

IN THE TWINKLING OF AN EYE

by

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CHAPTER TEN

IN THE NICK OF TIME

As Tom Hammond's cab drew up at the office, another hansom drew up a yard ahead of his. The occupant alighted at the same instant as did Hammond, and glanced in his direction. Both men leaped forward, their hands were clasped in a grip that told of a very warm friendship. Like simultaneous pistol shots there leaped from their separate lips,-

“Tom Hammond!”

“Ralph Bastin?”

The friends presently passed into the great building, arm linked in arm, laughing and talking like holiday school-boys.

“Not three minutes ago, as I drove along in my cab, I was saying, ‘Oh! if only I could lay my hand on Ralph!’”

They were seated by this time in Tom Hammond's room.

“Why? What did you want, Tom - anything special?” the bronzed, travelled Bastin asked.

“Rather, Ralph! My second, poor Frank Marsden, has broken down suddenly; it's serious, may even prove fatal, the doctors say. Anyway, he won't be fit (if he recovers at all) for a year or more.”

He leaned eagerly towards his friend as he spoke, and asked,

“Are you open to lay hold of the post?”

“Yes.”

“When?”

“To-morrow, if you like!”

“Good!”

Hammond stretched his hand out. Bastin grasped it.

Then they talked over terms, duties, etc.

“But you, man?” said Hammond, when the last bit of shop had been talked. “Where have you been? What have you been doing?”

“Busy for an hour, Tom?” Bastin asked, by way of reply.

“No!”

“Come round to my diggings, then; not far - Bloomsbury. We can talk as we go. I shall have time to give you a skeleton of my adventures, to be filled in later. Then, when we get to my hang-out, I can tell you, when you have seen her, the story of my chief adventure, for it concerns her.”

Hammond flashed a quick, wondering glance at his friend.

“*Her!*” he said; “are you married, then?”

“No,” laughed Bastin, “but I’ve adopted a child. But come on, man!”

The pair left the office. In the cab, talking very rapidly, Bastin gave the skeleton sketch of his wanderings, but saying no word of the promised great adventure.

Tom Hammond never forgot the first sight of his friend's adopted child. There was a low grate in the room, a blazing fire of leaping, flaming coals in the grate. Curled up in a deep saddle-bag arm-chair was the loveliest girl-child Hammond had ever seen.

She must have been half asleep, or in a deep reverie, but as the two men advanced into the room she sprang from the chair, and, with eyes gleaming with delight, bounded to meet Bastin. Wreathing her arms about his neck, she crooned softly over him some tongue of her own. She was loveliness incarnated. Her eyes, black as sloes, were big, round, and wide in their staring wonder at Hammond's appearance. Her hair was a mass of short curls. She was dark of skin as some Spanish beauty.

Her costume lent extra charm to her appearance; for she wore a long, Grecian-like robe of some light, diaphanous ivory-cream fabric, engirdled at the waist with a belt composed of some sort of glistening peacock-green shells, buckled with frosted silver.

The simple but exquisite garment had only short shoulder-sleeves, and was cut low round the throat and neck, and finished there -as were the edges of the shoulder-sleeves - with a two-inch wide band of sheeny silk of the same color as the shells of her belt. The opening at the neck of the robe was fastened with a brooch of frosted silver of the same pattern, only smaller, as the buckle of the belt.

From beneath the silk-bound hem of her robe there peeped bronze slippers, encasing the daintiest little crimsoned-stockinged feet ever used for pedaling this rough old earth's crust.

Bastin introduced the child. She gave Tom her hand, and lifted her wondrous eyes to his, answering his question as to her health in the prettiest of broken English he had ever heard. A moment or two later the three friends were seated -Tom and Bastin in armchairs opposite each other, the child (Viola, Bastin had christened her) on a low stool between Bastin's knees.

"Shall we use the old lingo-French?" Bastin asked the question in the Bohemian Parisian they had been wont to use together years before.

"As you please, Ralph," Hammond replied.

"I have told you hurriedly something of where I have been," Bastin began. "But I have reserved my great story until I could tell it to you here -" He glanced down at the child at his feet. "I heard," he went on, "when at La Caribe - as everyone hears who stays long in the place - that each year, in spite of the laws of the whites, who are in power, a child is sacrificed to the Carib deities, and I longed to know if it were true.

"During my first few week's sojourn on the little island of Utila, I was able to render one of the old priests a service, which somehow became so exaggerated in his eyes that there was almost literally nothing that he would not do for me, and eventually he yielded to my entreaties to give me a chance to see for myself the yearly sacrifice, which was due in a month's time.

