

IN THE TWINKLING OF AN EYE

by

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CHAPTER ELEVEN

“LONG ODDS”

FOR a wonder, Tom Hammond could not sleep.

Usually, when the last thing had been done, and he was assured that everything was in perfect train for the morning's issue, he ate a small basin of boiled milk and bread, which he invariably took by way of a "nightcap," then went to bed, and slept like a tired ploughman. But to-night slumber would have none of him.

"It must be the various excitements of the day," he muttered. "That story of Ralph's Caribbean child was enough to keep a fellow's brain working for a week. Then there was meeting Ralph so unexpectedly, just, too, when I so lusted for his presence and help. Then there was that Joyce item -"

His mind trailed off to the scene of the morning, every item of it starting up in a new and vivid light. Suddenly he recalled the booklet Mrs. Joyce had given him.

"I can't sleep," he murmured; "I'll find that thing and read it."

His fingers sought the electric switch.

The next moment the room was full of light. He got out of bed, passed quickly through to his dressing-room, found the coat that he had worn that morning, and secured the booklet.

He went back again to bed, and, lying on his elbow, opened the dainty little printed thing and began to read thus:

"LONG ODDS"

"You don't say so! Where on earth has she gone?"

"I can't say, sir, but it's plain enough she is missing. Hasn't been seen since last night when she went up to her room."

I was put out, I own; my man on waking me had informed me that the cook was missing; she had gone to bed without anything being noticed amiss, and was now nowhere to be found. She was always an odd woman, but a capital cook. What had become of her? The very last sort of person to disappear in this way - a respectable elderly Scotchwoman - really quite a treasure in the country; and the more I thought of it while I dressed, the more puzzled I became. I hardly liked to send for the police; and then again it was awkward, very - people coming to dinner that day. It was really too bad.

But I had scarcely finished dressing when in rushed my man again. I do so dislike people being excited, and he was more than excited.

"Please, sir, Mr. Vend has come round to see you; his coachman has gone - went off in the night, and hasn't left a trace behind, and they say the gardener's boy is with him."

"Well," said I, "it is extraordinary; tell Mr. Vend I'm coming; stay, I'll go at once."

It was really past belief - the three of them! After an hour's talk with Vend, no explanation offered itself, so we decided to go to town as usual.

We walked down to the station, and saw at once something was wrong.

Old Weeks, the stationmaster, was quite upset: his points-man was missing, and the one porter had to take up his duty. However, the train coming up, we had no time to question him, but jumped in. There were three other people in the compartment, and really I thought I was going off my head when I heard what they were discussing. Vend, too, didn't seem to know if he was on his head or his heels. It was this that startled us so: "What can have become of them all?"

I heard no more. I really believe I swooned, but at the next station - a large one - we saw consternation on every face. I pinched myself to see if I was dreaming. I tried to persuade myself I was. Vend looked ghastly. A passenger got in; he did not look quite so dazed as some did, but savage and cross. For a time none spoke; at last someone said aloud - I don't think he expected an answer -

"What on earth's become of them?" and the cross looking man, who got in last, growled out,

"That's the worst of it; they are not on earth, they are gone. My boy always said it would be so; from the very first moment I heard it, I knew what had happened; often he has warned me. I still have his voice ringing in my ears.

“ ’I tell you, in that night there shall be two men in one bed: the one shall be taken, and the other shall be left.’ (Luke 17:34).

“I know only too well **‘that night’** was last night. I’ve often prayed for it without thinking, and so I daresay have you: **‘Thy kingdom come.’** It makes me so savage I don’t know what to do.”

Now, I was an atheist, and did not believe the Bible. For the last thirty years (I am past fifty) I had stuck to my opinions, and when I heard men talk religious trash I invariably objected.

But this seemed altogether different. I tell you, for a thousand pounds I couldn’t have said a word. I just hoped it would all turn out a dream, but the further we went, the more certain it became that we were all awake, and that by some unaccountable visitation of Providence a number of people had suddenly disappeared in the night.

The whole of society was unhinged; everybody had to do somebody’s else’s work. For instance, at the terminus, a porter had been put into Smith’s stall, as the usual man was missing. Cabs were not scarce, but some of those who drove them seemed unlicensed and new to their work. The shutters in some of the shops were up, and on getting to my bank I heard the keys had only just been found.

Everyone was silent, and afraid lest some great misfortune was coming. I noticed we all seemed to mistrust one another, and yet as each fresh clerk, turned up late, entered the counting-room, a low whisper went round. The chief cashier, as I expected, did not come. The newspapers no one cared to look at; there seemed a tacit opinion that they could tell us nothing.

Business was at a standstill. I saw that very soon. I hoped as the day wore on that it would revive, but it did not. The clerks went off without asking my permission, and I was left alone. I felt I hated them. I did not know what to do. I could not well leave, else they might say the bank had stopped payment, and yet I felt I could not stay there. Business seemed to have lost its interest, and money its value. I put up the shutters myself, and at once noticed what a change had come over the City while I had been at the bank. Then all were trying to fill the void places; now it seemed as if the attempt had failed.

