

# IN THE TWINKLING OF AN EYE

by

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(Author of *Mark of the Beast*)

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## CHAPTER FOUR

### “I ONLY REAPED WHAT I SOWED”

HAMMOND awaited the woman whom he had saved from drowning.

"She has slept fairly well," the landlady told him, "and I made her eat a good breakfast that I carried up to her myself, Mr. Hammond!"

Now he waited to speak to her. A moment or two more, and the landlady ushered her into the room, then slipped away.

"How can I ever repay you, sir!" cried the woman, seizing the hand that Hammond held out to her.

For a moment or two her emotion was too great for further speech.

Hammond led her to an armchair and seated her. She sobbed convulsively for a moment or two. He allowed her to sob. Presently tears came. The paroxysm passed, the tears relieved her, and she lifted her sad, beautiful eyes to his face.

"You know - oh, yes, you must know, Mr. Hammond - (I recognized you last night) - how I came to be in the water. I tried to take my life. I was miserable, despairing! GOD forgive me."

His strong eyes were full of a rare tenderness, as he said, "But, Mrs. Joyce, you surely know that death is not the end of all existence. I am not what would be called a religious man, but every fiber of my inward being tells me that death does not end all."

He saw a shiver pass over her, as she hoarsely replied:

"I, too, realize that this morning, Mr. Hammond. But last night the madness of an overwhelming despair was upon me. My life had been a literal hell for years, until yesterday I could bear it no longer. I was famished with hunger, sick with despair, and -"

She sighed wearily. "Perhaps," she went on, "if you knew all I have borne, you would not wonder at my rash, mad act."

"Tell me your story, Mrs. Joyce," he said, gently. "It may relieve your overcharged heart, and, anyhow, I will be your friend, as far as I can."

She sighed again. This time there was a note of relief, rather than weariness, in the sigh.

"My father was a well-to-do farmer," she began, "in North Hants. I was the only child, and I fear I was spoiled. I received the best education possible, and loved my studies for their own sake, for culture, in all its forms, had a strong attraction for me. I had been engaged to a young yeoman farmer for nearly a year. I had known him all my life, and we had been sweethearts even as children. Then there came suddenly into my life that man Joyce, for whom I sacrificed everything. GOD only knows how he contrived to exercise such an awful fascination over me as to make me leave everyone, everything, and marry him."

For a moment she paused, and shuddered. Her voice, when she spoke, again, was hollow, and full of tears.

"I killed my father by eloping on the very eve of my arranged marriage with Ronald Ferris. Ronald left the country as soon as he could wind up his affairs. And I - well, here in this mighty Babylon, I have ever since been reaping some of the sorrow I had sown. Not a penny of my father's money ever reached me, and that brute Joyce only married me for what he expected to get with me. He has done his best to make earth a hell for me, and I, in my mad blindness, last night, almost exchanged earth's fleeting hell for GOD's eternal hell."

A look of shame filled her eyes as she lifted them to Hammond.

"What you reminded me of just now, Mr. Hammond, I, deep down in my soul, know only too well - that death does not end all. My father was a true Christian, and a lay preacher. I have travelled with him hundreds of times to his preaching appointments, playing the harmonium and singing solos for him in his services. More than once the sense of GOD's claim upon me was so great as almost to compel my yielding my heart and life. Would to GOD I had! But my pride, my ambitions, strangled my good desires, and, as I said just now, I broke my father's heart. I killed him, and ruined all my own life, though I have no pity for myself. Then London life, my husband's brutality, my own misery, all helped to drive even the memory of GOD from my mind."

"Yet," broke in Hammond, "the Christian religion teaches that sorrow and suffering ought to drive the possessor of the faith nearer to GOD."

There was a hint of apology in his tones as he went on:

"Don't misunderstand me, Mrs. Joyce; I only speak from hearsay. I have heard parsons preach it, but I know nothing experimentally about these things myself."

She smiled in a slow, sad way, and, catching her breath in a kind of quick sob, said: "Neither have I ever known anything experimentally of these truths. I drifted into the outward form of a correct, religious, life. I learned to like the brightness of our chapel services, the fun of choir practice, the merry company, the adulation heaped upon me for my solo-singing. Then there were the tea-meetings, the service of song, and a multitude of other mild excitements which went to brighten the monotony of a rural existence. But of GOD, of CHRIST, of the Divine life, I fear I knew nothing."

Hammond smiled inwardly as he listened to this strange confession. The phraseology was new to him.

"It is the shibboleth of Nonconformity, I suppose," he told himself. "And I suppose each section of religious society has its own outward form of things in which it trusts, thinking, caring, nothing for the great Divine verities that should be the true religious life."

He did not utter his thoughts aloud, but asked with some apparent irrelevance, "Where is your husband, Mrs. Joyce?"

"Off on one of his drinking bouts, or maybe, locked up for drunkenness; I cannot say."

Her lifted eyes were full of beseeching, as she went on, "You will keep secret, Mr. Hammond, all this wild, mad episode of my life. If only I could know that the sad, mad, bad story was locked up between GOD and you, your kind landlady and myself, I think I could go back and face my misery better."

"Do not fear, Mrs. Joyce," he replied quickly. "The affair shall be as though it had never been. I can answer for Mrs. Belcher, my landlady; and for myself I give you my word, and -"

"GOD reward you, sir!" she sobbed. "Already you have given me clearer views of Him than any minister or any sermon ever did."

A few moments later Mrs. Joyce rose to leave. He pressed three sovereigns into her hand, and in spite of her tearful protestations made her take the money.

"If you are ever in desperate need, come to me, or write me, Mrs. Joyce, and I will help you, if I can. Meanwhile, be assured that the little I have done for you I would have done for any stranger, for, after all, the human race is linked by a strange, a mighty family tie. Good-bye."

She wrung the hand he gave her, then with a sudden, impulsive movement she lifted it sharply to her lips and kissed it with a tearful passionateness.

The next moment she was gone. His hand was wet with her tears.

"Poor soul!" he muttered.

Passing across the room to the window, he glanced out. She was moving down the street. Her handkerchief was pressed to her eyes.

"How strange," he murmured, as he turned from the window, "are these chance encounters in life! Like ships at sea, we sight, hail, exchange some kind of greeting, then pass on. Do we, after all, I wonder, unconsciously influence each other in these apparently trivial life-encounters? If so, how? Take this episode now, for instance. Will my encounter with that poor soul have any effect on my life, or on hers? If so, what?"

~ end of chapter 4 ~

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