

IN THE TWINKLING OF AN EYE

by

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CHAPTER TWO

“THE COURIER”

FOR two hours the three men held close conference together. At the end of that time all the preliminaries of the new venture were settled. Tom Hammond had explained his long-cherished views - of what the ideal daily paper should be. Sir Archibald was delighted with the scheme, and, in closing with Hammond, gave him a perfectly free hand.

"You were on the point of saying something about a striking poster to announce the coming paper, Mr. Hammond," said the old baronet.

"Yes," Tom replied; "I think a great deal may be done by arresting the attention of the people - those in London especially. My idea for a poster is this: the name of the paper is to be 'The - Courier.' Very well, let us have an immense sheet poster, first-class drawing, striking but harmonious coloring, and bold, arrestive title of the paper and announcement of its issue.

Following the title, I would have in the extreme left a massive sign-post, a prominent arm of the structure bearing the legend 'To-morrow.' On the extreme right of the picture I would put another signpost, the arm of which should bear the words 'The Day After To-morrow.' I would have a splendidly-drawn mounted courier, the horse galloping towards the right-hand post, having left 'Tomorrow' well in the rear."

The old baronet exclaimed, "Rush the thing on! Flood the hoardings of London, Edinburgh, Manchester, Liverpool, Birmingham, Cardiff - all the large towns, and the smaller ones as well, if you can get hoardings big enough. Don't study the expense, either in the get-up or in the issue of the picture. Don't let the pill-sellers or cocoa or mustard people beat us."

The old man sprang to his feet and paced the floor, rubbing his hands, crying continually, "Good! Good! We'll wake old England up. We'll - "

"Toddle into lunch," interrupted George Carlyon.

"That's the third summons we've had!"

Tom Hammond sat next to Madge at luncheon, and was charmed with her easy, unconventional manners. But his mind was too full of the new paper, of the great opportunity that had come to him so unexpectedly, to be as wholly absorbed with the charm of her personality as he might otherwise have been.

He did not linger over the luncheon table.

"There are one or two fellows, Sir Archibald," he explained, "whom I should like to secure on my staff at once. I don't want to lose even an hour."

As he bade Madge Finisterre good-bye, he expressed the hope that he might see her again soon, and the girl in reply allowed her eyes unconsciously to express more than her words.

"She is the most charming woman I ever met," he told himself, as he followed Sir Archibald into his room for the final word for which the baronet had asked. George Carlyon had remained behind with Madge.

"It was about the first working expenses I wanted to speak to you, Mr. Hammond," the baronet began. They were seated in the baronet's room.

"I will have fifty thousand pounds - or shall we say a hundred thousand? - deposited, at once, in your name at - what bank?"

"Any good bank you please, Sir Archibald, so long as the particular branch is fairly central."

"Capital and Counties - how will that do?" the baronet asked, adding, "I always bank with them myself."

"That will do, sir."

"How about the Ludgate Hill branch, Mr. Hammond?"

"Could not be better, sir."

"Settled, then, Mr. Hammond!"

There were a few more words exchanged between master and man, and then they parted. As Tom Hammond strode along the Embankment towards Waterloo Bridge, his heart was the heart of a boy again.

"Is life worth living!" he cried inwardly, answering his own question with the rapturous words: "In this hour I know nothing else that earth could give me to make life more joyous!"

People passing him saw his face radiant with a wondrous joy. It's rare to see peace, even, in faces in our great cities. It is rarer still to see joy's gleam. He allowed his glance to flash all around him, as he murmured, "I am glad, too, that I am in London. Who dare say that London is dull, or grim, or sordid? Who was it that wrote, "No man curses the town more heartily than I, but after travelling by mountains, plain, desert, forest, and on the deep sea, one comes back to London and finds it the most wonderful place of them all!"

"Ah! It was Roger Pocock, I believe, wrote that sentiment. Roger Pocock, 'I looks towards yer, sir! Them's my senterments!' "

He laughed low and gleefully at his own merry mood. Then as his eyes took in the river, the moving panorama of the Embankment, and caught the throb of the mighty pulsing of life all about him, Le Gallienne's lines came to him, and, while he moved onward, he murmured:

"London, whose loveliness is everywhere.
London so beautiful at morning light,
One half forgets how fair she is at night.

"London as beautiful at set of sun
As though her beauty had just begun!
London, that mighty sob, that splendid tear,
That jewel hanging in the great world's ear.

"Ah! of your beauty Change no single grace,
My London with your sad mysterious face."

He moved forward in a strange rapture of spirit. He forgot even "beautiful London"; he was momentarily unconscious how he travelled or whither. He might have been blind or deaf for all that he now saw or heard. The drone of a blind beggar's voice reading the Scriptures, however, presently had power to break his trance. He paused a moment before the man.

"This same Jesus," droned the blind man's voice, **"who is taken up from you into heaven, shall so come in like manner as ye have seen Him go."**

Hammond dropped a sixpence into the beggar's box, and moved away, the wonder of the words he had just heard read arresting all his previous thoughts of his glad success.

"Shall so come in like manner!" he murmured. "I wonder what it means?"

The next instant a woman's pitiful voice filled his ear, crying:

"For the love of GOD, good sir, give me the price of a piece of bread."

He turned sharply towards her. Her face was haggard and hunger-filled; her eyes were wells of despair. He slipped his finger and thumb into the fob of his coat. The first coin that came to his touch was a shilling. He dropped it into the emaciated, outstretched palm.

The wretched creature gazed at the coin~ then at him.

Her lips moved, but no words came from them. Her eyes filled with a rush of tears. He passed on. But the incident moved him strangely.

"If CHRIST," he mused, "ever comes back to earth again, surely, surely He will deliver it from such want and misery as that!"

He paused and looked back at the woman. Her face was buried in her hands. Her form was shaking with sobs. Curiosity tempted him to go back.

As he came abreast of her, a child, a girl about nine, barefooted and tired-looking, was saying to the woman, "What's the matter, missis? Wouldn't that swell giv' yer nuffink w'en yer arst 'im?"

"Give me nothing?" The woman glanced down at the child. "Why, he is kinder than Gawd, fur he give me a shilling!"

At this Tom Hammond hurried away.

"Kinder than GOD!" he murmured. "Oh, GOD, that we should have it in our power to buy such happiness for so small a sum!"

"Kinder than GOD" he repeated to himself. He was now mounting the granite steps to the bridge.

"Of course, one knows better; yet how difficult of proof it would become, if one had to explain it to that poor soul, and to the thousands like her in this great city!"

For the first time since leaving Sir Archibald his own joy was forgotten. The awful problem of London's destitution had supplanted London's beauty in his thoughts.

~ end of chapter 2 ~

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