

# THE MARK OF THE BEAST

By

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## CHAPTER TWO

### A "SUPER-MAN"

LONDON was still in its first throes of wonder, speculation, and, in some cases, fearsome dread, at the ever increasing discovery that a number of its citizens had mysteriously disappeared.

"And the most curious part of the whole affair," a prominent London philanthropist had remarked to an informal gathering of the Committee of one of the Great Societies, "is this, that whether we look at the gaps in our own committee, or of any other committee, or of any church - as far as I have been able to gather, the story is the same, the missing people are in almost every case those whom, when they were with us, were least understood by us."

Some such thought had been filling the mind of Ralph Bastin, as he sat in his Editor's chair in the office of the "*Courier*." Allied to this thought there came another - an almost necessary corollary of the first - namely the new atmosphere of evil, of lawlessness, of wantonness that pervaded the city.

With a jerk, his mind darted backward over the years to that remarkable sermon on Judas and the Antichrist.

"It is true, too true," he murmured, " **'the mystery of iniquity'** that has long been working undermining the foundations of all true social and religious safety and solidity, is now to be openly manifested and perfected. The real Christians, the Church of GOD, which is the Bride of CHRIST, has been silently, secretly caught up to her Lord in the air. She was **'the salt of the earth,'** she kept it from the open putrefaction that has already, now, begun to work. Then, too, that wondrous, silent, but mighty influence of restraint upon evil - The Holy Spirit, Himself, has left the earth, and now, what? All restraint gone, the world everywhere open to believe the Antichrist lie, the delusion. The whole tendency of the teaching, from a myriad pulpits, during the last few years, has been to prepare the world to receive the Devil's lie."

For a moment or two he sat in deep thought. Suddenly glancing at the clock, he murmured:

"I wonder what the other papers are saying this evening."

He rang up his messenger boy on his office phone. The lad came promptly. Bastin handed him half-a-crown, saying:

"Get me a copy of the last edition of all the chief evening papers, Charley, and be smart about it, and perhaps you will keep the change for your smartness."

In six minutes the lad was back with a sheaf of papers. Bastin just glanced at them separately, noting the several times of their issue, then with a "Good boy, Charley! Keep the change," he unfolded one of the papers.

The boy stood hesitatingly, a moment, then said: "Beg yer pardin', Mr. Bastin, sir, but wot's yer fink as people's sayin' 'bout the 'Translation o' the Saints,' as it's called?"

"I can't say, I am sure, Charley. The careless, and godless have already said some very foolish things relative to that stupendous event that has just taken place, and I think, for a few days, they are likely to say even more foolish things. What is the special one that you have heard?"

"Why they sez, sir - its in one o' the heving peepers, they sez - that the people wot's missin' hev been carted off in aeroplanes by some o' the other religionists wot wanted to git rid o' them, an' that the crank religiouses is all gone to-"

"Where?" smiled Bastin.

"I don't think anybody knows where, sir!"

"I do, Charley, and many others to-day, who have been left behind from that great Translation know - they have been '**caught up**' into the air where JESUS CHRIST had come from Heaven to summon them to Himself.

"Mr. Hammond is there, Charley, and that sweet little adopted daughter of mine, whom you once asked me whether 'angels could be more beautiful than she was!' "

"Ah, yus, sir, I recollecks, sir, she wur too bootiful fur words, she wur."

There was one moment's pause, then the boy, with a hurried, "it's all dreadful confuzellin," slipped from the room.

Ralph Bastin opened paper after paper, glanced with the swift, comprehensive eye of the practiced journalist at here and there a column or paragraph, and was on the point of tossing the last news-sheet down with the others, on the floor, when his eye caught the words, "Joyce, Journalist."

The paragraph recorded the finding of the body of the drunken scoundrel.

"From the position of the body," the account read, "and from the nature of the wounds, it would almost seem as though some infernal power had hurled him, head on, against the wall of the room. Whether we believe, or disbelieve the statements concerning the taking away, by some mysterious Translation process, of a number of persons from our midst, yet the fact remains that each hour is marked by the finding of some poor dead creature, under circumstances quite as tragically mysterious as this case of Joyce the reporter."

