

IN THE TWINKLING OF AN EYE

by

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CHAPTER EIGHT

REVERIE

IN spite of the time of the year, the evening was almost as warm as one in June.

Madge Finisterre was on one of the wide hotel balconies overlooking the Embankment. She had dined with her cousin, George Carlyon, but instead of going out of town that evening with him - he had pressed her strongly to go,- she had elected to spend a quiet evening alone.

London's roar, subdued a little, it is true, at that hour, rose all around her where she sat. The cup of coffee she had brought to her, cooled where it stood upon the little table at her elbow. She had forgotten it.

Her mind was engrossed with the memory of the latter part - the interrupted part - of that interview with Tom Hammond that afternoon.

"What would have happened if George Carlyon had not turned up at that moment?" she mused. - "if we had been left alone and undisturbed another five minutes?"

Her cheeks burned as she whispered softly to herself:

"I believe Tom Hammond would have proposed to me. If he had, what should I have replied?"

A far-away look crept into her eyes. She was back again in the little town where she had been "reared," as she herself would have said. We have many villages in England larger, more populous, more busy, than her "town," but, then, the people of her land talk "big."

Before her mind's eye there rose the picture of her father's store, a huge, rambling concern built of wood, with a frontage of a hundred feet, and a colonnade of turned wooden pillars that supported a verandah that ran the whole length.

Every item of the interior of the store came vividly before her mind, the very odor of the place – a curious blend of groceries, drapery, rope, oils and colors, tobacco,- seemed suddenly to fill her nostrils. And in that instant, though she scarcely realized it, the first real touch of nostalgia came to her.

She saw the postal section of the store littered with men, all smoking, most of them yarning. One after another dropped in, and, with a "Howdy, all?" dropped upon a coil of white cotton rope, or lounged against a counter or cask. "Dollars" and "cents" floated in speech all around, while the men waited for the mail. It was late that night.

A week before she had sailed for England, she had gone down to the store, as she had gone every evening about mail-time, and, entering at the end nearest her home, she had come upon the scene that had now so suddenly risen before her mind's eye. She had traversed all the narrow alley-way between the stored-up supplies, from which the various departments were stocked, singing as she went:

“The world is circumbendibus,
We're all going round;
We have a try to fly the sky,
But still were on the ground.
We every one go round the sun,
We're moving night and day;
And milkmen all go round the run
Upon their Milky Way.”

"We're all circumbendibus,
Wherever we may be,
We're all circumbendibus,
On land or on sea.
Rich or poor or middling,
Wherever we are found,
We're all circumbendibus,
We're all going round."

She had punctuated the chorus with a series of jerked steps, her high heels striking the wooden floor in a kind of castanet accompaniment. Every waiting man had risen to his feet as she came upon them in that post-office section, and she had answered their rising with a military salute.

In the great mirror that ran from floor to ceiling of the store, she had caught a glimpse of herself. She recalled, even now, exactly what she was wearing that evening - a white muslin frock, a very wide sash of rich silk-crushed strawberry color-about her waist, the long ends of the sash floating behind her almost to the high heels of her dainty bronze shoes.

A knot of the same-hued ribbon, narrow, of course, with streamers flying, was fastened at her left shoulder. Her wide-brimmed hat was trimmed with the same color. She had known that she made a handsome picture before she read the light of admiration in the eyes of the post-office loungers.

"Have you heard the news, boys?" she asked.

"Aw, guess we hev, Miss Madge."

It was Ulysses Fletcher who had acted as spokesman. In some surprise, and not altogether pleased, she had wheeled sharply round to the lantern-jawed Ulysses and asked,

"How did you hear the news, Ulysses? Dad didn't tell you, I'm sure, for he promised me I should tell you all myself."

"Met a coon down to the depot, an' I guess he wur chuck full o' it, an' 'e ups an' tells me."

"A coon told you?" she had cried in ever-increasing amazement.

"Sartin, Miss Madge !"

"A coon!" she had repeated. "A coon-told you-down at the depot-that-I was-going-to Europe next week!"

Every eye had stared in wondering astonishment at Madge Finisterre at her announcement that she was going to Europe. Then there was a general laugh, and one of the smartest of the "boys" had cried:-

"I low there's been a mistake some, Miss Madge, an' that, too, all roun'. Fact is, we've been runnin' two separate tickets over this news business, an' thought it wur one an' the same. We wur talkin' 'bout Seth Hammond's herd o' hogs as wur cut up by the Poughkeepsie express 'smarnin'."