"During that month of waiting I made many sketches of this wonderful neighborhood, and became acquainted with this little Carib maiden, painting her in three or four different ways. The child became intensely attached to me, and I to her, and we were always together in the daytime.

"As the time drew near for the sacrifice I noticed that the little one grew very elated, and there was a new flash in her eyes, a kind of rapturous pride. I asked her no question as to this change, putting it down as girlish pride in being painted by the 'white prince,' as she insisted on calling me.

"I need not trouble you, my dear fellow, with unnecessary details of how and where the old priest led me on the eventful night, which was as black as Erebus, but come to the point where the real interest begins.

"It was midnight when at last I had been smuggled into that mysterious cave, which, if only a tithe of what is reported be half true, has been damned by some of the awfullest deeds ever perpetrated. My priest-guide had made me swear, before starting, that whatever I saw I would make no sign, utter no sound, telling me that if I did, and we were discovered, we should both be murdered there and then.

"We had hardly hidden ourselves before the whole center of the cave became illuminated with a mauve colored flame that burned up from a flat brass brazier, and seemed like the colored fires used in pantomime effects on the English stage. By this wonderful light I saw a hundred and fifty or more Carib men and women file silently into the cave, and take up their positions in orderly rows all round the place. When they had all mustered, a sharp note was struck upon the carimba, a curious one-stringed instrument, and the circles of silent savages, dropped into squatting position on their heels. Then the weirdest of all weird music began, the instruments being a drum, a flute, and the carimba.

"But my whole attention became absorbed by the grouping in the center of the room - the fire-dish had been shifted to one side, and I saw a hideous statue, squatted on a rudely-constructed, massive table, the carved hands gripping a bowl that rested on the stone knees of the image. The head of the hideous god was encircled with a very curious band, that looked, from where I stood, like bead and grass and feather work. The face-cheeks and forehead - was scored with black, green and red paint, the symbolic colors of that wondrous race that once filled all Central America.

"In the back part of the wide, saucer-like edge of the bowl which rested on the knees of the statue, there burned a light-blue flame, and whether it was from this fire, or from the larger one that burned in the wide, shallow brazier on the floor, I cannot positively say, but a lovely fragrance was diffused from one or the other.

"Before this strange altar stood three very old priests, while seven women (sukias) as grizzled as the men, stood at stated intervals about the altar. One of these hideous hags had a dove in her hand; another held a young kid clasped between her strong brown feet; a third held the sacrificial knife, a murderous-looking thing, made of volcano glass, short in blade, and with a peculiar jagged kind of edge; another of these hags grasped a snake by the neck - a blood-curdling-looking tamagas, a snake as deadly as a rattle-snake.

"Opposite the center-man of the three old priests stood a girl-child, about ten years of age, and perfectly nude. During the first few moments the vaporous kind of smoke that was wafted by a draught somewhere, from the fire-pan on the floor of the cave, hid the child's features, though I could see how beautiful of form she was; then, as the smoke-wreath presently climbed straight up, I was startled to see that the child was my little friend.

"In my amaze I had almost given vent to some exclamation, but my old priest-guide was watching me, and checked me.

"My little one's beautiful head was wreathed with jasmine, and a garland of purple *madre-de-cacao* blossoms hung about her lovely shoulders.

“Suddenly, like the barely-audible notes of the opening music of some orchestral number, the voice of one of the priests began to chant; in turn the two other priests took up the strain; then each of the seven hags in their turn, and anon each in the first circle of squatting worshippers, followed by each woman in the second row: and in this order the chant proceeded, until, weird and low, every voice was engaged.

“Suddenly the combined voices ceased, and one woman's voice alone rose upon the stillness; and following the sound of the voice, I saw that it was the mother of my little native child-friend. I had not noticed her before - she had been squatting out of sight. Hers was not the chant of the others, but a strange, mournful wail. It lasted about a minute and a half; then, rising to her feet, she gently thrust the child forward towards the altar, then laid herself face down on the floor of the cave.

“The little one leaned against the edge of the altar, and taking up, with a tiny pair of bright metal tongs, a little fire out of the back edge of the bowl on the knees of the god, she lighted another fire on the front edge of the bowl, her suddenly-illuminated face filled with a glowing pride.

“Then, at a signal from the head priest, the child lifted her two hands, extended them across the altar, when they were each seized by the two other priests, and the beautiful little body was drawn slowly, gently over, until the smooth breast almost touched the sacrificial fire she had herself lighted.