In the City some of the streets had that dismal Sunday appearance, while a few houses had been broken into; but in the main thoroughfares there was a dense mass of people, hurrying, it struck me, they knew not where. Some seemed dazed, others almost mad with terror. At the stations confusion reigned, and I heard there had been some terrible accidents. I went into my club, but the waiters had gone off without leave, and one had to help oneself.

As evening came on, I saw the lurid reflection of several fires, but, horrible to say, no one seemed to mind, and I felt myself that if the whole of London were burnt, and I with it, I should not care. For the first time in my life I no longer feared Death: I rather looked on him as a friend. As the gas was not lit, and darkness came down upon us, one heard cries and groans. I tried to light the gas, but it was not turned on. I remembered there was a taper in the writing-room. I went and lit it, but of course it did not last long.

I groped my way into the dining-room, and helped myself to some wine, but I could not find much, and what I took seemed to have no effect; and when I heard voices, they fell on me as if I were in a dream. They were talking of the Bible, though, and it now seemed the one book worth thinking of, yet in our vast club library I doubt if I should have found a single copy.

One said: "What haunts me are the words '**Watch therefore.**' You can't watch now."

I thought of my dinner party. Little had I imagined a week ago, when I issued the invitations, how I should be passing the hour.

Suddenly I remembered the secretary had been a religious fanatic, and I made my way slowly to his room, knocking over a table, in my passage, with glasses on it. It fell with a crash which sounded through the house, but no one noticed it. By the aid of a match I saw candles on his writing table and lit them. Yes I as I thought, there was his Bible. It was open as if he had been reading it when called away, and another book I had never seen before lay alongside of it - a sort of index.

The Bible was open at Proverbs, and these verses, being marked, caught my eye:

"Because I have called and ye refused, I have stretched out My hand and no man regarded; I also will laugh at your calamity; I will mock when your fear cometh."

I had never thought before of GOD laughing - of GOD mocking. I had fancied man alone did that. Man's laughing had ended now - I saw that pretty plain. I had a hazy recollection of a verse that spoke of men wanting the rocks to fall on them; so looked it up in the index. Yes, there was the word "Rock," and some of the passages were marked with a pencil. One was Deuteronomy 32:15: "**He forsook God which made him, and lightly esteemed the Rock of our Salvation.**"

Perhaps he marked that passage after he had had a talk with me. How well I remember the earnestness with which he pressed salvation upon me that day - explaining the simplicity of trusting CHRIST and His blood for pardon - and assuring me that if I only yielded myself to the Lord I should understand the peace and joy he talked about. But it was no use. I remember I only chaffed him, and said mockingly that his GOD was a myth, and time would prove it, and he answered,

"Never. '**Heaven and earth shall pass away, but My Word shall not pass away.**' He may come to-night."

I laughed and said, "What odds will you take? I lay you long ones."

Another passage marked was I Samuel 2:2, "**Neither is there any rock like our God,**" and lower still "**Man who built his house upon a rock.**"

I had no need to look that out. I knew what it referred to, and then my eye caught Matthew 27:51, "**The earth did quake, and the rocks rent.**"

That was when CHRIST died to save sinners, died to save me - and yet I had striven against Him all my life. I could not bear to read more. I shut the book and got up. There were some texts hanging over the fireplace:

- **"Repent ye therefore, and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out"** (Acts 3:19).
- **"The blood of Jesus Christ His son cleanseth us from all sin"** (I John 7).
- **"Now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation"** (II Corinthians 6:2).

As I turned to leave the room these caught my eye, and I said, "Well, I have been a fool."

Tom Hammond looked up from the little booklet, - a look of bewilderment was in his eyes, a sense of blankness, almost of stupefaction, in his mind. Like one who, half stunned, passes through some strange and wondrous experience, and slowly recalls every item of that experience as fuller consciousness returns, he went, mentally, slowly over the story of the little book.

"The verisimilitude of the whole story is little less than startling," he murmured. His eyes dropped upon the book again, and he read the last line aloud: "Well, I have been a fool."

Slowly, meditatively, he added: "And I, with every other otherwise sane man who has been careless as to whether such things are to be, am as big a fool as the man in that book!"

He laid the dainty little messenger down on the table by his bedside. His handling of the book was almost reverential. Reaching to the electric lever, he switched off the light. He wanted to think, and he could think best in the dark.

"Of course, I know historically," he mused, "all the events of the CHRIST's life, His death, His resurrection, and - and - well, there, I think, my knowledge ends. In a vague way I have always known that the Bible said something of a great final denouement to all the World Drama - an award time of some kind, a millennium of perfect - perfect - well perfect everything that is peaceful and - Oh, I don't know much about it, after all. I am very much in a fog. I see, for Mrs. Joyce and that booklet both speak of a return of CHRIST into the air, whither certain dead and certain living are to be caught up to be with Him and to begin an eternity of bliss."

For a moment or two he tried to disentangle his many thoughts; then, with a weary little sigh, he gave up the task, murmuring: "I certainly am not ready for any such event. If there is to be a hideous leaving behind of the unready, then I should be left to all that unknown hideousness."

A myriad thoughts crowded upon his brain. He gave up, at length, the perplexing attempt to think out the problem, telling himself that with the coming of the new day he would begin a definite search for the real facts of this great mystery - the second coming of CHRIST.

By an exercise of his will he finally settled himself to sleep.

~ end of chapter 11 ~

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