

"want to sup and drink, for I am both hungry and thirsty. Afterwards you shall fill me to sleep with your sweet music."

"Oh, I have prepared such sweet music to-night," she said, looking into my face with her bright eyes. "But you will go upstairs and get tidy before dinner, won't you, Harry?"

"I promised, and she left me at once, carrying the baby herself up the wide stairs. I watched her for a minute as I stood in the centre-hall. She turned at a corner of the spacious staircase, waved her hand to me, kissed the babe and was then lost to sight.

"I don't know what impelled me to do as I did then, but instead of following her advice and going up to my dressing room to change, as was my custom, into full evening dress, I went into a sort of morning room, where I kept my whips, pipes, guns, etc. There was a window here which looked right out on the carriage drive. I stood at it and watched the young moon coming up over the hill. It was the veriest crescent moon, and I was glad to observe, being in spite of myself, somewhat superstitious, that I saw it through the open window, and without the intervention of glass between it and me. I had just noticed it, and was about to go upstairs when to my amazement I saw my groom, Amos, coming quickly round the avenue leading my favourite mare, Starlight, saddled and bridled. I had been riding a stout cob, Rufus, all day. He brought her to the front door, where he waited, looked round him eagerly, caught sight of me, and called out—

"Here she is, sir. I got her ready as fast as possible."

"I went out to him in some amazement.

"What in the world do you mean?" I said. "I don't want Starlight now. Take her back again."

"But excuse me, sir, you told me to get her ready as fast as ever I could. You said you wanted to be off, and you hadn't a moment to lose."

"My first inclination was to let out a torrent of abuse at the lad, but when I looked into his face, all wish to speak left me. I felt the strangest sensation that could ever be roused to anybody, and that was a mad desire to find myself on Starlight's back. There she stood, curving her graceful neck, and looking at me with her bright eyes. Get on her I must, and get on her also as quickly as I possibly could. Somehow, I felt that it was not only necessary to ride her, but that it was necessary to ride her quickly, to go as fast as ever I could, as fast as the mare's fleet feet could take me, I knew not whither.

"All thought of Ursula and her disappointment and amazement when she found me not coming into supper, faded from my mind. I said, after a brief moment's pause—

"That's all right, then, Amos. You have been quick," and I am off."

"I sprang on the mare's back, and the sound of her hoofs thundering up the avenue as fast as ever I could compel her to go, must have been borne up to Ursula as she laid her babe to rest.

"I must reach the toll-gate, whatever happens," I thought, and I urged my willing steed with both spur and whip. But she did not need any entreaties of mine to go fast. Never before had she flown at such a rate. But it seemed to me, in some unaccountable way, that minutes were dragging, and that we could never reach our destination in time. All the same I did not know what that destination was, and I had not the faintest idea why I was on Starlight's back; why I had gone away without saying a single word to my wife; why I, a tired man, weary to death with a long day's work, should be suddenly galloping over the roads as fast as ever the feet of my good mare could convey me. I kept on repeating to myself—

"This is absolute folly! But I will ride as far as the toll-gate. The toll-gate, of course, will be shut. The toll-keeper, I know, goes to bed soon after eight o'clock, and will be snoring lustily. I won't wake him, poor chap, I will just go as far as the toll-gate and the unaccountable sensation which is at my heart, and which is driving me there will have passed by then, and I will go home. Yes, when I reach the toll-gate I will return and Starlight will be all the better for her gallop in the moonlight."

"But there was no moonlight. The

young crescent moon was already hidden behind banks of clouds which were gathered up in every direction. Long as the days now were, it was past ten o'clock, and for a midsummer's night really dark. The wind, too was sighing amongst the trees. There had been a long season of drought, and little eddies of dust kicked up by my mare's hoofs, were blown disagreeably into my eyes. Still he thundered on and on.

