

IN THE TWINKLING OF AN EYE

by

Sydney Watson
(Author of *Mark of the Beast*)

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CHAPTER THREE

FLOTSAM

"ONLY nine hours!"

Tom Hammond laughed amusedly at his own murmured thought. It seemed ridiculous almost to try to believe that only nine hours before he had been a discharged journalist, while now he was at the head of what he knew would be the greatest journalistic venture London - yea, the world - had ever seen.

He had just dined. He felt that he wanted some kind of movement, some distraction, to relieve the tension.

He was in that frame of mind when some kind of adventure was necessary, although he did not tell himself this, being hardly conscious of his own need. He knew that the haunts of his fellows - club, theatre, music hall - would only serve to irritate him. Some instinct turned his feet riverwards.

It was now a quarter past seven o'clock. Night had fallen upon London.

Tom Hammond crossed the great Holborn thoroughfare. The heavier traffic of London's commercial life had almost ceased. The omnibuses going west were filled with theatre goers, and other pleasure-seekers. Hansoms flitted swiftly either way, each holding a man and a woman in evening dress.

Having crossed the roadway, he paused for a moment at the corner of Chancery Lane, and let his eye take in all the scene. And again Le Gallienne came to his mind, and he softly murmured:

"Ah! London! London! our delight,
Great flower that opens but at night,
Great city of the midnight sun,
Whose day begins when day is done.

"Lamp after lamp against the sky
Opens a sudden beaming eye,
Leaping alight on every hand,
The iron lilies of the Strand,

"Like dragonflies the hansoms hover
With jeweled eyes to catch the lover;
The streets are full of lights and loves,
Soft gowns and flutter of soiled doves."

He turned with a faint sigh, and began to pass on down Chancery Lane.

"Oh, London!" he mused, "thy surface may be wonderful and beautiful; but below - what are you below the surface?"

"The human moths about the light
Dash and cling in dazed delight,
And burn and laugh, the world and wife,
For this is London, this is life!

"Upon thy petals butterflies,
But at thy root, some say, there lies
A world of weeping, trodden things,
Poor worms that have not eyes or wings."

He moved onwards in the direction of the Law Courts.

Presently he neared the Waterloo Bridge approach. He had, all unrealized by himself, since he left the restaurant where he had dined, been walking towards the river. A moment or two after, and he was leaning on the parapet of the bridge, looking down into the dark waters. Sluggish, oil-like in appearance, as seen in the dull gleam of the lamps, the river moved seawards. A sudden longing to get out upon those dark waters came to him.

"If only -" he mused. Then, turning briskly, he came face to face with a man in a blue guernsey, who was crossing the bridge. It was the very man of his half-uttered thought. "If only I could run up against Bob Carter!" he had almost said.

"Good evening, Mister Ham'nd." The man in the guernsey saluted with a thick, tar-stained forefinger as he recognized Tom Hammond.

"Good evening, Carter." Hammond laughed as he added, "I was just wishing I could meet you, for I felt I should like to get out on the river."

"I'm jes' going as fur as Lambeff, sir. Ef yer likes ter go wif me, you'll do me proud, sir; yer know that, I knows!"

A few minutes later the two men sat in Carter's boat.

Hammond, in the stern, was steering. The man Carter, on the first thwart, manipulated the oars.

Hammond had known the man about a year. He had done him a kindness that the waterman had never forgotten.

"Aw'd go to ther world's end fur yer, sir," he had often said since.

The man was ordinarily a silent companion, and tonight after a few exchanged words between the pair, he was as silent as usual.

Down the wide, turgid river the boat, propelled by Carter's two oars, shot jerkily, the rise and fall of the glow in the rower's pipe-bowl synchronizing with the lift and dip of the oars.

Hammond enjoyed the silence. There was a weirdness about this night trip on the river that fitted in with his mood. His brain had been considerably overwrought that day. The quiet row was beginning to soothe the overwrought nerves. Where he sat in the stern of the boat, he faced the clock-tower at Westminster. The gleaming windows of the great embankment hotels lay behind him. A myriad of electric lights were on his right hand. The gloom and darkness of the unlighted wharfage on the Surrey side were on his left.

Only by a waterway miracle Carter cleared an anchored barge that, defying the laws of the river, carried no warning light.

"Drat 'em!" growled the man Carter. "They oughter do a stretch in Portlan' or Dartmoor fur breakin' the lor. There's many a 'onest waterman whose boat's foun' bottom-up, or smashed to smithereens, an' whose body's foun', or isn't, jes, as the case may be, all becos' they lazy houn's is too 'idle-boun' to light a lamp, cuss 'em!"