For a time Ralph Bastin sat deep in thought. He had not yet written the article for to-morrow's issue "*From the Prophet's chair.*" He felt his insufficiency, he realized the need of being GOD's true witness in this hour that was ushering in the awful reign of The Antichrist. He did the best thing, he knelt in prayer, crying:

"O GOD, I am so ignorant, teach me, give me Thy wisdom in this momentous hour. If those who cleave to Thee amid this awful time must seal their witness with death, must face martyrdom, then let me be counted worthy to die for Thee. In the old days, before yesterday's great event, all prayer had to be offered to Thee through JESUS CHRIST. I know no other way, please then hear my prayer, and accept it, for JESUS CHRIST's sake. Amen."

Rising from his knees, with a sense of solemn calm pervading all his soul, he presently took his pen and began to write rapidly, his mind seeming, to him, to be consciously under the domination of the divine.

Embodying the various items over which he had so recently mused, as to the awfulness of the development of evil that would increasingly mark the near coming days, now that all restraints were taken away, he went on to show that now that the Devil, who had, for ages, been the Prince of the Power of the air, with all his foul following of demons, had been cast down out of that upper realm, where CHRIST and his translated saints had taken up their abode, the forces of evil upon the earth would be magnified and multiplied a million-fold.

"CHRIST and the Devil," he went on, "never can dwell in the same realm, hence the coming of CHRIST into the air meant the descent to earth, of the Devil and, with him all the invisible hosts of evil. The wildest, weirdest imagination could not conceive all the horrors that must come upon those who presently will refuse to wear the '**Mark of the Beast**' and bow to worship him."

Suddenly, at this point in his writing, a curious sense of some presence, other than his own, came over him, and slowly, almost reluctantly he looked up.

He started visibly, for, seated in the chair on the opposite side of his desk, was a visitor. The man was the most magnificent specimen of the human race he had ever seen, a giant, almost, in stature, handsome to a degree, and with a certain regal air about him.

Bastin had involuntarily leaped to his feet, and now stammered:

"I-er-beg pardon, but I did not hear you come in."

Even as he spoke two things happened. His mind swept backward over the years to the day of that wonderful Judas sermon he had heard, and with this recalled memory there came the recollection of his turning to look into the face of that magnificent looking young man who had been the cynosure of all eyes as he left the church with his mother.

He was conscious also of a strange uncanny sense that this smiling handsome man, with mocking, dancing light in his eyes, was no ordinary man.

In that same instant, too, Ralph Bastin knew who his visitor was, since he had become familiarized by the illustrated papers and magazines, with the features of "*The Genius of the Age*" - as he was often styled - Lucien Apleon.

"My name," said the smiling visitor, "is Lucien Apleon. As editor of a great journal like the '*Courier*,' you know who I am when you know my name, even though we have never met before. You were so busy, so absorbed, when I came in that I did not so much as cough to announce my presence."

Ralph longed to ask him if he came through the door, or how, since he had heard no sound. But he did not put his question, but replied:

"Who has not heard and read of Lucien Apleon, '*The Genius of the Age*,' sage, savant, artist, sculptor, poet, novelist, a giant in intellect, the Napoleon of commercial capacity, the croesus for wealth, and master of all courts and diplomacy. But I had not heard that you were in England, the last news *par'* of you which I read, gave you as at that wonderful city, the New Babylon, more wonderful, I hear, than any of the former cities of its name and site."

Ralph had talked more than he needed to have done, but he wanted time to recover his mental balance, for his nerves had been considerably startled by the suddenness, the uncanniness of his visitor's appearance.

There was a curious quizzical, mocking look in the eyes of Apleon while Ralph was speaking. The latter noted it and had an uncomfortable consciousness that the mocking-eyed visitor was reading him like a book.

"I only landed to-day," replied Apleon. "Steamer?" asked Ralph.

"No, by a new aerial type of my own invention," replied Apleon. "It brought me from Babylon to London in about as many minutes as it would have occupied the best aeronaut, days, by the best machines of a year ago."

He laughed. There was a curious sound in the laugh, it was mocking yet musical, it was eerie yet merry. Involuntarily Ralph thought of Grieg's "*Dance of the Imps*," and Auber's overture "*Le Domino Noir*."

"But I have not yet explained my object in calling upon you," the visitor went on.

