

IN THE TWINKLING OF AN EYE

by

Sydney Watson
(Author of *Mark of the Beast*)

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CHAPTER NINE

A THREAT

TOM HAMMOND paused before the house that bore the number at the head of Mrs. Joyce's letter. It was in a mean street, and his soul went out in pity towards the unfortunate woman, who, with all her refinement, was compelled to live amid such squalid surroundings.

“And heart-starved, too,” he mused, pityingly. “Heart-starved for the want of love, of sympathy, of the sense of soul-union that makes life with a married partner at all bearable.”

“Yus, sir; Mrs. Joss lives yere. Top floor, lef’ ‘and side. Yer kin go hup!”

A child had opened the door in response to his knock.

Following the directions given, Tom Hammond climbed the dirty stairs. On the top landing were two doors. The one on the right was fast shut; that on the left was ajar a few inches. His approach did not seem to have been heard. Mrs. Joyce, the only occupant of the room, was seated at a bare deal table, sewing briskly.

He stretched out his hand to tap at the door, but some impulse checked him for a moment. He had the opportunity to observe her closely, and he did so.

She sat facing the window; the light shone full upon her. She was dressed in a well-worn but well-fitting black gown. Round her throat - how pure and white the skin was! - she wore a white turnover collar, like a nurse, white cuffs at her wrists completing the nurse idea. Her hair - she had loosened it earlier because of a slight headache - hung in clustering waves on her neck, and was held back behind her ears with a comb on either side.

There was a rare softness and refinement in the pale face that drooped over her sewing. Seen as Tom Hammond saw her then, Mrs. Joyce was a really beautiful woman.

He gazed for a few moments at the picture, amazed at the rapidity of her sewing movements.

“The tragedy of Tom Hood’s ‘Song of the Shirt,’ ” he muttered, as he watched the gleam of the flying needle.

“Oh, men with sisters dear!
Oh, men with mothers and wives!
It is not linen you're wearing out,
But human creature's lives!
Stitch, stitch, stitch,
In poverty, hunger, and dirt,
Sewing at once, with a double thread,
A shroud as well as a shirt.”

Under the magnetic constraint of his fixed gaze the woman looked towards the door. She recognized her visitor, and with a little glad cry started to her feet. Tom Hammond pushed the door open and entered the room. She sprang to meet him.

Now that he saw her, he realized the expression of her face had changed. Heaven - all the heaven of GOD's indwelling pardon, love, peace, had come to dwell with her. All that she had said in her letter of her new-found joy, was fully confirmed by her looks.

“How good of you to come to see me, Mr. Hammond!” she cried, as she felt the clasp of his hand.

“How good of you to write me of your new-found happiness!” He smiled back into her glad, eager eyes:

He took the chair she offered, and with a question or two sought to lead her on to talk of the subject about which he had come to see her.

“The very title of the subject,” Hammond explained, “is perfectly foreign to me.”

“It was all so, so foreign to me,” she returned. Then, as swift tears flooded her eyes, she turned to him with a little rapturous cry, saying,-

“And it would all have been foreign to me forever, but for you, Mr. Hammond. I never, never can forget that but for you my soul would have been in a suicide’s hell, where nope and mercy could never have reached me. As long as I shall live I shall never forget the awful rush of soul-accusation that swept over me, when my body touched the foul waters of that muddy river that night. The chill and shock of the waters I did not feel, but the chill of eternal condemnation for my madness and sin I did feel.

“I saw all my life as in a flash. All the gracious warnings and pleadings that ever, in my hearing, fell from my sainted father's lips, as he besought men and women to be reconciled to GOD, seemed to swoop down upon me, condemning me for my unbelief and sin. Then - then you came to my rescue-and -”

Her tears were dropping thick and fast now.

“And-my soul-had respite given in which to-to seek GOD-because-you saved my body.”

Overcome with her emotion, she turned her head to wipe away the grateful tears. When next she faced him, her voice was low and tender, her eyes glowed with a light that Tom Hammond had never seen in a human face before.

“Now, if my Lord come,” she said softly, rapturously, “whether at morning, at noontide, at midnight” or cock-crowing, I shall be ready to meet Him in the air.

“I used to think that if ever I was converted, I should meet my dear father and mother at the last day, at the great final end of all things.