She had joined in the laugh, and then in reply to the question of another of the men, as to whether it was really true that she was going to "Urop," she had replied in the affirmative, adding, by way of explanation:

"I guess you all know that my momma is British, that she belonged to what the Britishers call, 'the Quality. She was the youngest sister of Sir Archibald Carlyon, was travelling over here, out west, when she was about my age, got fixed up in an awkward shop by half-breeds, and was rescued by my dear old poppa. Fact, that's how he came to be my poppa, for she married him. Spite of her high connections in England, she was very poor, and she loved dad. If dear momma could only face the water journey, she'd go over with me."

"Air you goin' alone, Miss?" one of the boys had asked.

Then - how well she remembered it to-night! - she had given the answer, part of which she had given to George Carlyon that very day:

"Oh, I'll git all right, boys, you can bet on that, without anyone dandying around me. For I guess if there's one thing the Britishers are learning about our women, it's this - that if a United States gel's got dollars under her boots to wheel around on it ain't much fuss for her to skate through their old country, nor yet through Europe, come to that, even if she has no more language under her tongue than good, plain, Duchess county American."

With a merry smile, for which there had been no scrambling, since it was shed upon them all, she had passed on' to where she knew she would find her father, ringing her boot-heels, castanet fashion, as she sang lightly:

"Mary's gone wid a coon,
Mary's gone wid a coon;
Dere's heaps o' trubble on de ole'man's min'
Since Mary flit wid de coon."

How vividly it all came up before her in this hour of quiet reverie!

But her mind flitted swiftly to another scene, one that had been hanging in the background of all her thought ever since (thinking of Tom Hammond and the interrupted conversation,) she had been reminded of home and its happenings.

There had been a Donation Party for their pastor (Episcopalian Methodist) at the house of one of the members on the very night of the store scene. Madge had gone, of course. Balhang was wont to say that a Donation Party simply could not be run without her.

Sitting on that Embankment hotel balcony, with eyes fixed on the lamps, the river, the bridge, the traffic yet seeing nothing of it all, that Donation Party all came back to her. Things had been a bit stiff and formal at first, as they often are at such gatherings.

The adults sat around and talked on current topics - how much turkeys would fetch for Thanksgiving, whether it would pay best to sell them plucked or unplucked, what would folks do for cranberries for Thanksgiving, since the cranberry crop had failed that year - "An' turkey wi'out cranberry ain't wuth a twist o' the tongue."

"An' squash," suggested one old man. "What's turkey wi'out squash? I'd most so soon hev only Boston (i.e., pork and beans) "fur' dinner as ter go wi'out squash wi' turkey."

The young folk had been "moping around" like draggled chickens on a wet day when the barn-door is shut. Then, at this juncture, Madge had burst upon the scene.

She swam into the largest room, swirling round and round with a kind of waltz movement, to the accompaniment of her own gay voice as she sang:

“I said, ‘My dear, I’m glad!’
Said she, ‘I’m glad you’re glad!’
Said I, ‘I’m glad you’re glad I’m glad,
It is so very, very nice;
It makes it seem worth twice the price,
So glad you’re glad I’m glad!’ ”

With a gay laugh she had turned to the hostess, saying;

“Things want hustling a bit here, Miss Julie. Everyone is as glum as a whip-poor-will that is fixed up with the grippe.”

In the quiet of that corner of the hotel balcony she smiled at these remembrances of her nonsense that night. She had started the young people playing their favorite games of “Whisper,” “Amsterdam,” etc., in two or three of the smaller rooms; then had raced away again to the room where the adults were sitting squarely against the wall, as grim as “brazen images.” Dropping on to the piano stool, she struck a few soft, tender notes, suggestive of some very gracious hymn, then suddenly broke into song:

“Oh, dat’s so! Oh, dat’s so!
Dar is nulling ‘neath de moon dat’ll satisfy dis coon.
Like a K – I - double S, kiss,
Since dat Cupid, wid his dart, made a keyhole in my heart
For dat M – I - double S, miss.”

Behind a corner of the curtain the young pastor had watched and listened. He had thought his presence unknown to her. He was mistaken.

For three-quarters of an hour she had been the life of that room. Then, suddenly, as she was singing at the piano, the room grew very quiet. She was aroused by a voice just behind her ear, saying:

“Miss Finisterre, are you going to supper with this first batch, or will you wait the next turn?”

Turning, she found herself face to face with the young pastor, the room being otherwise empty. His gaze was very warm, very ardent. She had flushed under the power of that gaze.

She had railed him on his extra seriousness, and he had answered,

“Don’t, Madge! you must know why I am grave and sad, to-night.” (He had never called her Madge before).