"I have, of course, seen this morning's '*Courier*,' and have been intensely interested, and, will you mind, if I say it, amused."

"Amused, Mr. Apleon?" cried Ralph.

"Yes, intensely amused," went on the mocking-eyed visitor. "I do not mean with the issue as regards its general contents, it was to the '*Prophet's Chair*' column that I alluded."

Ralph, regarding him questioningly, inclined his head, without speaking.

"Do you really believe, Mr. Bastin," went on the visitor, "what you have written in that column? Do you really believe that a certain section of Christians, out of every one of the visible Evangelical churches of this land, and elsewhere, have been translated into the air? That the Holy Spirit of the Christian New Testament, the third Person of the Trinity, whom that same New Testament declares was sent to the earth when the Nazarene CHRIST went home to His Father - please, note, Mr. Bastin, that I am using the terms of the orthodox Christian enough I tell you frankly I do not believe a word of the jumble which, for nearly two thousand years, has been accepted as a divinely inspired Revelation to so-called fallen man?"

"Yes," replied Ralph, and his voice rang with a rare assurance, and every line of his face held a wondrous nobility. "Yes, I believe it all. If I had not been a blind, conceited fool of a sinner, a week ago, I should have known that all this, and much more was true, and I should have found my way in penitence and faith to the feet of the Nazarene, of JESUS CHRIST the World's Redeemer, and, finding pardon for my sin, as I should have done, I should have been made one of the Church of GOD, as my friend, and Editor-in-chief, Tom Hammond, had done. And, had I listened to him, I should now have been with those blessed translated ones of whom I have written in that article of which you speak, Mr. Apleon.

"I sat in that chair where you now sit," Ralph went on. "Mr. Hammond, in his eagerness to win me to CHRIST, leant forward over this desk - he was sitting where I am - to lay his hand on my wrist, when, with angry impatience, I leaped to my feet, and declaring that he must be going out of his head, I swung round on my heel.

"Instantly there fell upon the room an eerie stillness. I swung back on my heel to reply to my friend, but his chair was empty, he was gone - gone to the CHRIST whom he loved, '**caught up in the air**' to meet his Lord, where all those other missing saints have been taken.

"Yes, yes, Mr. Apleon, a thousand times yes, to your question, 'do I believe all that I have written there in that article.'

"Here in this little pamphlet - He laid his hand, as he spoke, upon a small book that had been Tom Hammond's, which bore the title "*THE SECOND COMING OF OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST - Systematically arranged from passages in the Holy Scriptures, for Students, Teachers, and others.*" by Robert Middleton."

"Here, in this little book," he went on, "there is not only set out with the most luminous clearness, with the actual Bible texts, all that I have written in that article, but also many other truths and texts which have already been literally fulfilled during the last forty-eight hours - even as the book said that they would be."

With the old mocking, quizzical smile, the handsome Apleon interrupted him, asking:

"What do you mean by the real Church of GOD? The Romish Church, The Greek Church, The Anglican Church or anyone of the multitude of dissenting churches?"

It was Ralph's turn to smile now, as he said:

"None of those churches could be called THE CHURCH OF GOD. The true, the real church was composed of true believers, men and women who had been born again by the Spirit of GOD, and who, numbered among every section of so-called Christians - and some who were wholly unattached - made up in their wide-world entirety the true Church of GOD, the Bride of CHRIST."

"And what," asked Apleon, "of the rest, the vast bulk of the worshippers at the various churches? What is their fate to be?"

"GOD only knows!" replied Bastin. "Some, at least, have already sought, and found GOD, or believe they have, even as I have sought, and believe that I have found GOD. But the vast bulk of the people already seem to be rollicking in a curious sense of non-restraint. I remember some years ago, hearing a lady say that visiting the houses of one of the worst streets in Winchester, and speaking to the people as to their eternal welfare, she found one woman particularly hardened.

To this woman she said: 'But, my dear sister, think of what it will be to be eternally lost, to be separated from GOD, and from all that is pure and good, forever, and in a state and place which the Bible calls Hell.' And the woman laughed, as she said: 'Well, there's one thing, I shall not be lonely there, for I shall have all my neighbours around me, for everyone in this street is on the same track as me.' "

A sardonic smile curled the full lips of Apleon, as he said:

"Poor deluded soul! For if there is such a place as that Hell, that underworld of lost souls of which your Bible speaks, and declares that it was prepared for the Devil and his angels, and that woman and her neighbours find themselves there, they will realize that hell, for its lost, is the loneliest spot in the universe, since each soul will hate the other and will live alone, apart in its own hideous realm of anguish and remorse."

