

difficult matter, owing to the showy suit worn by the bookmaker.

So presently Mr. Tidmarsh, who had lighted his cigar and seated himself in the shop to await developments, had the charge of seeing his antagonist slowly repass and he was not at all sure that the inspector's sharp eyes had not caught sight of him in the dark interior. After that it became a battle of impatience, Croal patrolling the Arcade, and Tidmarsh smoking cigar after cigar while maturing a fresh plan.

He hit on one at last, and none too soon, if he was to catch the train to Metcham he had decided on—the 6.45 from Victoria. The afternoon had slipped away apace in all these dodgings to and fro, and it was already past six. His move was also expedited by the fact that the tobacconist had begun to eye him askance, despite his profuse purchases.

He rose and walked from the shop, and knew long before he was out of the Arcade that Croal was close on his tracks. Disregarding him entirely, he hailed a cab in Piccadilly, and bade the man take him to Victoria Station. There he swung into the first-class booking office and asked for a Pullman car return for Brighton. The express was drawn up at the main-line departure platform, and Mr Tidmarsh ostentatiously seated himself in the drawing-room car.

The third-class carriages were in front of the train, and a minute later he saw Croal go by the car towards them. Once again he was trading on the unfortunate detective's make-up, for he told himself with much satisfaction that his pursuer's present style was hardly "classy" enough for the Pullman. And this time his simple-hearted cunning was crowned with success.

The whistle sounded, the train began to move, but not till it was well in motion did he step from the platform of the car on to the platform of the terminus and wave a parting hand to the fast receding face of Mr Croal, who was leaning out of one of the third-class carriages, peering back.

"Yah! What price soft-roed 'uns?" resounded the bookmaker's jubilant shout.

Croal tore frantically at the door-handle of his compartment, but the train had gathered too much way for a safe descent, and those within restrained him from making the attempt. With a sigh of relief Tidmarsh ran round and jumped into the suburban train, which started almost as he sank into his seat.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

"VENGEANCE IS MINE."

That night, as the lengthening shadows grew to dusk, Mr Tidmarsh found himself in a maze of country lanes in the neighbourhood of Beddington and Canshalton. He had not lost himself by any means. Skinner's directions had been far too explicit for that. But he was cking out the remaining daylight by prowling in ever-narrowing circles towards his prey.

Suddenly, as he was traversing a cross-road that ran over a low hill, he came upon a labourer's cottage nesting just under the brow. Adjoining the cottage was a strip of garden-ground separated from the road by a thick hedge and running some fifty yards down the hill. Walking on the soft turf at the roadside his footsteps made no noise, and he was passing the garden when he heard voices on the other side of the hedge. One of them seemed strangely familiar.

"Don't ask questions, old man, and you won't be told any lies. You've got a quid for allowing me to use your garden. What more do you want?"

Yes, there could be no doubt about it, Mr Tidmarsh told himself. The speaker was Mr Tannadycce's groom-coachman—his informant of the previous night. There was no mistaking Skinner's level tones, and he crept closer to the hedge to listen.

"Dunno as iver I've seen fireworks since forty years ago at the Christian Pallidge, when I were a boy," after a pause came the tones of an unmistakable rustic.

"Well, you'll see one in a few minutes," returned Skinner shortly.

"The stick won't drop in the thatch of my cot, will 'e?" the anxious proprietor inquired next.

"Hanged if they ain't firing a rocket," muttered Tidmarsh, and suspicious of everything that might affect his purpose, he found a thin spot in the hedge and

peered through. His surmise proved correct. It was nearly dark, but he could just discern Skinner engaged in adjusting a big conical rocket on a hurdle, while the old man in a smock frock hovered around.

"It's time now, I think; give us the matches, gaffer," Skinner was heard to say.

A moment after the match flared up, and the bookmaker saw, too late to stop him, that the groom's inexperience in pyrotechny had led him to the brink of disaster. Instead of applying a light to the rocket from a distance by means of a long stick, as a piece of such size demanded, he held the match directly to it. The tremendous rush of fire from the tube as it shot upwards struck him full in the wrist, so that the roar of the ascending rocket was mingled with his scream of agony as he fell writhing to the ground.

"Oh, heavens!" he cried, wild with pain. "Oh, heavens! But this is retribution. Bessie Beckford's murderer is to die to-night, and I, who aided him in the mock marriage, have to suffer torments."

Mr Tidmarsh, whose humanity had prompted him to run through the garden gate to proffer assistance, paused thunderstruck, as he stooped over the injured man.

"What do you mean by that?" he said. But Skinner, in his anguish, could only groan and mumble inarticulately. "I was the registrar—the sham registrar—master's orders."

"You don't take back what you said last night? Lord Hooligan was the man?" asked Tidmarsh, bending low.

"That is true enough, but best leave him alone, Mr Tidmarsh, and inform Croal. I will atone all in my power. This is a plot of Tannadycce to keep himself clear of the business," the scorching wretch murmured, and put an end to further questions by quietly fainting.

Some relatives, male and female, of the old rustic had come into the garden, so Mr Tidmarsh was not called upon to remain.

"Best send for a doctor," he told them, and went out into the lane, puzzled but in no way turned from his purpose. If he could get his hand on Hooligan's throat it was no matter to him whether he was playing Tannadycce's game or not. Whatever the moneylender's guilt might be, he had not actually murdered his sister, and he could get square on him after he had settled with the prime culprit.

