IN THE TWINKLING OF AN EYE

by

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CHAPTER TWELVE

THE CENTER OF THE EARTH

WILL you come into my workroom, Mr. Hammond? It is a kind of sanctum to me as well as a workroom, and I always feel that I can talk freer there than anywhere else."

It was the Jew, Abraham Cohen, who said these words. His visitor was Tom Hammond. It was the morning after that Tom Hammond had been troubled about "*Long Odds*" and its mysterious subject.

Jew and Gentile had had a few moments' general talk in the sitting-room downstairs, but Cohen wanted to see his visitor alone - to be where nothing should interrupt their conversation.

Tom Hammond's first vision of Cohen's workroom amazed him. As we have seen before, the apartment was a large one, and, besides being a workroom, partook of the character of a study, den, sanctum - anything of that order that best pleases the reader.

But it was the finished work which chiefly arrested the attention of Tom Hammond, and in wondering tones he cried: "It is all so exquisitely wrought and fashioned! But what can it be for?"

Cohen searched his visitor's face with his deep grave eyes.

"Will you give me your word, Mr. Hammond," he asked, "that you will hold in strictest confidence the fact that this work is here in this place, if I tell you what it is for?"

"I do give you my word of honor, Mr. Cohen."

As he spoke, Tom Hammond held forth his hand. The Jew grasped the hand, there was an exchange of grips; then, as their clasp parted, the Jew said: "I do not wish to bind you to any secrecy as to the fact that such work as this is being performed in England, but only that you should preserve the secret of the whereabouts of the work and workers." With a sudden glow of pride-it flashed in his eyes, it rang in his tones-he cried, "This work is for the New Temple!"

"The New Temple? I don't think I quite understand you, Mr. Cohen. Where is this temple being built?" There was amaze in Tom Hammond's voice.

"It is not yet begun," replied the Jew. "That is, the actual rearing has not yet begun, though the preparations are well forward. The New Temple is to be at Jerusalem, Mr. Hammond."

The ring of pride deepened in his voice as he went on: "There can be no other site for the Temple of The Lord save Zion, the city of our GOD, beautiful for situation, the joy of the whole earth - the center of the world, Mr. Hammond."

As he talked, Tom Hammond, watching him intently, saw how the soul of the man and the hope of the true Israelite shone out of his eyes. Crossing the room to where a chart of the world (on Mercator's Projection) hung on the wall, the Jew took an inch-marked straight-edge, and laying one end of it on Barrow Point, Alaska, he marked the spot on the straight-edge where it touched Jerusalem. From Jerusalem to Wrangel Land, Siberia, farthest east, he showed by his straight-edge that practically he got the same measurement as when from the west. From Jerusalem to North Cape, Scandinavia, and from Jerusalem to the Cape of Good Hope, he showed again was each practically the same distance.

"Always, always, is Zion the center of the inhabited earth!" he cried in quiet, excited tones. Moving quickly back to Hammond's side, he said: "Did you ever think of this, sir, that, practically speaking, all the nations west of Jerusalem (those of Europe) write from west to east - that is, towards the city of our GOD; whilst all the Asiatic races (those east of Zion) write from east to west - just the opposite, - but always towards Zion? No, no, sir; there can be no other place on earth for the New Temple of The Lord save Jerusalem. Read Ezekiel, from the fortieth chapter, sir, and you will see how glorious a Temple The Lord is to have soon. '**Show the house to the people of Israel**,' GOD said in vision to His prophet, and let them, build it after the sum, the pattern which I show you.' And that, sir, is what we are doing."

"Who are the we who are doing this?" Tom Hammond's face was as full of wonder as his voice. "Who," he continued, "makes the plans, gives the orders, finds the funds?"

"Wealthy, patriotic men of our people, sir. We as a race are learning that soon the Messiah will come, and we are proving our belief by preparing for the House of our GOD. Italian Jews all over Italy are carving the richest marbles; wrought iron, wondrous works in metal, gold and silver ornaments, cornices, chapiters, bells for the high priest's robes, and a myriad other things are being prepared; so that the moment the last restriction on our land - the land of our fathers, the land which the Lord gave unto our forefather Abraham, saying, '**Your seed shall possess it**' - is removed, we shall begin to snip the several prepared parts of the Temple to Palestine, as the Gentiles term our land."

A curious little smile flittered over his face as he added.

"The very march of modern times in the East, Mr. Hammond, is all helping to make the consummation of our work more easy. The new railways laid from the coast to Jerusalem are surely part of the providence of our GOD. When Messiah comes, sir, we shall be waiting ready for Him, I trust."

"But do you not know," Tom Hammond interrupted, "that according to every record of history as well as the New Testament, all Christendom has believed, for all the ages since, that the Messiah came nearly two thousand years ago?"

"*The Nazarene?*"

There was as much or more of pity than scorn in the voice of the Jew as he uttered the word.

"How could He be the Messiah, sir? he went on.

"Could any good thing come out of Nazareth? Besides, our Messiah is to redeem Israel, to deliver them from the hand of the oppressor, and to gather again into one nation all our scattered race. No, no! a thousand times No! The Nazarene could not be our Messiah?"

Turning quickly to Hammond, he asked, "Are you a Christian, sir?"

For a moment Tom Hammond was startled by the suddenness, the definiteness, of the question. He found no immediate word of reply.

"You are a Gentile, of course, Mr. Hammond," the Jew went on; "but are you a Christian? For it is a curious fact that I find very few Gentiles whom I have met, even professed Christians, and fewer still whoever pretend to live up to their profession."

