

beard the Hydra in its den, be its heads ever so many. He would win his lady-love or perish!

By this time he was half-way home. The market traffic on the road had ceased, the moon had not yet risen, the night lay quiet about him. Presently as he crossed a wet, rushy flat, one of the loneliest parts of the way, he saw the lights of a vehicle coming towards him. The road at that point had not been long enclosed, and a broad strip of common still survived on either hand, so that moving on this his horse's hoofs made no sound save a soft plop-plop where the ground was wettest. He could hear, therefore, while still afar off, the tramp of a pair of horses driven at a trot, and it occurred to him that this might be the Squire returning late. If he could have avoided the meeting he would have done so, though it was unlikely that the Squire would recognise him in the dark. But to turn aside would be foolish. 'Hang me if I am going to be afraid of him!' he thought. And he touched up his horse with his heel.

Then an odd thing happened. While the carriage was still fifty yards from him, one of the lights went out. His eyes missed it, but his brain had barely taken in the fact when the second vanished also, as if the vehicle had sunk into the ground. At the same moment a cry reached his ears, followed by a clatter of hoofs on the road as if the horses were being sharply pulled up.

Clement took his horse by the head and bent forward, striving to make out what was passing. A dull sound, as of a heavy body striking the road reached him, followed by a silence that seemed ominous. Even the wind appeared to have hushed its whisper through the rushes.

'Hallo!' he shouted. 'What is it? Is anything the matter?' He urged his horse forward.

His cry was lost in the crack of a whip, he heard the horses break away, and without further warning they came down upon him at a gallop, the carriage bounding wildly behind them. He had just time to thrust his nag to the side, and they were on him and past him, and whirling down the road – a mere shadow, but as perilous and almost as noisy as a thunderbolt. There was no doubt now that an accident had happened, but before he could give help he had to master his horse, which had wheeled about; and so a few seconds elapsed before he reached the scene – reached it with his heart in his mouth, for who could say with what emergency he might not have to deal?

Certainly with a tragedy, for the first thing that he made out was the form of a man stooping over another who lay in the road. Clement drew a breath of relief as he slipped from his saddle – he would not have to meet the crisis alone. But as his foot touched the ground, he saw the stooping man raise his hand with something in it, and he knew instinctively that it was raised not to help but to strike.

He shouted, and the blow hung in the air. The man, taken by surprise, straightened himself and turned. He saw Clement at his elbow. He hesitated, then, with an oath, he aimed his blow at the newcomer.

Clement parried it, rather by instinct than with intention, and so weakly, that the other's weapon beat down his guard and cut his cheekbone. He staggered back and the villain raised his cudgel again. Had the second blow fallen where it was aimed, it would have finished the business. But Clement, aware now that he fought for his life, sprang within the other's guard, and before the cudgel alighted, gripped him by the neckcloth. The man gave ground, tripped backwards over the body that lay behind him, and in a twinkling the two were rolling together on the road, Clement striving to beat in the ruffian's face with the butt-end of his whip, while the man tried vainly to shorten his weapon and use it to purpose.

It was a desperate struggle, in the mire, in the darkness – a struggle for life carried on in a silence that was broken only by the combatants' breathing and a rare oath. Twice each rolled over the other, and once Clement, having the upper hand, became aware that the fight had its spectator. He had a glimpse of a ghastly face, one side of which had been mangled by a murderous blow, a face that glared at them with its remaining eye. He guessed that the man lying in the road had raised himself on an elbow, and he heard a gasping 'At him, lad! Well done, lad!' then in a turn of the struggle he lost the vision. His opponent had him by the throat, he was undermost again – and desperate. His one thought now was to kill – to kill the brute-beast whose teeth threatened his cheek, whose hot breath burned his face, whose hands gripped his throat. He struck again and again, and eventually, supple and young, and perhaps the stronger, he freed himself and staggered to his feet, raising his whip to strike.

But the same thing happened to him which had happened to his assailant. As he stepped back to give power to the blow, he fell over the third man. He came down heavily, and for a moment he was at the other's mercy. Fortunately the rascal's courage was at an end. He got to his feet,

but instead of pursuing his advantage, he snatched up something that lay on the ground, and sped away down the road, as quickly as his legs could carry him.