He was anxious now to reach the Rook's Nest with the least possible delay, for he could not fathom the deep waters in which he was plunged. The rocket might be a warning for all he knew. He suspected everything and believed nothing—after Skinner's confession.

"That cursed Jew, Tannadycce, goes and puts up the job and then betrays his pal. Hanged if I can make head or tail of it—except that I've got to even the book with his lordship to-night," he growled, as he passed through the Rook's Nest gates.

A moment later he stepped from the drive into the bushes, as a brougham, rapidly driven, swung by and out into the road.

"Them's the bruisers," he reflected as he resumed his course.

At the bend in the drive he got his first view of the house, of which, in the gleaming, only the skeleton outline and the lighted dining-room windows were visible. He could see a man sitting at one of the windows, and he clenched his teeth as he told himself that it must be his enemy. The distance was too great for recognition.

Mr Tidmarsh had brought no weapon with him. He had thoughts of arming himself, but on reflection had decided that that sort of thing was "unEnglish." Above all, the burly bookmaker prided himself on being a Briton. No; he had learned to rely on his fists as a lad, and his fists should do the business. If Hooligan could meet him at the game he would go under with the best grace he could, but he trusted in a clean cause to give him the victory, and then God help his adversary. It would be a fight to a finish, but not under Queensberry rules. So sure as he got in a knock-out, so sure would his fingers complete the job—by squeezing my lord's life out.

His heart beating with fierce joy, he stole towards the house, keeping in the shelter of the shrubbery. As he neared his goal the objects in the dining-room grew clearer. He noted the legs

of the solitary occupant protruding from the French window; he made out the table with the lamp and the decanter; he could almost recognise the flushed face of the notorious peer.

He saw his intended victim suddenly rise, and half turn to the table and then he saw no more. For with the rapidity of a transformation scene the whole vision was blotted out; the window and the room behind it were plunged in darkness black as the pit.

The black gloom that had so unaccountably enveloped the dining-room where Lord Hooligan was seated was not of more than two seconds' duration. It was succeeded by a flash of dazzling light as startling by its suddenness as had been the swift swoop of darkness.

Mr Tidmarsh, who had halted in amusezement, began to move forward again, but he had not moved many steps when he perceived that a great change had taken place in the scene at the window. The man in the chair was no longer visible, nor, indeed, were any of the objects previously observed. The first clear flash had given place to a vibrating dancing mass of blurred light that obscured rather than illuminated.

And then a scream as of a lost soul pierced the stillness of the summer night, and volumes of smoke rolling from the window proclaimed the horrid truth. The room was on fire, and its occupant was overcome by the flames.

For one brief moment the bookmaker stopped again—from sheer fright of the supernatural. It was as though for the second time that night an unseen hand had intervened to wreak the vengeance he sought, and again by the dread agency of fire. But, mastering the feeling, he ran on, remembering that if Skinner's tale were true Nancy Beauchamp also must be in the burning house.

The bookmaker's vast bulk was not conducive to fleetness, and long before he neared the now blazing window he saw that the fire had got a firm hold on the room. At the same time he became conscious of running footsteps behind him—footsteps far speedier than his own. A phantom form rushed past without a word, and was already busy at the window when at last he panted up to the house.

Gruesomely busy was that stranger who had passed him in the drive. He had just seized a pair of boots that stuck out of the window, and by them had pulled from the raging furnace within the charred and smouldering body of a man. The blistering features of the corpse were only recognised by the savage scowl as those of Lord Hooligan.

Then the stranger looked up at Tidmarsh, who saw that he was no stranger at all, but Inspector Croal, still in the guise of a fish-hawker. The detective gave a rueful little laugh.

"Well, we've had a good race, Mr Tidmarsh, but neither of us is to pass for winning-post, it seems," said he. "There lies our man, stone dead, and safe from both of us."

Mr Tidmarsh, trembling like an aspen, peered into the blazing room. "He must have upset the table with the lamp, and the lamp burst," he faltered.

"That was it, undoubtedly. In fact, I saw it as I was hurrying to catch you up to save you from yourself," replied Croal gravely.

"He was drunk, most likely," said Tidmarsh.

"Aye, made so on purpose, so that you should have an easy job of it," was the detective's comment. And then, after dragging the smoking body further from the window, he exclaimed suddenly—

"Curious that he should have been here all alone; yet if anyone else had been in the house they'd have shown up before now. You're better posted about that than I am, I expect?"

"Lor' lumme, but I'm forgetting," said Mr Tidmarsh, half dazed. "There was the gal that lodged at Brenner's, in Beaker-street—her from the tipster's in Red Lion Court—along with him here, so I was told."

"Then, by heaven! she must be locked in somewhere," cried Croal. "We can't get in this way through the fire. Let's try the doors and search for the girl, for the place is well alight and the roof will be down inside half an hour."

(To be continued.)

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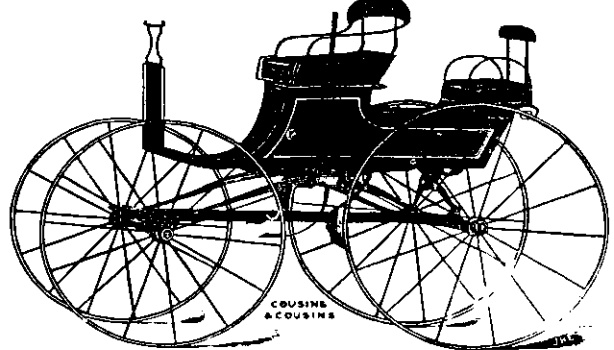
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