Tom Hammond recovered himself sufficiently to say:

"Yes, I am a Gentile, of course, and I suppose I am - er - "

It struck him, as he floundered in the second half of his reply, as being very extraordinary that he should find it difficult to state why he supposed he was a Christian. While he hesitated the Jew went on:

"Why should you say you suppose, sir? Is there nothing distinctive enough about the possession of Christianity to give assurance of it to its possessor? I do not suppose I am a Jew, sir (by religion I mean, and not merely by race). No, sir, I do not suppose, for I know it. There is all the difference in the world, it seems to me, sir, between the mere theology and the religion of the faith we profess. The religion is life, it seems to me, sir; theology is only the science of that life."

Both men were so utterly absorbed in their talk that they did not hear a touch on the handle of the door.

It was only as it opened that they turned round. Zillah stood framed in the doorway. Cohen, who saw her every day, realized that she had never looked so radiantly beautiful before. She had almost burst into the room, but paused as she saw that a stranger was present.

"Excuse me," she began; "I had no idea you had a friend with you, Abraham."

She would have retreated, but he stopped her with an eager -

"Come in, Zillah."

She advanced, gazing in curious inquiry at Hammond. "This is Mr. Tom Hammond, editor of the '*Courier*,' Zillah," Cohen explained to the young girl. To Hammond he added, "My wife's sister, Zillah Robart."

The introduced pair shook hands. The young Jew went on to explain to Zillah how the great editor came to be visiting him.

Tom Hammond's eyes were fixed upon the vision of loveliness that the Jewess made. She was going to assist at the wedding of a girl-friend, and had come to show herself to her brother-in-law before starting. Lovely at the most ordinary times, she looked perfectly radiant in her well-chosen wedding finery.

Tom Hammond had seen female loveliness in many lands - East, North, West, South. He had gazed upon women who seemed too lovely for earth-women whose flesh was alabaster, whose glance would woo emperors; women whose skins glowed with the olive of southern lands, the glance of whose black, lustrous eyes intoxicated the beholder in the first instant: Inez of Spain. Mousmec of Japan, Katrina of Russia, Carlotta of Naples, Rosie of Paris, Maggie of the Scottish Highlands, Patty of Wales, Kate of Ireland, and a score of other typical beauties. But this Jewish maiden, this Zillah of Finsbury - she was beyond all his thought or knowledge of feminine loveliness.

While Cohen talked on for a moment or two, and Zillah's eyes were fixed upon her brother-in-law, Tom Hammond's gaze was riveted upon the lovely girl.

Every feature of her beautiful face became photographed on his brain. Had he been a clever artist, he could have gone to his studio and have flung with burning, brilliant haste her face upon his canvas.

He thought of Zenobia as he looked upon her brow. He wondered if ever two such wide, black, lustrous eyes had ever shone in the face of a woman before, or whether a female soul had ever before been mirrored in such eyes.

Her mouth was not the large, wide feature so often seen in women of her race, but of exquisite lines, with ripe, full lips, as brilliant in color as the most glowing coral. Her eyes were fringed with the blackest, finest, silkiest lashes. Her hair was raven in hue and wondrous in its wealth.

He realized, in that first moment of full gazing upon her, how faded every other female face must ever seem beside her glorious beauty. With a strange freak of mental conjuring, Madge Finisterre and that interrupted *tete-a-tete* rose up before him, and a sudden sense of relief swept over him that George Carlyon had returned at the moment that he did.

"It is all so strange, so wonderful to me, what I have seen and heard here," he jerked out as Cohen finished his explanation.

Hammond spoke to the beautiful girl, whose great lustrous eyes had suddenly come back to his face.

For a moment or two longer he voiced his admiration of the separate pieces of finished work, and spoke of his own growing interest in the Jewish race.

The great black eyes that gazed upwards into his, grew liquid with the evident emotion that filled the soul of the beautiful girl. With the frank, hearty, simple gesture of the perfectly unconventional woman, she held forth her hand to Hammond as she said:

"It is so good of you, sir, to speak thus of my brother-in-law's work and of our race. There are few who speak kindly of us. Even though, as a nation, you English give our poor persecuted people sanctuary, yet there are few who care for us or speak kindly of us, and fewer still who speak kindly to us."

Tom Hammond held the pretty, plump little hand that she offered him clasped warmly in his, almost forgetting himself as he gazed down into her expressive face and listened to her rich musical voice. There was an ardency in his gaze that was unknown, unrealized, by himself.

The olive of the girl's cheeks warmed under the power of his gaze. He, saw the warm color rise, and remembered himself, shifted his eyes, and released her hand: “I must not stay another moment, Abraham," she cried, turning to the Jew. "Adah would be vexed. if I were late."

She turned back to Hammond, but before she could speak he was saying,

"Good-bye, Miss Robart; I hope we may meet again.

What your brother has already told me only incites me to come again and see him, for there are many things I want to know."

He shook hands with the girl again. His eyes met hers, and again he saw the olive cheeks suddenly warm.

Ten minutes later he was driving back to his office, his mind in a strange whirl, the beautiful face of Zillah Robart filling all his vision.

He pulled himself up at last, and laughed low and amusedly as he murmured,

"And I am the man whose pulses had never been quickened by the sight or the touch of a woman until I met her - "

The memory of Madge Finisterre flashed into his mind. He smiled to himself as he mused:

"Even when I seemed most smitten by Madge, by her piquant Americanism, I told myself I was not sure that love had anything to do with my feelings. Now I know it had not."

His eyes filled suddenly with a kind of staring wonder as he cried out, in a low, startled undertone:

"Am I inferring to myself that this sudden admiration for Zillah Robart has any element of love in it?"

He smiled at his own unuttered answer. The cab pulled up at the door of the office at that moment. He came back sharply to everyday things.

~ end of chapter 12 ~

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