

IN THE TWINKLING OF AN EYE

by

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

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CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

CASTING A SHOE

IT was two hours after midnight when Tom Hammond was free at last. But he did not go to bed. His soul was disturbed. What he had heard at the major's meeting had stirred a myriad disquieting thoughts within him, and now that he was clear to do it, he shut himself up alone with a Bible, and began to go over every point of the major's address. He had taken copious notes in shorthand, paying especial attention to the texts quoted and referred to.

At the end of an hour he looked up from his Bible. There was a wondering amaze in his eyes, a strange, perplexed knitting of his brows.

"It is all most marvellous!" he murmured. "There is not a flaw or hitch anywhere in the major's statements or reasoning. The Scriptures prove, to the hilt, every word that he uttered."

He smiled to himself as, rising to his feet, he said aloud,

"I should not sleep if I went to bed; I will go out."

There are ways of getting into some of the London parks before the regulation hour for opening the gates. Tom Hammond had often found a way to forestall the park-opener.

Ten minutes after leaving his chambers he was inside the park he loved best. Everything was eerily still and silent. The calm suited his mood. He wanted to feel, as well as to be, absolutely alone. He had his desire. There had been a thick mist over London overnight, but the atmosphere was as clear as a bell now. The air was as balmy as a morning in May or September.

There was a faint light from the stars that stabbed the deep violet sky. He moved slowly, thoughtfully, through paths as familiar to him as the rooms he occupied at home.

"And CHRIST might come to-day!" he mused. "As Major H - showed plainly from the Bible, there is no other prophetic event to transpire before His coming."

Almost unconsciously he paused in his walking.

"If," he cried softly, a certain fearsomeness in his voice, "if He came to-day, came now, what about me? Where should I come in?"

He recalled the fact that, according to the major's showing, he, Tom Hammond, was quite unprepared for CHRIST's coming, because he was still unsaved. He shivered slightly as the thought of his unpreparedness came to him.

With the flashing swiftness of one of memory's freaks, there leaped into his mind some lines of Charles Wesley's. He had written them, a day or two before, in illustration of a certain statement in an article on hymnology. They had not borne any message to his soul then, but now they seemed like the voicing of his own inmost thoughts.

He walked slowly on, the words falling from his lips in half-uttered notes.

"And am I only born to die?
And must I suddenly comply
With nature's stern decree?
What after death for me remains
Celestial joys, or bitter pains,
To all eternity?"

"No room for mirth or trifling here,
For worldly hope, or worldly fear,
If life so soon is gone -
If now the Judge is at the door,
And all mankind must stand before
The inexorable throne!"

"Nothing is worth a thought beneath,
But how I may escape the death
That never, never dies -
How make my own election sure,
And, when I fail on earth, secure
A mansion in the skies."

"There was something inspiring, something helpful, in the last verse," he mused, "but, for the life of me, I cannot recall it."

The piping note of a robin from a clump of bush trees close by broke into his reverie. He lifted his head sharply and looked around, then upwards. The stars had paled in the violet dome above him. Somewhere near, ahead of him, was a piece of ornamental water. He caught a glimpse of it between the trees.

"Pip-pip!" came again from the robin's throat. He remembered Charles Fox, and said softly aloud:

"Came forward to be seen,
My little bright-eyed fellow,
And an honest one as well Oh!
In thy suit of olive green,
With red-orange vest between,
And small touching voice so mellow."

The bird suddenly flew across his path, dropped upon a low piece of iron fencing, glanced askance at him, then darted to where a morning meal peeped out of the damp sod.

Two or three other low, sleepy bird-notes followed, then the water-fowl began their discordant quacking. The tremulous flute-notes of a thrush made rich music on the morning air.

The stars faded out of sight. The cold grey light of dawning day moved into the eastern horizon. The smell of the earth grew rank. The air grew keener. The east slowly reddened. Roofs and towers of houses and churches grew up slowly, and grey amid the cold light of the dawn. He turned to face the spot where he knew the great clock-tower of Westminster could be seen. A light burned high aloft in the tower, telling that England's legislators were still in session.

Slowly, thoughtfully, he turned back to walk home.

"If CHRIST came at this instant," he mused, "how many of those Commoners and Peers would be ready to meet Him? And what of the teeming millions of this mighty city? GOD help us all! What blind fools we are!"

* * * *

In spite of his night vigil Tom Hammond was in his office at his usual hour. He had been there about an hour when there came a short, sharp rap on the panel of his room-door. In response to his "Come in!" Joyce, the drunken reporter lurched in. In some way he had contrived to elude those on duty in the enquiry-office.

He was the worse for drink, and in response to Hammond's sharp queries:

"What do you want? How came you here unannounced?" he began to "beg the loan of five shillings."

"Not a copper!" cried Hammond.

Joyce whined for it.

Hammond refused more sharply.

The drunken wretch cringed, whimpered for "just 'arf-a-crown."