Lifting his eyes to his visitor's face, as the latter delivered himself to this strange speech, Bastin was startled to note the expression on the handsome face. The eyes, unutterably sad for one instant, turned suddenly to savage hate, the mouth was as cruel as death, the eyes grew baleful, like the eyes of a snake that is being whipped to death.

He was startled even more by the tones of his voice when he said:

"And what of the Antichrist of whom you have spoken and written? Do you believe what you have written?"

"I most certainly do," replied Ralph.

Again the sardonic smile filled all Apleon's face as he returned:

"Then if all that you say and write be true, as regards the coming Antichrist, and you continue to wear the late editor's mantle when you write *The Prophet's chair* articles, how long do you suppose that that powerful super-man, the Antichrist of your belief, will let you alone. If he is to be so powerful, and if the devil is to energize him, as you say;-even as you profess to believe that he has called into being - is now actually dwelling on the earth; though invisible, and all his angels (demons, I believe they are called in the Bible) are moving about invisibly among the people on the earth, among the people of this wonderful London, if all this, I say, be so, how long do you suppose you will be allowed, by his Satanic Majesty, to ply your trade of warner of the peoples? Why, man, your life is not worth the snap of a finger?"

Ralph smiled. The smile transfigured his face, even as the same sort of smile transfigured the faces of the martyrs of old time, beginning with Stephen.

"I care not how long I live," he replied. "The only care I have now is to be true to my convictions, true to my GOD."

The telephone rang at that instant. "Excuse me one moment, Mr. Apleon," he said, turning to the instrument.

There followed a few moments exchanges on the phone, then replacing the receiver he turned. But his visitor was gone.

"That's curious!" he muttered. "I did not hear a sound of his going, any more than I did of his coming. Uncanny, eerie, creepy, almost!"

There was a tap at the door. "Come in!" he called. The messenger boy, Charley, entered with a sheaf of proof galleys.

"Did you see that tall gentleman pass out, Charley?" he asked. "Did he go down stairs, or into one of the other offices?"

"Tall gennelman, sir? There ain't bin no one come along this way, sir, nobody couldn't pass my little hutch wivout me a see in' on 'em. I ain't been out no wheres, an' I knows no one aint come by-least ways, not this way, not past my place."

"If any tall gentleman does come up, Charley, show him in to me, at once please."

Ralph had had time, during Charley's extended answer, to recover himself from the amaze that the boy's first sentence has produced in him.

"That's all, Charley!" he added, turning to his desk. The boy gave him a curious, puzzled look, lingered for the fraction of a second, then slowly turned and left the office.

When the door had closed behind him, Ralph, who had felt all that had passed in that moment of the boy's hesitancy, though he had purposely refrained from looking up, lifted his head and glanced around him.

"If I did not know better," he murmured, "I should suppose that the whole incident was but a dream, or hallucination."

A perplexed look filled his face, as he continued:

"What does it all mean?"

Again, in a flash, the memory of that Judas sermon swept back over him, and the startling statement recurred to him:

"Somewhere, even as I have preached of him, and as you have listened, there is, I believe, a young man of noble stature, exceedingly attractive, wealthy, fascinating, bewitching in fact, since all the world will wonder after him - yes, somewhere in the world, perhaps in this very city where we are now gathered, is the young man who, presently, when our Lord has come, when the Church, and the Holy Spirit are gone, will manifest himself as the Antichrist."

Coming back at this particular moment, Ralph asked himself: "Is Lucien Apleon the Antichrist?"

He paused an instant, then, as a sudden startling sense of assurance of the fact swept into his soul he cried:

"He is! I have seen the Antichrist!"

For nearly an hour he sat on his chair, his mind wrapped in deep thought, and occasionally referring to a book of prophecy which Tom Hammond had evidently deeply studied.

At the end of the hour, he bowed his head upon his hands, and held silent communion with GOD, seeking wisdom to write and speak and live the Truth.

~ end of chapter 2 ~

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