“But now I know that if JESUS came for His people to-day, that I should meet my dear ones to-day. For when **‘the Lord Himself shall descend from heaven . . . the dead in Christ shall rise first: then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord.’**”

Tom Hammond gazed at the speaker in wonder. The glory that filled her face, the triumph and rapture that rang in her voice, were a strange revelation to him.

“A starvation wage for making slop-shirts,” he mused “yet more than triumphing over every discomfort of poverty by the force of the divine hope that dominate her! What is this hope?”

“Tell me of this wondrous thing, Mrs. Joyce,” he said, aloud, “that can transmute your poverty and suffering to triumph and rapture, and your comfortless garret to a heaven on earth.”

“Before I begin,” she replied, “tell me, Mr. Hammond, have ever you seen this?”

From the window-shelf she reached a tiny envelope booklet.

“‘*Long Odds*’ !” he said, reading the boldly-printed title of the book. “No; I have never seen this. It sounds sporting, rather.”

“Take it, Mr. Hammond,” she went on; “if it does nothing else, it will awaken your interest in this wonderful subject.”

He slipped the book into his breast-pocket. She opened her mouth to speak again, when a sound from outside caught her ear. She started to her feet; her face turned deadly pale. The next instant the door was flung noisily open, and her husband entered the room.

The bleary-eyed, drunken scoundrel glared at the two seated figures, then laughed evilly as he cried, -

"Turned religious? Oho! Oho! Like all the rest of your religious people, make a mantle - a regular down-to-your-feet ulster - of your religion to cover every blackness and filthiness of life."

"Silence, you foul-mouthed blackguard!"

Tom Hammond's lips were white with the indignation that filled him, as he flung his command to the man.

"Silence yourself, Tom Hammond!" bellowed the drunken scoundrel. "I know you," he went on. "You're a big bug now! Think no end of yourself, and of your messing paper. Perhaps you'll say you came to invite me to join your staff, now that I've caught you here?"

His sneering tone changed to one of bitterest hate, as he turned to the white, trembling woman.

"You're a beauty, ain't you? Profess to turn saint; then, when you think I'm clear away, you receive visits from fine gentlemen! Gentlemen? Bah! they're -"

"Silence, you drunken, foul-mouthed beast!" again interrupted Tom Hammond.

There was something amazing in the command that rang in the indignant tones of his voice.

"Unless," he went on, "you want to find yourself in the grip of the law."

For a moment or two Joyce was utterly cowed! then the devil in him reared its head again, and he hissed, "You clear out of here, and remember this; if I have to keep sober for a year to do it, I'll ruin you Tom Hammond, I will!"

He laughed with an almost demoniacal glee, as he went on:

"I can write a par yet, you know. I'll dip my pen in the acid of hate - hate, the hate of devils, my beauty - and then get Fletcher to put them into his paper. He's not in love with the '*Courier*,' or with Tom Hammond, the Editor."

"You scurrilous wretch!" It was all that Hammond deigned to reply.

"Good day, Mrs. Joyce!" he bowed to the white-faced woman.

For her sake he did not offer to shake hands, but moved away down the stairs.

He caught a hansom a few moments after leaving the mean street. He had purposed, when he started out that morning, to hunt up his other correspondent, the Jew, Abraham Cohen. But after the scene he had just witnessed, he felt quite unwilling to interview a stranger.

“I wish,” he mused, as he sat back in the hansom, “I had not gone near that poor soul. I am afraid my visit may make it awkward for her.”

His eyes darkened as he added: “And even for myself. It will be very awkward if that drunken brute puts his threat into execution - and he will, I believe. Innuendo is a glass stiletto, which, driven into the victim's character, into his heart and then snapped off from the hilt, leaves no clue to the striker of the blow. And a demon like that Joyce, playing into the hands of a cur like Fletcher, may slay a fellow by a printed innuendo, and yet the pair may easily keep outside the reach of the law of libel.”

For the first time since the floating of the "*Courier*," his spirits became clouded.

“Then, too,” he muttered, “there is this sudden breakdown of Marsden, and, for the life of me, I don't know where to look for a fellow, whom I could secure at short notice, who is at all fit for the '*Courier*'s' second.”

His face had grown moody. His eyes were full of an unwonted depression.

“If only,” he went on, “Bastin had been in England, and were to be got -” He sighed.

There was perplexity in the sigh.

"Where on earth can Ralph be all these years?" he muttered.

He glanced out of the cab to ascertain his own whereabouts. In two minutes more he would be at the office.

~ end of chapter 9 ~

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