Clement recovered his feet, but more slowly, for the fall had shaken him. Still, his desire for vengeance was hot, and he set off in pursuit. The man had a good start, however, and presently, leaving the road and leaping the ditch, made off across the open common. To follow farther promised little, for in a few seconds his figure, already shadowy, melted into the darkness of the fields. Clement gave up the chase, and turned back, panting and out of breath.

He did not feel his wound, much less did he feel the misgivings which had beset him when he came upon the scene. Instead, he experienced a new and thrilling elation. He had measured his strength against an enemy, he had faced death in fight, he felt himself equal to any and every event. Even when, stooping over the prostrate figure, he saw the bleeding face turned up to the sky it did not daunt him, nor the darkness, nor the loneliness. The injured man seemed to be aware of his presence for he made an attempt to rise; but he failed, and would have fallen back on the road if Clement, dropping on one knee, had not sustained his head on the other. It was the Squire. So much he saw; but it was a Squire past not only scolding but speech, whom he held in his arms. To all Clement's questions he made no answer. It was much if he still breathed.

Clement glanced about him, and his confidence began to leave him. What was he to do? He could not go for help, leaving the old man lying in the road; yet it was impossible to do much in the dark, either to ascertain the extent of the Squire's hurt, or to use means to stanch it. The moon had not yet risen, the plain stretched black about them, no sound except the melancholy whisper of the wind in the rushes came to his ear. There was no house near and it was growing late. No one might pass for hours.

Fortunately when he reached this stage he remembered that he had his tinder box and matches in his pocket, and he fumbled for them and got them out with his disengaged hand. But to strike a light and catch it in the huddled posture in which he knelt was difficult, and it was only after a score of attempts that the match caught the flame. Even so, the light it gave was faint, but it revealed the Squire's face, and Clement saw, with a shudder, that the left eye and temple were terribly battered. But he saw, too, that the old man was conscious, for he uttered a groan, and peered with

his uninjured eye at the face that bent over him. 'Good lad!' he muttered, 'good lad!' and he added broken words which conveyed to Clement's mind that it was his man who had attacked him. Then – his face was so turned that it was within a few inches of Clement's shoulder – 'You're bloody, lad,' he muttered. 'He's spoiled your coat, the d—d rascal!'

With that he seemed to slip back into unconsciousness and the light went out. It left Clement in a strait to know what he ought to do, or rather what he could do. Help he must get, if he would save the Squire's life, but his horse was gone, and to walk away for help, leaving the old man lying in the mud of the way seemed inhuman. He must at least carry him to the side of the road.

The task was no light one, for the Squire was tall, though not stout; and before Clement stooped to it he cast a last look round. But silence still wrapped all, and he was gathering his strength to lift the dead weight, when a sound caught his ear, and he raised himself. A moment, and he caught the far-off beat of hoofs on the turf. Someone was coming, approaching him from the direction of Aldersbury. He shouted, shouted his loudest and waited. Yes, he was not mistaken. The soft plop-plop of hoofs grew louder, two forms loomed out of the darkness, a horse shied, a man swore.

'Here!' Clement cried. 'Here! Take care! There's a man in the road.'

'Where?' Then, 'Confound you, you nearly had me down! Are you hurt?'

'No, but—'

'I've got your horse. I met him a couple of miles this side of the town. What has—'

Clement broke in. 'There's bad work here!' he cried, his voice shaky. Now that help was at hand and the peril was over, he began to feel what he had gone through. 'For God's sake get down and help me. Your uncle's man has robbed him and, I fear, murdered him.'

'The Squire?'

'Yes, yes. He's lying here, half dead. We must get him to the side of the road at once.'

Arthur slipped from his saddle, and holding the reins of the two horses, approached the group as nearly as the frightened beasts would let him. 'Quiet, fools!' he cried angrily. And then, 'Good heavens!' in a whisper, as he peered awe-stricken at the injured man. 'Is he dead?'

'No, but he's terribly mauled. And we must get help. Help, man, and

quickly, if it is to be of any use. Shall I go?’

‘No, no, I’ll go,’ Arthur answered, recoiling. What he had seen had given him no desire to take Clement’s place. ‘Garthmyle is the nearer, and I shall not be long. I’ll tie up your horse – that’ll be best.’

There was an old thorn-tree standing solitary in the waste not many yards away: a tree destined to be pointed out for years to come as marking the spot where the old Squire was robbed. Arthur tied Clement’s horse to this, then together they lifted the old man and carried him to the side of the road. The moment that this was done, Arthur sprang on his horse and started off. ‘Back soon,’ he shouted.