His growl died away in his throat. The glowing fire of his pipe rose and fell quicker than ever, telling of a fierce anger burning within him.

"Ssh!" he hissed. Hammond saw that his face was turned shorewards. He heaved aft towards Hammond, and whispered, "Kin yer see that woman, sir?" He jerked his chin in the direction of a line of moored barges.

Hammond had turned his head, and could plainly discern the form of a woman standing on the edge of the outer barge of the cluster.

The men in the boat sat still, but watchful.

"Do she mean soerside, sir?" whispered Carter.

"Looks like it, sir. Don't make a soun'."

Even as he spoke the woman leaped into the air.

There was a low scream, a splash, a leap of foam flashed dully for one instant, then all was still again.

The waterman plied his oars furiously. Hammond steered for the spot where that foam had splashed. An instant later the boat was over the place where the body had disappeared. Carter lay on his oars, and peered into the darkness on one side. Hammond strained his eye on the other side.

With startling suddenness a hand darted upwards within a foot of where Hammond sat in the stem of the boat. In the same instant the woman's head appeared. Hammond reached out excitedly, and caught the back hair of the woman, twisting his fingers securely into the knot of hair at the back of her head.

Carter shipped his oars, and in two minutes the wretched woman was safe in the boat. Her drenched face gleamed white where they laid her. A low whimpering sob broke from her.

"Turn 'er over on her face a little, sir, while I makes the boat fast fur a minute or two, sir," jerked out the waterman.

"Pore soul ov 'er!" he went on, knotting his painter to a bolt in the stem of a barge. "She 'ave took in a bellyful of Thames water, an' it ain't filtered no sort, that's sartin!"

Hammond had by this time turned the woman over on her face.

Carter came aft bearing a water-beaker in his hands. "I'll lift her legs, sir," he said, and you put this beaker under her, jes' above her knees; that'll 'elp her a bit."

That was done, and almost instantly the woman was very sick.

"In my locker there, sir, I've got a drop o' whisky. I keeps it there fur 'emergencies like this," said Carter.

Hammond moved to allow the man to reach a seat locker in the stem. The next minute, while Hammond supported the woman, the waterman poured a few drops of the spirit down her throat.

She coughed and sputtered, but the draught restored her. She began to cry in a low, whimpering way.

"We must get her ashore, Carter," cried Hammond.

"I'll take the oars, and, as you know the riverside better than I do, just steer into the nearest landing-place you know."

Carter leaped to the bows, cast off the painter, and hurried aft again.

"Jes' 'long yere, sir, there's an old landin' as'll jes' serve us. Wots yer fink ter do wi' the pore soul, sir - not 'and her over to the perlice?"

"No, neither the police nor workhouse, Carter. I wish I could see her face, and see what kind of woman she is."

By way of reply, Carter struck a match, and lit a small bull's-eye lantern. When the wick had caught light, he flashed it on the face of the woman.

Her eyes were closed, her face was deadly pale. Her hair was disheveled. But in the one flashing glance Hammond took at her, he recognized her.

"It's Mrs. Joyce!" he muttered half-aloud and in amazed tones.

"Know 'er, sir?" asked the waterman.

"A little!" he replied "Her husband is a reporter - a drinking scamp."

Carter shut off the light of the bull's-eye, at that moment.

"We're jes' 'ere now, sur, so's best not to be callin' 'tention like wi' a light."

He steered the boat into a kind of narrow alley-way between two crazy old wharves.

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Hammond, rightly gauging the kindly heart of his landlady, had brought the drenched woman in a cab to his lodgings.

She was still in a half-fainting condition when he carried her into the house. In two sentences he explained the situation to the landlady, whose natural kindness and loyalty to her lodger made her willing to aid his purpose of rescue.

"I will carry her up to the bath-room," he said. "Let your girl get a cup of milk heated as hot as can be sipped, while you bath this poor soul quickly in very hot water. Then let her be got to bed, and have some good, nourishing soup ready. She'll probably sleep after that."

And in the morning - well, the events of the morning will take their own shape."

Half-an-hour later, as Hammond took a cup of coffee, he had the satisfaction of knowing that the woman he had saved was in bed, and doing well.

"Poor soul!" he mused. "That brute of a husband has probably driven her to this attempt on her life. I wonder what her history was before she married, for I remember how it struck me, that day when I saw her at the office, that she was evidently a woman of some culture."

It was nearly ten now. He had no desire to go out again. It wanted two hours quite to his usual bed-time. But a strange sense of drowsiness began to steal over him, and he went off to his bed.

"What a day this has been!" he muttered, as he laid his head on the pillow.

~ end of chapter 3 ~

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