“Then I saw the woman who had held the knife suddenly yield it up to the head priest, and I made an unconscious movement to spring forward.

“My guide held me, and whispered his warning in my ear: yet, even though I must be murdered myself, I felt I dared not see that sweet young life taken.

“Like a man suffering with nightmare, who wants to move, but cannot, I stood transfixed, fascinated, one instant longer. But in that flashing instant the head priest had swept, with lightning speed, the edge of that hideous knife twice across the little one's breast, and she stood smiling upwards like one hypnotized.

“The priest caught a few drops of the child's blood, and shook them into the bowl of the god; then I saw the little one fall into her mother's arms; there was a second sudden flashing of that hideous knife, a piteous, screaming cry, and I gave vent to a yell - but not voice to it,- for the watching guide at my side clapped one hand tightly over my mouth, while with the other he held me from flying out into the ring of devils, whispering in my ear as he held me back,

“ ‘It is the goat that is slain, not the child.’

“Another glance, and I saw that this was so; one flash of that obsidian sacrificial blade across the throat of the kid had been enough, and now the blood was being drained into the bowl of the god.

“I need not detail all the other hideous ceremonies; they lasted for nearly two hours longer, ending with a mad frenzied dance, in which all joined save the priests and the mother and child.

“Every dancer, man and woman, flung off every rag of clothing, and whirled and leaped and gyrated in their perfect nudity, until, utterly exhausted, one after another they sank upon the floor.

“Then slowly they gathered themselves up, clothed themselves, and left the cave. And now some large pine torches were lighted, and my guide drew me further back, that the increased glare might not reveal our presence, and I saw the curious ending to this weird ‘night’ work. The priests and their seven women sukias opened a pit in the floor of the cave by shifting a great slab of stone, and lowered the idol into the pit. The remains of the kid, the sacrificial knife, and the dove were dropped into the bowl of blood that rested on the knees of the idol; then the sukia that had held the tamagas snake during the whole of those hideous night hours, dropped the writhing thing into the bowl, and the slab was lowered quickly over the pit, every seam around the slab being carefully filled, and the whole thing hidden by sprinkling loose dust and the ashes from the fire over the spot.

“Then, as soon as the last of the performers had cleared the cave, I followed my guide, and with a throbbing head, and full of a sense of strange sickness, I went to the house where I was staying.

“I lay down upon my bed, but could not sleep; and as early as I dared I went round to my little Martarae's home - Martarae was her native name. Her mother met me, said that the child would not come out in the sun to-day, that I might see her for a moment if I pleased, but that she was not very well.

“Sweet little soul! I found her lying on her little bed, with a proud light in her eyes, and a very flushed face.

“A fortnight later the light flesh wounds were healed.

She showed me her breast, confided to me the story, and asked me if I did not think she had much to be proud of.

“ ‘Will you keep a secret?’ I asked her. She gave me her promise, and I told her how I had seen the whole thing, and all my fears for her.

“A week later she was orphaned. Her mother was stung by a deadly scorpion, and died in an hour, and I made the child my care.

“She has travelled everywhere with me ever since, and you see how fair and sweet she is, and how beautifully she speaks our English. She is barely twelve, is naturally gifted, and is the very light of my life.”

“Would she let me see her breast, Ralph, do you think?” Hammond asked.

Bastin smiled, and spoke a word to the child, and she, rising to her feet and smiling back at him, unfastened the brooch at her throat, and, laying back her breast covering, showed the gleaming, shiny scars. Then as she re-covered her chest, she said softly:

“Ralph has taught me that those gods were evil; but though I shall ever wear this cross in the flesh of my breast, I shall ever love the CHRIST who died on the world's great cross at Calvary.”

“It is a most marvellous story, Ralph,” he said tearing his eyes away from the child's clear, searching gaze.

“The more marvellous because absolutely true,” returned Bastin.

Then, addressing Viola, and relapsing, of course, into English for her sake, he explained who Tom Hammond was, and that he (Ralph) was going to be associated with him on the same great newspaper.

“Mr. Hammond and you, Viola, must be real good friends,” he added.

“Sure, daddy!” the girl said smilingly; “I like him much already -”

She lifted herself slightly until she rested on her knees, and stretching one hand across the hearth rug to Tom Hammond, she laid the other in her guardian's, as she went on:

“Mr. Hammond is good! I know, I know, for his eyes shine true.”

A ripple of merry laughter escaped her, as she gazed back into her guardian's face, and added: “But you, daddy, are always first.”

~ end of chapter 10 ~

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