so loudly?"

"Sure," said that gentleman airily. "That's what I'm here for."

"Really?" "Well, of course, idiot. I've always been in love." "You mean you actually have some

body in view?" "No, son. I've always been in love with-love. I'm a sentimental sentry on the ramparts of reason. I'm properly armed for trouble now, so if I'm

challenged I won't let my chance slip

by me.' After a little while Selwyn went away, first to look up a book which he was having bound for Elleen, then to call on his sister, who, with Eileen, had just returned from a week at Silverside with the children preliminary to moving the entire establishment

there for the coming summer. "Silverside is too lovely for words!" exclaimed Nina as Selwyn entered the library. "Nobody wanted to come away. Elleen made straight for the surf, but it was an Arctic sea, and as soon as I found out what she was doing I made her come out"

"I should think you would," he said.

'Nobody can do that and thrive.' "She seems to," said Nina. "She was simply glorious after the swim, and I hated to put a stop to it. And you should see her drying her hair and helping Plunket to roll the tennis courts—that hair of hers blowing like gold flames and her sleeves rolled to her armpits-and you should see her down in the dirt playing marbles with Billy and Drina shooting away excitedly and exclaiming 'Ten dubs!' and 'Knuckle down, Billy!' like any gamin you ever heard of-totally unspoiled, Phil, in spite of all the success of her first winter! And do you know that she had no end of men seriously entangled? Phil!

"What?" he said.

His sister regarded him smilingly, then partly turned around and perched herself on the padded arm of a great chair.

"Come over here, Phil; no, close to me. I wish to put my hands on your shoulders, like that. Now look at me. Do you really love me?"

"Sure thing, Ninette." "And you know I adore you, don't

"Madly, dear, but I forgive you."

"No. I want you to be serious, because I'm pretty serious. See, I'm not smiling now. I don't feel like it, because it is a very, very important matter, Phil, this thing that has-has-almost happened. It's about Elleen. And It really has happened."

"What has she done?" he asked curi-

His sister's eyes were searching his very diligently, as though in quest of something elusive, and he gazed serenely back, the most unsuspicious of smiles touching his mouth.

"Phil, dear, a young girl-a very young girl-is a vapid and uninteresting proposition to a man of thirty-five

"Rather-in some ways."

"In what way is she not?" "Well, to me, for example, she is acceptable as children are acceptable-a blessed, sweet, clean relief from the women of the Fanes' set, for example." "Like Rosamund?"

"Yes. And, Ninette, you and Austin seem to be drifting out of the old circles, the sort that you and I were accustomed to. You don't mind my saying it, do you? But there were so many people in this town who had some thing besides millions-amusing, well bred, jolly people who had no end of good times, but who didn't gamble and guzzle and stuff themselves and their friends, who were not eternally hanging around other people's wives. You have just asked me whether a young girl is interesting to me. I answer, yes, thank God, for the cleaner, saner, happier hours I have spent this winter among my own kind have been spent where the younger set dominated. They are better than those who bred them, and if in time they, too, fall short they will not fall as far as their parents. And in their turn when they look around them at the younger set. whom they have taught in the light and wisdom of their own shortcomings, they will see fresher, sweeter, loveller young people than we see now. And it will continue so, dear, through the jolly generations. Life is all right, only, like art, it is very, very long sometimes."

Nina sat silent upon the padded arm of her chair, looking up at her brother "Mad preacher! Mad mollah! Dear, dear fellow!" she said tenderly. "All ills of the world canst thou discount,

but not thine own.' "Those, too," he insisted, laughing. "I had a talk with Boots. But anyway I'd already arrived at my own conclusion that-that-I'm rather overdoing this blighted business."

"Phil!" in quick delight. "Yes," he said, reddening nicely; "between you and Boots and myself I've decided that I'm going in for-for whatever any man is going in forlife! Ninette, life to the full and up to the hilt for mine!"

"I am going to say something that is very, very serious and very near my heart," said Nina. "I remember," he said. "It's about

Elleen, isn't it?" "Yes, it is about Elleen." He waited, and again his sister's eves began restlessly searching his for something that she seemed unable to

"You make it a little difficult, Phil. I don't believe I had better speak of

"Why not?" "Why, just because you ask me "Why not?" for example." "Is it anything that worries you

about Elleen?" "N-no, not exactly. It is-it may be a phase, and yet I know that if it is anything at all it is not a passing direct. She never forgets, for example. Her loyalty is quite remarkable, Phil. She is very intense in her-her beliefs, the more so because she is unusually free from impulse, even quite ignorant of the deeper emotions,

or so I believed until-until"-"Is she in love?" he asked.

"A little, Phil." "Does she admit it?" he demanded, unpleasantly astonished.