"When we got to the toll-gate we will go back," I kept repeating and repeating. "But when we did reach the gate, what was my amazement to see it wide open, and old Jakes, the toll-keeper was standing at one side, his wife and little son having placed themselves just behind him. The moment he saw me approaching, he took off his moleskin cap, waved it three or four times in the air, and shouted in a voice of great excitement:

"Here you are, Squire! I kept the gate open, for I knew you would be coming. You go through at once, Squire, and don't wait to pay the toll until you are returning; and ride for your life, air; ride for your life! And God bless you sir! God bless you!"

"His words were utterly amazing, and the frantic gestures of excitement from his wife and son were only matched by his own. Starlight thundered through the open gate-way and on up the dusty road, and I felt my heart beating in the queerest state of ungovernable amazement. The frantic haste I had felt the very moment I had seen my mare saddled and bridled and standing waiting for me outside my own front door, was nothing to what now caused my heart to beat as though it must burst. Yes, there was no doubt about it; whatever the consequence, I must go forward and as rapidly as it was in the power of man and beast to go.

"Presently we found ourselves in the open country, and a very barren piece of country it was. It was a road stretching across a great extent of heather and moorland, and not a living soul in sight. There were mile stones here and there to mark the way, and there was an old gibbet on which three robbers had hung not so many years ago, and there was a blasted oak tree which the lightning had seared. All these objects stood out black and gaunt in the semi-darkness of that summer's night, and still Starlight and I kept the road, rushing on and on, and on. Starlight good horse, being quite willing to go anywhere, in any direction where I bade her go, and I, myself, in a state of absolute astonishment, not having the faintest idea what I was doing, or where I was being driven, for it came over me, as I rushed along that windy desolate track and dreary road, that something, superhuman, unaccountable, was directing my way, and that I was compelled to go I did not know where, and to do I did not know what.

But by and by, as I rode, a sort of reaction took possession of me. The desire to go on and meet something unaccountable and unknown became fainter, the desire to return to my wife and child became more dominant. It is true, the toll-gate had not stopped me, for it was open, and I had rushed through as though propelled by a mighty power. But by and by there would be the ferry. The ferryman with his boat would not be in readiness at this hour of the summer's night. I knew quite well the hours that the old ferryman kept. He generally put up his boat, and retired to his cottage near by soon after nine o'clock. It was not far from eleven o'clock now. He would be in bed and asleep, having truly earned his night's repose.

"I will not wake him," I said to myself. "I will go as far as the ferry, and if he is not there, I will return. There is no manner of use in taking this mad ride for ever. If the ferryman is not waiting, and of course he will not be waiting for me, Starlight and I will return home quietly. We will go back over the miles of road, and forget this night, and what impelled us almost to risk our lives in our speed to get somewhere, and to do something unknown. Yes, it will be at the ferry that I shall stop. The ferry will put an end to this extraordinary adventure."

"I had to ride several miles yet, to reach it, but by and by I saw the bend in the river, which very soon afterwards opened out into a landlocked harbour, and further on into another harbour, and then once more into the

restless main of the open sea. The clouds broke now and then overhead, and I could observe the gleaming of the water. Starlight and I could not swim across. The ferry would be our halting place. Afterwards we would quietly return.

"But as we approached the ferry, what was my amazement to see that the boat was still rocking on the water, and that the ferryman, a stalwart person, with long gray hair, and an unkempt beard, was standing up in the boat, swaying it slightly from side to side. He was looking up the road down which I was rushing, and when he saw me, he did exactly what the toll-keeper had done. He took off his tattered cap and waved it and shouted aloud in the still night air:

"I knew you were coming, Squire Chalmers, and I kept the boat waiting for you, sir. There isn't a minute to lose. In you get, sir, in you get! and I'll ferry you across in a twinkling! For the Lord's sake don't delay, sir! Get in, get in! I knew well you were coming, and the wife could not get me indoors, try as she would; and neither bite nor sup have I tasted, for the thought of you, and the need that was bringing you. Here's a place for the horse, sir. Here you sit. Get in, get in, Squire! I'll soon have you ferried across the river."