The fellow began to bluster, then to threaten.

"If you don't leave this room, I'll hurl you out," cried Hammond, "and give you in custody of the police."

The drunken beast straightened his limp form as well as he was able, as he hiccupped:

"All rightsh, Tom Ham'n'd. Every dawg hash hish day. You're havin' yoursh now, all rightsh - all rightsh, - but I'll-hic-do fur yer; I'll-hie-ruin yer; I'll -"

Tom Hammond darted from his place by the table. The next instant he would have put his threat of "hurling out" into execution, but the drunken braggart did not wait for him, for he shuffled out of the room, cursing hideously.

As the door closed upon him, Tom Hammond went across to the window, and flung up the lower sashes, and drew down the upper ones. From a drawer in a cabinet he took a strip of scented joss-paper, and lit it. The sandal-like perfume spread instantly through all the room.

"Faugh!" he muttered. "The whole place seems foul after his presence."

He turned to his wash-stand, rolled back the polished top, and washed his hands.

"I'll see Ralph, he muttered, as he dried his hands "and go out for a couple of hours. I'll go and see Cohen."

It was curious how often he found excuse to visit the Jew.

A quarter of an hour later he drove up to the house of Cohen. He found him, with his wife and Zillah, on the point of starting for their synagogue.

"One may live a life-time, as a Jew, in this country," Cohen explained, "and never see the ceremony that is about to take place in our synagogue. It is what is known in our religion as 'Chalitzah.' Will you go with us, Mr. Hammond?"

Tom Hammond's eyes met Zillah's. Then he promptly said -

"Yes" to the Jew's question.

"Right, then! We can explain about the ceremony as we go!" Cohen said, and the quartette left the house.

There was not much time for explanation, but what Tom Hammond heard convinced him that he was a fortunate journalist that day. He had no opportunity of talking with Zillah, but he found his heart beating with a strange wildness whenever his eyes met hers - and they frequently met.

At the door of the synagogue the party had to separate, the two women going one way, Cohen and Hammond another. The building was filling very fast. Presently it was packed to suffocation. It was Tom Hammond's first sight of a Jewish congregation in a synagogue. It amazed him. The hatted men and bewigged women - these latter sat behind a grille. The gorgeousness of much of the female finery. The curious "praying shawls" - the "Talith" of the men.

Suddenly a Rabbi began to intone the opening words of the service, reading from the roll of the law, "The Holy Scroll:" **"If brethren dwell together, and one of them die, and have no child, the wife of the dead shall not marry without unto a stranger; her husband's brother shall take her to wife, and perform the duty of a husband's brother to her . . . And if the man like not to take his brother's wife, then let his brother's wife go up to the gate unto the elders, and say, My husband's brother refuseth to raise up unto his brother a name in Israel, he will not perform the duty of my husband's brother.**

"Then the elder of the city shall call the man, and speak unto him: and if he stand to it, and say, I like not to take her;

"Then shall his brother's wife come unto him in the presence of the elders, and loose his shoe from off his foot, and shall spit in his face, and shall answer and say. 'So shall it be done unto that man that will not build us his brothers' house.'

"And his name shall be called in Israel, 'the house of him that hath his shoe loosed'."

The service was all very curious in the eyes of Tom Hammond. He followed every item of it with the closest, most interested attention. Presently the parties specially concerned mounted the platform. This platform was backed with a huge square frame covered with black cloth. This was meant to symbolize mourning for the dead husband. Three tall candle-sticks held lighted candles, their flames looking weird and sickly in the daylight.

The Rabbi stooped before the brother-in-law, and took off his right shoe and sock. Another official washed the foot, wiped it with a towel, and pared the toe-nails.

A soft white shoe, made specially for the occasion, was then taken by the rabbi, put on to the bare foot of the man, and laced up very tightly, the long ends of the lace being twisted round the ankle and knotted securely.

Then there followed a seemingly interminable string of questions, put by the rabbi, and answered by the brother-in-law. The catechism culminated in a few chief questions such as:

"Do you wish to marry this woman?"

"I do not," replied the brother-in-law.

"For what reason?"

"I am already married; my wife is living, and the law of the land we live in does not permit my having more than one wife.

The reply rang clear and strong through the silent building, and the hush seemed to deepen as the rabbi asked,

"Will you give this woman Chalitza?"

"Certainly I will, if she wishes it," replied the brother-in-law.

Turning to the woman, the rabbi asked, "Do you wish to receive Chalitza?"

Tom Hammond saw how the light of a great eagerness leaped into the eyes of the beautiful Jewess, and how her face glowed with the warmth of a sudden color, as she replied,

"I do wish for Chalitza, for I desire to marry again."

The rabbi's assistant gave her certain instructions, and she knelt before her brother-in-law, and with the thumb and finger of her right hand - she dare not use the left, however difficult her task might prove,- she began untying the knots in the lace fastenings around the ankle.