Clement had not seen his way to object, but it was with a heavy heart that he resigned himself to another period of painful waiting. He was cold, his face smarted, and at any moment the old man might die on his hands. Meantime he could do nothing but wait. Or yes, he could do something; chilled as he was, he took off his coat, and rolling it up, he slipped it under the insensible head.

Little had he thought that morning that he would ever pity the Squire. But he did. The man who had driven away from him, hard, aggressive, indomitable, asking no man’s help and meeting all men’s eyes with the gaze of a master, now lay at his feet, crushed and broken; lay with his head on the coat of the man he had despised, dependent on him for the poor service that still might avail him. Clement felt the pathos of it, and the pity. And his heart was sore for Josina. How would she meet, how bear the shock that a short hour must inflict on her?

He was thinking of her, when, long before he had dared to expect relief, he heard a sound that resolved itself into the rattle of wheels. Yes, there was a carriage coming along the road.

Arthur had been fortunate. He had come upon the Squire’s horses, which had been brought to a stand with the near wheels of the curricule wedged in the ditch. He had found them greedily feeding, and he had let his own nag go, and had captured the runaways. He had drawn the carriage out of the ditch, and here he was.

‘Thank God!’ Clement cried. ‘I think that he is still alive.’

‘And we’ve got to lift him in,’ said Arthur, more practical. ‘He’s a big weight.’

It was not an easy task. But they tied up the horses to the thorn-tree, and lifting the old man between them, they carried him with what care

they might to the carriage, raised him, heavy and helpless as he was, to the step, and then, while one maintained him there, the other climbed in and lifted him to the front seat. Clement got up behind and supported his shoulders and head, while Arthur, first tying the saddle-horse behind the carriage, released the pair, and with the reins in his hands scrambled to his place.

The thing was done and cleverly done, and they set off. But they dared not travel at more than a walk, and never had the three miles to Garthmyle seemed so long or so tedious.

They were both anxious and both excited. But while in Clement's mind pity, a sense of the tragedy before him, and thought for Josina contended with an honest pride in what he had done, the other, as they drove along, was already calculating chances and busy with contingencies. The Squire's death – if the Squire died – would work a great change, an immense change. Things which had yesterday been too doubtful and too distant to deserve much thought would be within reach, would be his for the asking. And he was the more inclined to consider this because Betty – dear little creature as she was – had shown a spirit that day that was not to his liking. Whereas Josina, mild and docile – it might be that after all she would suit him better. And Garth – Garth with its wide acres and its rich rent-roll would be hers; Garth that would give any man a position to be envied. Its charms, while uncertain and dependent on the whim and caprice of an arbitrary old man, had not fixed him, for to attain to them he must give up other things, equally to his mind. But now the case was or might be altered. He must wait and watch events, and keep an open mind. If the Squire died—

A word or two passed between the couple, but for the most part they were silent. Once and again the Squire moaned, and proved that he still lived. At last, where the road to Garth branched off, at the entrance to the village, they saw a light in front, and old Fewtrell carrying a lanthorn met them. The Squire's absence had alarmed the house, and he had come thus far in quest of news.

'Oh, Lord, ha' mercy! Lord, ha' mercy!' the old fellow quavered as he lifted his lanthorn and the light disclosed the group in the carriage, and his master's huddled form and ghastly visage. 'Miss Jos said 'twas so! Said as summat had happened him! Beside herself, she be! She've been down at the gate this half-hour waiting on him!'

'Don't let her see him,' Clement cried. 'Go, man, and send her back.'

But, 'That's no good,' Arthur objected, with more sense but less feeling. 'She must see him. This is women's work, we can do nothing. Let Fewtrell take your place and do you go for the doctor. You know where he lives, and you'll go twice as quick as he will, and there's no more that you can do here. Take your horse.'

Clement was unwilling to go, unwilling to have no further part in the matter. But he could not refuse. Things were as they were; in spite of all that he had done and suffered, he had no place there, no standing in the house, no right beside his mistress or call to think for her. He was a stranger, an outsider, and when he had fetched the doctor, there would, as Arthur had said, be nothing more that he could do.

Nothing more, though as he rode over the bridge and trotted through the village his heart was bursting with pity for her whom he could not comfort, could not see; from whose side in her troubles and her self-arrangement – for he knew that she would reproach herself – he must be banished. It was hard.