“No, I don’t,” she had replied.

“In less than a week,” he went on, “so I have heard to-night, you leave Balhang. You are going to Europe, and will be away long months, perhaps a year.”

She had gazed at him in honest wonder, not fully grasping his meaning.

“Why,” she asked, “should that make you sad?”

He had leaned closer towards her. There was no one to see them. The heavy door-curtain had slipped from its hook, and shut them in. Where her hand rested on the rounded, polished arm of the piano, his larger hand had moved, and her white fingers were clasped in his larger ones. His eyes had sought hers, and, under the hypnotic power of the strong love in his eyes, she had been compelled to meet his gaze.

“I thought, dear, you must have seen how, for a long time, I had learned to love you, Madge.”

His clasp on her fingers had tightened. He had leaned nearer to her still. No man's face, save her father's had ever been so close to hers before, and the contact strangely affected her. She felt the warmth of his breath, the heat of his clean, wholesome flesh; even the scent of the soap he had used - or was is some perfume in his clothing? - filled all her sense of smell.

The perfume was violet, and she remembered tonight how, for many a day, she could not smell violets without recalling that moment, and seeing again the strong, earnest, eager face, with the fire of a mighty love burning in the eyes.

To-night she heard again the yearning, pleading voice as he had cried: “Madge, Madge, my darling! Can you ever guess how great is my love for you? Tell me, dear, do you, can you, love me in return? Will you be my wife? Will you come into all my life to bless it? And let me be wholly yours to help, to bless, to strengthen, to love, to cherish you? Tell me, darling!”

And she had cried, almost piteously:

“I don't know how to answer you, pastor. It is all so sudden. I knew, of course, that we were great friends, and I am sure I like you very much, but - this proposal! Why, I never dreamed that you cared for me like that, for how could I be a minister's wife? I am such a gay, thoughtless, foolish little thing - ! -”

There had followed more tender pleading, and she had finally said, “If you love me, Homer, as you say you do, please do not bother me any more now. Wait until I come back from Europe-then-then -”

“What, Madge?” he had cried softly, eagerly.

“If I can honestly say ‘Yes,’ ” she had replied, “I will and I will not even wait for you to ask me again.”

He had bent over her. His gaze held her fascinated.

She thought he was going to take toll of her lips before his right was confirmed. But at that instant there had come a rush of feet, a sound of many voices.

The curtain was flung aside, just as her fingers strayed over the keys of the instrument, and the pastor succeeded in regaining his old unseen nook.

"I guess Miss Julie's waitin' fur yer, Miss Madge, ter go ter yer supper," bawled an old deacon of the church.

She had swept the ivory keys with rollicking touch, and sang in gayest style:

"Allow me to say Ta-ta!
I bid you good-day. Ta-ta!
I wish I could stay, But I'm going away.
Allow me to say Ta-ta"

Amid the uproarious laughter of everyone in the room, she had bounded away to supper.

Except for one moment, when she was leaving the house for home, and he had helped her on with her cloak, the pastor had not spoken again directly to her that evening. He had managed then to whisper,

"GOD bless you, my darling! I shall pray for you, and live on the hope I read in your eyes to-night."

It was all this which had risen so strangely before her mind, as to-night, on that hotel balcony, she had begun to ask herself how much she really cared for Tom Hammond, and what answer she would have given him had he proposed to her that afternoon.

"I told pastor," she murmured, "that night, that I was not sure of myself. I am no nearer being sure of myself now than I was then."

The scene with Hammond rose up before her, and she added: "I am less sure, I think, than ever!"

She gazed fixedly where the double line of lamps gleamed on the near-distant bridge.

For a moment she tried to compare the two lives - that of an American pastor's wife, with endless possibilities of doing good, and that of the wife of a comparatively wealthy newspaper editor-manager.

"Should I like to marry a popular man?" she asked herself. "I read somewhere once that popular men, like popular actors, make bad husbands, that they cannot endure the tameness of an audience of one."

She laughed low, and a little amusedly, as she added,

"Oh, well, Tom Hammond has not asked me to marry him. Perhaps he never will-and-well, **'sufficient for the day is the evil thereof.'** Pastor once preached from that, I remember."

The night had grown cooler. She shivered a little as she rose and passed into the lighted room beyond.

Two hours later, as she laid her head upon the pillow, she murmured, "I don't see how I could marry the pastor! Why, I haven't 'got religion' yet. I am not 'converted,' as these Britishers would say!"

~ end of chapter 8 ~

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