

The Stroke of Midnight

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Illustrations

Wild rush

Stop!

Salute

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The battle trod to and fro in the darkness and the whirling snow; tiny blue flames, nearly smothered by the night and the melting flakes, shot up from the half burned houses, flickered awhile and then went out, to be succeeded by others as feeble; rifle shots rattled in irregular volleys, and the smoke from the gun muzzles increased the obscurity which was scarcely broken by the flashes from the weapons and the faint light of the smoldering timbers.

The wind with an edge of ice whirled here and there and impartially drove gusts of snow into the faces of the combatants, but could not dim their rage. Passion and courage were equal in each, and though the main battle had passed on their own little corner of the struggle was as important to them as the fate of great armies, and neither would yield the ground which had already become where they fought a slippery mire of red mud and snow.

Fleming, the First Lieutenant, was shouting to his men and gesticulating with his sword, broken at the point by a rifle ball, though he had never noticed it. The big flakes struck in his eyes and blinded him at times, but he fought on, encouraging his soldiers, struggling through the mire, and watching the combat as best he could by the feeble light of the burned buildings. The difficulties of the battlefield, the snow, the darkness, the fierce resistance of the enemy, his inability to drive them back, filled him with the unreasonable rage of youth. A man who despised oaths he began to use them with rapidity and unctiousness and was unconscious of doing so. But his soldiers needed no spur from their commander. Evans, the Second Lieutenant, a year younger than himself—Fleming had reached the honorable age of 20—was by his side, firing with his pistols at the flitting black forms that opposed them, and around the two Lieutenants fought a little band of splashed and begrimed men with a courage and energy equal to those of their leaders.

A wall of a house fell on a bed of live coals and the timbers blazed up with sudden vividness, cutting through the darkness and casting a distorting light over the snow, the ruined village and the fighting men.

Fleming paused for a moment to grasp his field of battle by the new light that had come. The flames magnified some objects, diminished others and made the whole unreal and fantastic. The forms of his enemies wavered as the flames flickered and grew to gigantic size, the bloody spots on the snow spread and united, and the scorched rafters of an abandoned house made an ugly black tracery in the sky. In the momentary stillness that had seized them all Fleming heard the sputtering of the snowflakes as they fell in the flames.

Being able now to see his battlefield, the Lieutenant knew that the little church which stood somewhere to his right was its key, and, shouting to his men to follow, he rushed forward that he might seize it at once and cut off his enemy.

The soldiers fired a volley and dashed toward the church, but the leader of the hostile band was as quick of eye and as ready of action as Fleming, and when the Lieutenant and his men entered one door of the church their antagonists dashed in at the other.

Fleming's wrath flamed to its highest pitch. It seemed a personal injustice to himself that his foe should be so stubborn and so prompt, and his resolve to overcome him grew with his anger. He stopped just outside the door, and his men gathered around him. The room was dim, but Fleming saw the outlines of the

benches and at the far end the pulpit. The building, until then outside the line of battle, seemed to have been untouched. The light from the blazing house flared in at the window and fell across the faces of his enemies, who were entering at the farther door. Neither side gave a thought to the character of the place, but both knew that a fierce struggle was sure to follow for the possession of so strong a fort as a brick building, and they prepared at once for the issue. Three or four of the heavy wooden benches, which served as pews hastily thrown together, made a good breastwork, and standing behind it Fleming and his men waited to see what the enemy would do.

The hostile leader waited, too, perhaps with the same purpose, and again the building was silent. The fallen wall was burning finely and the light from it now shone through the window with a steady radiance and drove the dusk from the room.

Fleming listened intently and heard nothing from without. The battle, save for his own part in it, seemed to have ended or to have gone faraway. The snow, driven against the window panes, gleamed red in the light of the flames, and the wind increased in violence. All this was but the affair of a moment, and then Fleming turned the full attention of eye and ear to his enemy. That the two little bands had been left to fight their battle alone was no inducement to him to draw away from the conflict; rather it increased his desire to triumph, for the field was now wholly his own. Evans whispered to him that they must rush the rebels and Fleming, nodding his head, gave a quick command to the men, who leaped over the hasty fortification that they no longer desired and rushed upon their enemies, the Lieutenants, as always, at their head.