"She admits it in a dozen innocent ways to me, who can understand her. But to herself she has not admitted it, I think-could not admit it yet, be-

cause-because"-"Who is it?" asked Selwyn, and there was in his voice the alightest undertone of a growl.

"Dear, shall I tell you?" "Why not?"

"Because-because, Phil, I think that our pretty Elleen is a little in love with-you." He straightened out to his full

height, searlet to the temples. She dropped her linked fingers in her lap,

gazing at him almost sadly.

"Dear, all the things you are prepar ing to about at me are quite useless. I know. I don't imagine, I don't forestall, I don't predict."

"Nina, you are madder than a March heiress!"

"Air your theories, Phil, then come back to realities. The conditions re main. Eileen is certainly a little in love with you, and a little with her means something. And you evidently have never harbored any serious in-tentions toward the child. I can see that, because you are the most transparent man I ever knew. Now, the question is, What is to be done?"

"I am, of course, obliged to believe that you are mistaken," he said. "A man cannot choose but believe in that manner. There is no very young girl, nobody, old or young, whom I like as thoroughly as I do Elleen Erroll. She knows it; so do you, Nina. It is open and aboveboard. I should be very unhappy if anything marred or distorted our friendship. I am quite confident that nothing will."

"In that frame of mind," said his sister, smiling, "you are the healthlest companion in the world for her, for you will either cure her or she you, and it is all right either way."

"Certainly it will be all right," he

said confidently. For a few moments he paced the room, reflective, quickening his pace all the while, and his sister watched him, silent in her indecision.

"I'm going up to see the kids," he said abruptly. The children, one and all, were in

the park, but Elleen was sewing in the nursery, and his sister did not call him back as he swung out of the room and up the stairs. But when he had disappeared Nina dropped into her chair, aware that she had played her best card prematurely, forced by Rosamund, who had just told her that rumor continued to be very busy coupling her brother's name with the name of the woman who once had been his wife.

Nina was new thoroughly convinced of Alixe's unusual capacity for making

She had known Alixe always, and she had seen her develop from a talented, restless, erratic, emotional girl, easily moved to generosity, into an impulsive woman, reckless to the point of ruthlessness when ennui and unhappiness stampeded her, a woman not deliberately selfish, not wittingly immoral, for she lacked the passion which her emotion was sometimes mistaken for, and she was kind by in-

stinct. Sufficiently intelligent to suffer from the lack of it in others, cultured to the point of recognizing culture, her dangerous unsoundness lay in her utter lack of mental stamina when conditions became unpleasant beyond her

will, not her ability to endure them. The consequences of her own errors she refused to be burdened with. To escape somehow was her paramount impulse, and she always tried to-had always attempted it even in school days-and further back when Nina first remembered her as a thin, eager, restless little girl scampering from one scrape into another at full speed. Even in those days there were moments when Nina believed her to be actually irrational, but there was every reason not to say so to the heedless scatterbrain whose father in the prime of life sat all day in his room, his faded eyes fixed wistfully on the childish toys which his attendant brought

All this Nina was remembering, and again she wondered bitterly at Alixe's treatment of her brother and what explanation there could ever be for it-

Lately, too, Alixe had scarcely been at pains to conceal her contempt for her husband, if what Rosamund related was true. It was only one more headlong scrape, this second marriage, and Nina knew Alixe well enough to expect the usual stampede toward that gay phantom which was always beckoning onward to promised happiness, that goal of heart's desire already lying so far behind her, and farther still, for every step her little flying feet were taking in the oldest, the vainest, the most hopeless, chase in the world -the headlong hunt for happiness

And if that blind hunt should lead once more toward Selwyn? Suppose, freed from Ruthven, she turned in her tracks and threw herself and her youthful unhappiness straight at the man who had not yet destroyed the picture that Nina found when she visited her brother's rooms with the desire to be good to him with rocking chairs. Not that she really believed or feared

that Philip would consider such an impossible reconciliation; pride and a sense of the absurd must always check phase. She is different from the ma- any such weird caprice of her brothjority, you see-very intelligent, very er's conscience, and yet-and yet other amazing and mismated couples had done it-had been reunited.

And Nina was mightily troubled, for Alixe's capacity for mischief was boundless, and that she in some manner had already succeeded in stirring up Philip was a rumor that persisted and would not be annihilated.

To inform a man frankly that a young girl is a little in love with him is one of the oldest, simplest and easiest methods of interesting that man unless he happen to be in love with somebody else. And Nina had taken her chances that the picture of Alixe was already too unimportant for the ceremony of incineration. Besides, what she had ventured to say to him was her belief. The child appeared to be utterly absorbed in her increasing

intimacy with Selwyn. Love was not there. stood that. But its germ was still dormant, but bedded deliciously in congenial soil—the living germ in all its latent promise, ready to swell with

with the first quickenis