It was no child's play to unfasten the shoe. The knots had been drawn very tight; but she was very determined, and presently a deep sigh of relief broke from the breathless, watching congregation, as, taking the shoe from the man's foot, she flung it sharply down, twice, upon the floor.

She rose now to her feet to complete the ceremony.

The law of spitting in the face of the man had been modified to meet the views of a day less gross than when it was carried out in full coarseness.

The brother-in-law took a couple of paces backwards, and the beautiful widow spat on the place he had stood a moment before.

Then she faced the great congregation. Her eyes travelled straight to the face of the man she loved, whom she was shortly to marry. Her eyes danced with excitement, her cheeks were rosy with color, her whole face was full of an indescribable rapture, as she cried:

"I am free!"

"True, sister, you are free!" the brother-in-law responded.

The rabbi moved swiftly to her side, and, looking into her face, said:

“O woman of Israel, you are free!”

With a shout that reminded Tom Hammond of the shout, "He is risen!" at the Easter service in the Greek churches of Russia, the excited, perspiring congregation cried: "Woman, you are free!"

A moment or two later the service concluded, and the building emptied. Walking homeward by Hammond's side, Cohen said, "Only the most orthodox of Jews would dream of using Chalitza to free themselves for re-marrying. This is the only case I have personally known. By-the-bye, Mr. Hammond, it is said that about the middle of the eighteenth century that one of the Rothschild widows sought Chalitza, but failed to untie the lace of the shoe, and was disqualified from re-marrying."

Cohen's wife had stopped to speak to some friends.

The young Jew joined her. Tom Hammond found himself moving forward by Zillah's side.

"What an extraordinary service that was, Miss Robart!" he said.

"It was!" she glanced almost shyly away from him, for, unknown to himself his eyes were full of the warmest admiration.

"Do you think, Miss Robart," he went on, "if you were situated as was that beautiful woman whom we have just seen freed from the Mosaic bond, that you would have braved the Chalitza ceremony, or would you have taken advantage of the English law and -"

She lifted her great, black, lustrous eyes to his in a sudden gaze of utter frankness, as, interrupting him, she cried:

"I would certainly not marry any man, save one whom I could wholly revere and love!"

"Happy the man whom you shall thus honor, Miss Robart!"

Tom Hammond barely whispered the words, and she was not wholly sure that he meant them for her ears. She did not respond in any way. But she was conscious that his gaze was fixed upon her. She was equally conscious that she was blushing furiously. Perhaps it was to give her a chance of recovering herself, that his next question was on quite a different topic.

"Are you, Miss Robart," he said, "wholly wedded to the Jewish faith? Do you believe, for instance, that JESUS, the Nazarene, was an impostor?"

He heard the catch that came into her throat. Then, with a half-frightened look around, she lifted her melting eyes to his, as she said, "I can trust you, Mr. Hammon, I know. You will keep my confidence, if I give it to you?"

His eyes answered her, and she went on.

"I have not dared to breathe a word of it to anyone, not even to my good brother-in-law Abraham, but I am learning to love CHRIST."

Her face was filled with a holy light, her cheeks glowed with excitement, as she went on:

"I see how the prophecies of our forefathers - Isaiah especially - were all literally fulfilled in the life and work of JESUS of Nazareth. I see, too, that when next He comes, it will not be as our race supposes, as the Messiah to the Jews, but He will come in the air, and -"

She glanced sharply round. Some instinct told her that her friends were coming.

"No more now," she whispered. "I will tell you more another time. I shall myself know more, to-night. I go twice a week to a mission-room at Spitalfields -"

"What time?" he asked eagerly.

"Seven," she replied, not realizing the eagerness of his tone.

"Where is this place?" he went on.

She had just time to tell him. When Cohen and his wife came up, husband and wife began talking together. Zillah appeared to listen, but in reality she heard nothing of what they were saying. For a strange thing had happened. She had dropped her hand by her side as the Cohens had rejoined them, and had suddenly found her fingers clasped in Hammond's hand.

What did it mean? she wondered. They had met often of late. She had read an unmistakable ardency in his eyes very often, when her glance met his. And, deep in her own heart, she knew that all the woman-love she would ever have to give a man she had unconsciously given to him. Was this sudden secret handclasp of his a silent expression of love on his part, or was it meant merely as an assurance of sympathy in the matter of her new faith?

She could not be sure which it was, but she let her plump fingers give a little pressure of response. How did he translate this response? she wondered. She had no means of deciding, save that her heart leaped wildly in a tumultuous delight as she felt how he literally gripped her fingers in a closer, warmer clasp.

They had reached the house by this time. Hammond would not go in. He shook hands, in parting, with each, but his hold upon Zillah's hand was longer than on the others. He pressed the fingers meaningly, and his eyes held an ardency that gave a new tumult to her heart.

As she passed into the house she whispered to herself, "Will he be at Spitalfields to-night?"

~ end of chapter 17 ~

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