Illustration:
Wild rush

Fleming knew that it was a bold plan allied to rashness, but he trusted that success would come from its suddenness and that he would be upon his antagonists before they could recover from their surprise and shoot down his men. A few swift steps took him across the room. He was filled with a fierce exultation, for he believed that he was about to triumph, but even in the wild rush of the moment and with a mind concentrated upon the impending struggle, he observed the room again, the rows of wooden benches, the aisles, the pulpit at the far end, the stairway that led to the second floor, and the light through the window flaring redly over everything. Then the wild rush carried his little band upon the enemy, and, as he had hoped, the surprise of the sudden movement made its success.

A few scattering shots that went wild were fired at them, and then they were over the benches and in the midst of the triumphant combat. Fleming was burning with the battle fever, and again he began to shout to his men and utter oaths of which he was unconscious, striking with his sword and calling at times upon his antagonists to yield.

He found that he was opposed by soldiers as valiant as his own. Beaten by numbers, those who were not wounded or taken by force refused to surrender, and wheeling about as if by a sign from their leader rushed up the stairway, which

began almost at their feet, and sought refuge and a second defense on the next floor.

Disappointment now mingled with Fleming's anger, but neither emotion caused him to forget for the moment his military prudence. Hastily dispatching a few of his men to keep watch at the windows outside and prevent escape there, he sprang up the stairway with the others in quick pursuit of the fugitives. Rage and excitement blinded him to the danger of shots from above, and Evans, as eager as himself, pressed on by his side, while the men crowded close after, the wooden stairway giving a dull echo under their footsteps.

The light from the flames of the burning village did not reach the second floor, and Fleming stood for a moment or two trying to accustom his eyes to the dusk. As the pupils distended he saw the last of the fugitives disappearing in a small room, and then he heard the slamming of the door and noises which indicated preparations for defense. A little gray haired man in civilian's attire and with a face of fright sprang from a dark corner where he had been crouching and darted to a window, at which he pulled vainly with trembling fingers as if he would open it and spring out.

Fleming looked quickly about that he might seize the salient points of this last battlefield. He paid no attention to the civilian, supposing him to be the sexton or some one else in charge of the building who had hidden there in fright while the fight was going on below. As his men paused with him to await his orders he felt for a sudden moment the solemn stillness of the place and its character, but the silence was quickly interrupted by a beating on the door of the room in which the fugitives had taken refuge, and he knew that they were breaking loopholes for their rifles. At the sound his passion, which had died for an instant, flamed up again, and he hastily drew his men to a far corner where the rifle barrels, even when thrust through the holes in the door, could not secure their range. Then while he whispered with Evans and the two tried to decide what would be best to do in the doubtful situation the curious silence which had in it so much that was solemn and impressive fell again over the place.

The defenders had broken the holes in the door and were motionless and silent, awaiting the advance of their assailants, who still stood in their corner hesitating. Only faint gleams of light came through the panes, but the eyes of the soldiers became accustomed to the dusk. The gray haired little man had ceased his efforts to open the window and stood with his back to it, his face expressing his fright and horror at what had happened and what was about to happen.

Fleming heard the ticking of a clock somewhere over his head, but he did not look up to see. In his indecision his eyes wandered to the civilian, and he was amused at the old man's fright. But, then, he had no business there and must take his chances. The fight could not pause for him. Yet the wrinkled face and the pinched features attracted and held Fleming's eyes, and he wondered in a vague way what the man would do—whether he would crouch again in the corner or make another effort to escape by the window. The man's eyes met his own and stared into them with a gaze that seemed to the young Lieutenant to be full of reproach and upbraiding.

Fleming could not account for the influence of this stranger, and the sudden strength of the gaze that met his own and held him back from his purpose, for the

figure of the old man was not commanding, and his fright was obvious. He was about to order him down the stairs, but at the moment the civilian raised himself up and his eyes grew bolder.

Fleming with the quickness of intuition saw that this old man whom he had despised felt one of those sudden inspirations of courage which sometimes come even to cowards. He saw the expansion of the figure, the brightening of the eye, the look that was prophetic, and again he paused as he was about to give a command.

Illustration:

Stop!

„Stop!“ said the old man in a firm voice, raising his hand and pointing an accusing finger at Fleming.

The Lieutenant hesitated and looked at him in wonder.

„What do you mean?“ he asked.

„Stop, I say!“ repeated the old man.

