

# IN THE TWINKLING OF AN EYE

by

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(Author of *Mark of the Beast*)

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## CHAPTER ONE

### TAKEN AT THE FLOOD

THE man walked aimlessly amid the thronging press. He was moody and stern. His eyes showed his disappointment and perplexity. At times, about his mouth there lurked an almost savage expression. As a rule he stood and walked erect. Only the day before this incident one of a knot of flower-girls in Drury Lane had drawn the attention of her companions to him as he strode briskly along the pavement, and in a rollicking spirit had sung, as he passed her:

"Stiff, starch, straight as a larch,  
Every inch a soldier;  
Fond o' his country, fond o' his queen,  
An' hawfully fond o' me."

But to-day there is nothing of the soldier in the pose or gait of Tom Hammond.

Yet the time and place ought to have held his attention sufficiently to have kept him alert to outward appearance. It was eleven in the forenoon. The place was Piccadilly. He came abreast of Swan and Edgar's. The pavement was thronged with women on shopping bent. More than one of them shot an admiring glance at him, for he had the face, the head, of a king among men. But he had no eyes for these chance admirers.

Tom Hammond was thirty years of age, a journalist, and an exceptionally clever one, at the time we make his acquaintance.

He was a keen, shrewd man, was gifted with a foresight and general prescience that were almost remarkable, and hence was commonly regarded by his journalistic friends as "a coming man."

He had strongly-fixed ideas of what a great daily paper should be, but never having seen any attempt that came within leagues of his ideal, he longed - lusted would not be too strong a term - for the time and opportunity when, with practically unlimited capital behind him, and with a perfectly free hand to use it, he could issue his ideal journal.

This morning he seems farther from the goal of his hopes than ever. For two years he had been sub-editor of a London daily that had made for itself a great name - of a sort. There were certain reasons which had prompted him to hope, to expect, the actual editorship before long. But now his house of cards had suddenly tumbled about his ears.

A change had recently taken place in the composition of the syndicate that financed the journal.

There were wheels within wheels, the existence of some of which he had never once guessed, and which in their whirling had suddenly produced unexpected results. The editor-in-chief had resigned, and the newly elected editor proved to be a man who had, years before, done him, Tom Hammond, the foulest wrong one journalist can do to another.

Under the present circumstances there had been no honourable course open for Hammond but to resign. That morning he had found his resignation not only accepted, but he found himself practically dismissed.

Enclosed in the letter of acceptance of his resignation was a check covering the term of his notice, together with the intimation that his services would cease from the time of his receipt of the check.

His dejection, at that moment when we meet him, was caused not so much at finding himself out of employment as from the consciousness that the new editor-elect had accomplished this move with a view to his degradation in the eyes of his profession - in fact, out of sheer spite.

To escape the crowd that almost blocked the pavement in front of Swan and Edgar's windows, he turned sharply into the road, and literally ran into the arms of a young man.

"Tom Hammond!"

"George Carlyon!"

The greeting flew simultaneously from the lips of the two men. They gripped hands.

"By all that's wonderful!" cried Carlyon, still wringing his friend's hand. "Do you know, Tom, I am actually up here in town for one purpose only - to hunt you up."

"To hunt me up?"

"Oh, let's get out of this crush, old man," interrupted Carlyon.

The pair steered their way through the traffic, crossed the Circus, stopped for a moment at the beautiful Shaftesbury Fountain, then struck across to the Avenue.

In the comparative lull of that walk Carlyon went on:

"Yes, I've run up to town this morning to find you out and ask you one question: Are you so fixed up - excuse the Americanism, old boy. I've a dashing little girl cousin, from the States, staying with my mother, and - well, you know, old fellow, how it is. Man's an imitative creature, and all that, and absorbs dialect quicker than anything else under the sun. But what I was going to say was this: are you too fixed up with your present newspaper to forbid your entertaining the thought of a real plum in the journalistic market?"

Hammond's customary alert look returned to his face.

He was now "every inch a soldier," as he cried, excitedly, "Don't keep me in suspense, Carlyon; tell me quickly what you mean."

"Let's jump into a gondola, Tom. I can talk better as we ride."

Carlyon had caught the eye of a cab-driver, and the next moment the two friends were being driven along riverwards.

"Someone, some Johnnie or other," began Carlyon, as the two men settled themselves back in the cab, "once called the hansom cab the gondola of London's streets -"

He caught the quick, impatient movement of Hammond's face, and with a light laugh went on:

"But you're on thorns, old boy, to hear about the journalistic plum. Well, here goes. You once met my uncle, Sir Archibald Carlyon?"

Hammond nodded.

"He is crazy to start a daily," said Carlyon. "It is no new craze with him; he has been itching to do it for years. And now that gold has been discovered on that land of his in Western Australia, and he is likely to be a multi-millionaire - the concessions he has already sold have given him a clear million,- now that he is rich beyond all his dreams, he won't wait another day; he will be a newspaper proprietor. It's a case of that kiddie in the bath, Tom, doncher-know, that's grabbing for the soap - 'he won't be happy till he gets it.' "

"He wants to find at once a good journalist, who is also a keen business man; one who will take hold of the whole thing. To the right man he will give a perfectly free hand, will interfere with nothing, but be content simply to finance the affair."

An almost fierce light was burning in the eyes of the eager, listening Hammond. A thousand thoughts rioted through his brain, but he uttered no word; he would not interrupt his friend.