"Without a word I dismounted; without even the ghost of a remonstrance, I led my horse into the old ferry boat, the ferryman took the oars and I sat quiet, and dumb, in the midst of the boat with the strangest fear at my heart.

"Jenkins on that night seemed to have the strength of ten men, so lustily did he ply the oars, and so rapidly did he propel the boat across the stream.

"On the opposite side several men had collected, and when we neared the shores one of them shouted:

"Faster, faster, Jenkins! It's a case of life and death, you know. That's right, Squire, we knew you'd come."

"For the Lord's sake tell me what is the matter," I said to the men as I sprang on shore and helped Starlight to do likewise.

"But there was not a word from anyone. The men looked at me with that same strange fear in their eyes which I had already seen in the face of Jenkins. It communicated itself to me. I had only one desire in life, and that was to go forward. I sprang on Starlight, without even waiting to pay the old ferryman, and was soon galloping up the High-street of the little town. In the street itself all was quiet, for people went to bed early in those days, but as I entered what was called Market-street and saw the market at one end and the new Court house at the further end, I perceived that several people were still up, and that the crowd which had assembled round the Court house when I left Chadwick early that evening was still there, only much greater in intensity.

"As soon as I appeared, the people made way for me right and left, and I drew up my panting horse exactly opposite the great row of steps which led into the court. A man came forward at once.

"It's all right, sir, you go straight in, please. I'll take care of the horse."

"I put Starlight's reins into his hand without glancing at his face, and went straight up the steps, the people all watching me as I went. No one spoke a

word, as I disappeared through the thick crowd into the Court house.

"The court where the prisoners were tried was a blaze of light caused by candles and torches stuck against the walls, and the air was breathless and very hot and exhausted. I observed that there were crowds of people, mostly men, but also a few ladies, in the house, and all bending forward as though they were full of the most intense emotion, and there was a great stillness, so still that you might have heard a pin drop.

"As soon as I appeared, everyone in the house looked at me, and there was a sort of murmur, for I came in all untidy and dusty from my ride, my hat in hand, and my hair tossed from my forehead. I carried my whip, and my spurs clanked at my heels. There were all those marks of that haste about me, which had certainly been mine during that marvellous ride. There was something about my appearance which evidently caused the most intense amazement, and then all of a sudden, the usher, who was standing close to the judge, said 'Hush!' and I looked towards the judge, and I saw that he had his black cap lying close to his side; just then a door was opened to his left and the twelve gentlemen of the jury came out, having at that very moment decided on their verdict. They took their places gravely in the jury box, and I, led by no human being, but still overpowered by that Masterful Presence, which had compelled me to come to the court, went up and stood between the judge and the prisoner.

"And then, for the first time, I looked full at the prisoner in the dock, and the face I saw was familiar to me, although just for a moment I could not remember where I had seen it before. Then, all of a sudden, I recalled that face, so gray, so sorrowful, with his eyes full of mute entreaty, that shaggy head, that poor exterior, and as I looked at the man, he looked full at me. I had never before seen such black lustre eyes as his were then, eyes from which all hope and almost intelligence had gone. But as he looked, back into his eyes there leapt a most golden, most rosy, most marvellous hope, and he stretched out his thin hands and he said imploringly—

"You remember me. Once you and I supped together. You remember me. You will prove that I was with you at the hour the murder was committed. You will save my life!"

"He had scarcely uttered the words before he sank in a dead heap on the floor.

"Well, that was about the principal part of the story. Of course I proved an alibi and saved the miserable life of the miserable man. But had I not been, so to speak, taken off my own feet and carried to that Court-house by a Power stronger than my own, and by a Will greater than my own, the man would have been hanged by the neck, for the jury, as I entered the house, were just coming out with the verdict of 'Guilty.'

"I cannot explain anything. What impelled my groom, what impelled myself, what impelled the man at the toll-gate, what impelled the ferryman, all to conduct a witness to that court-house to save an innocent man, lies amongst those inscrutable mysteries which another world will reveal."

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