Fleming laughed and with contempt. He had thrown off the momentary influence of the accusing look, and his mind returned with full force to his original purpose, the destruction of the rebels who had intrenched themselves in the room.

„Out of the way!“ he exclaimed angrily. „We’re going to storm that room in there, and we will not be responsible for stray bullets.“

The old man did not shrink back at the officer’s emphatic command. His eyes were shining with a feverish excitement and his courage seemed to grow as the fever rose.

„Stop, I tell you again!“ he shouted. „This is murder that you and those in that room, too, are bent upon!“

„It is war!“

„It is not war! The battle is over, and you fight here without purpose! What is the possession of this church to either of you? And to fight, too, at such a time!“

Fleming looked scornfully at the old man, who yet held his attention and impressed him.

„At such a time?“ he repeated. „It’s true that it’s night, and the snow is falling, but we’re not parlor soldiers to seek our tents because of a winter night.“

„It’s more than a winter night!“ said the old man sternly, raising his accusing finger and pointing it at Fleming. „Listen!“

The unseen clock overhead began to strike, and Fleming and his men, awed despite themselves by the old man’s manner, counted the strokes under their breath. One, two, three, they counted, and on up to twelve, standing in silence and making no movement, as if some new power possessed them. Nor did any sound come from the room in which their enemies lay, and Fleming believed that they, too, had been listening to the old man’s words. Then he grew angry at himself and sought to shake off the spell.

„Did you hear that?“ asked the old man.

„Yes, I heard it,“ said Fleming, „and I heard nothing but a clock striking midnight.“

„But what a midnight!“ exclaimed the other. „And do you know what morning has begun?“

„How should I know?“ asked Fleming. „How can any man who has been marching and fighting and skirmishing for weeks keep track of time?“

„This is the night of the 24th of December, and it’s Christmas morning now,“ cried the old man, “the night when Christ was born and came into the world to preach forgiveness and to teach men to love one another! I’ve rung that morning in with this bell every year for the last thirty years, and I came here to-night to do it again, though you’ve followed me and fought in the church itself. Stand back, I tell you! You shall not fight here with the bells of Christmas morning ringing in your ears. God would strike you dead for it.“

It seemed to Fleming that the man’s manner now had the dignity and force that we ascribe to the Hebrew prophets of old. His littleness had disappeared, he showed no semblance of fear, and his eyes blazed with the force of the spirit that was in him.

The notes of the bell rose far above the whistle of the wind, and even in the presence of those who carried arms in their hands to kill, told of peace on earth and good will to men. The sanguinary scenes of the night passed out of Fleming’s mind for a moment, and in their place he saw the peaceful Christmas morning of his childhood. Then he looked weakly at Evans, as if he would seek counsel from his second in command.

„Lower your weapons!“ cried the old man, who never ceased his ringing. „I tell you again that God will strike you dead if you fight in His house at such a time. What a sacrilege, and you but boys!“

The fever in Fleming’s veins was dying. He looked at his men and saw that the lust of combat was passing from them. In his ears rang the joyful note of the bell telling him that Christ was born, and had come on earth to teach peace and good will among men. He turned his eyes from his men to those of the sexton, who pulled the rope with regular and rhythmic stroke, and they fell before the gaze of the old man.

„And you propose to fight here!“ flamed out the old man. „You should be down on your knees and thank God that you are alive this Christmas morning. Listen to my bell! It is declaring peace, and no other voice shall be heard in this place.“

The last touch of the battle fever passed from Fleming’s veins, but he looked questioningly at the door behind which his enemies had fortified themselves. The old man’s eyes followed his.

„They, too, shall put down their guns while the Christmas bell is ringing,“ he cried. “Come out! These men give their promise that they will not fire upon you.“

„Yes, we promise,“ said Fleming mechanically, his mind still wandering back with the notes of the bell to other Christmas mornings.

„There is nothing to fight for here, anyway,“ said Evans in a low tone.

„Not now at least,“ replied Fleming in the same tone.

Illustration:

Salute

The door in front of them was opened, and their enemies, gun muzzles down, came slowly out. Fleming and Evans saluted them with military courtesy.

„About face!“ said Fleming to his men.

Then with their Lieutenants at their head the little band marched down the stairway and through the church and out into the snow and past the smoldering embers of the houses to their camp. And above them and around them the clear notes of the bell were proclaiming that Christ was born on earth and peace and good will should reign among men.