"I told Nunkums last night, when he was bubbling and boiling over with his project, that I had heard you say it was easier to drop a hundred or two hundred thousand pounds over the starting of a new paper than Perhaps over any other venture in the world.

"Nunkums just smiled as I spoke, dropped a walnut into his port glass, and said quietly, 'Then I'll drop them.'

"He hooked that walnut out of his wine with the miniature silver boathook - he had the thing made for him for the purpose,- devoured the wine-saturated nut, then smiled back into my face, as he said: 'Yes, Georgie, I am quite prepared to drop my hundred, two hundred, three hundred thousand, if needs be, as I did my walnut. But I am equally hopeful - if I can secure the right man to edit and manage my paper,- that I shall eventually hook out an excellent dividend for my outlay. I want a man who not only knows how to do his own work well, as an editor, but one who has the true instinct in choosing his staff.'

"Of course, Tom, I trotted you out before him. He remembered you, of course, and jumped at the idea of getting you, if you were to be got. The upshot of it is, nothing would satisfy him but that I should come up by an early train this morning - early bird catches the worm, and all that kind of business, you know,- and now, in spite of the fact that my particular worm had wriggled and squirmed miles from his usual habitat, I've caught him. Now, tell me, are you open to treat with Sir Archibald?"

"Yes, and can begin business this very day!" Hammond laughed with the abandon of a boy, as he told, in a few sentences, the story of his dismissal.

"Good!" Carlyon, in his own exuberant glee, slapped his friend's knee.

"Sir Archibald," he went on, "was to come up by the 10:05 from our place, due at Waterloo at 11:49. He'll be fixed up - "Hail Columbia!" again - at the hotel by this time. That's where we are driving to now, and - ah! here we are!"

A moment later the two men were mounting the hotel steps. One of the servants standing in the vestibule recognized Carlyon, and saluted him.

"My uncle arrived, Bates?" Carlyon asked.

"Yes, sir, and a young lady with him!" Carlyon turned quickly to Hammond.

"That's Madge, my American cousin, Tom. I'm awfully glad she has come; I should like you to know her."

Turning to the servant, he asked, "Same old rooms, Bates?"

"Yes, sir."

Three steps at a time, laughing and talking all the while, Carlyon, ignoring the lift, raced up the staircase, followed more slowly by his friend.

Hammond never wholly forgot the picture of the sitting-room and its occupant, as he entered with Carlyon.

The room was a large one, exquisitely furnished, and flooded with a warm, mellow light. A small but cheerful looking wood fire burned upon the tiled hearth, the atmosphere of the room fragrant with a soft, subtle odor, as though the burning wood were scented.

From a couch, as the two men entered, a girl rose briskly, and faced them. She made a picture which Tom never forgot. The warm, mellow light that filled the room seemed to clothe her as she stood to meet them. "America" was stamped upon her and her dress, upon the arrangement of her hair, upon the very droop of her figure. She was tall, fair, with that exquisite coloring and smoothness of complexion that is the product of an unartificial, hygienic life.

Her face could not be pronounced wholly beautiful, but it was a face that was full of life and charm, her eyes being especially arrestive.

"Awfully glad you came up, Madge!" cried Carlyon.

"I've run my quarry down, and this is my own particular, Tom Hammond."

He made a couple of mockingly-funny elaborate bows, saying: "Miss Madge Finisterre, of Duchess County, New York. Mr. Tom Hammond, of - oh, shades of Cosmopolitanism! - of everywhere, of London just at present." - Tom bowed to the girl - She returned his salute, and then held forth her hand in a frank, pleasant way, as she laughingly said, "I have heard so much of Tom Hammond during the last few days, that I guess you seem like an old acquaintance."

Tom shook hands with the maiden, and for a moment or two they chatted as freely and merrily as though they were old acquaintances.

The voice of Carlyon broke into their chat, asking:

"Where's Nunkums, Madge?"

Before the girl could reply, the door opened and Sir Archibald entered the room.

One glance into his face would have been sufficient to have told Tom the type of man he had to deal with, even if he had not seen him before. A warmhearted, unconventional, impulsive man; a perfect gentleman in appearance, but a merry, hail-fellow-well-met man in his dealings with his fellows.

With a bit of mock drama in the gesture, Madge Finisterre flourished her hand towards the newcomer, crying,

"Sir Archibald, George? Lo, he is here!"

She flashed a quick glance to the piano as she added, "If only I had known you were about to enter, uncle, I would have treated you to a few crashing bars of stage-life entrée-music."

"Go away with your nonsense!" laughed the old man.

"Nonsense, indeed!" the girl laughed as merrily as the old man. Then, with a sudden, swift movement, she crossed to the piano, struck one sharp note upon it, and whispered in well feigned hoarseness, "Slow music for the three conspirators as they retire to plot the destruction of London's press, and the accumulation of untold millions by their own special journalistic production!"

Her fingers moved over the ivory keys, and low, weird, creepy music filled the room with its eerie notes.

Sir Archibald and George Carlyon fell in with the girl's mood, and crept doorwards on tiptoe.

"Number three," hissed the girl.

And Tom Hammond laughingly followed with the two other men.

"She is a treat, is Madge!" laughed George Carlyon, as the three men passed through the doorway and made for the study-like room of Sir Archibald.

~ end of chapter 1 ~

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