

IN THE TWINKLING OF AN EYE

by

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(Author of *Mark of the Beast*)

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CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

"THIS SAYING SHALL COME TO PASS."

TOM HAMMOND greeted his sub most heartily. Ralph had been away, in Paris, for a fortnight, partly on business, partly for a change.

As soon as their greetings were exchanged, he turned eagerly to Hammond, as he said:-

"But I say, old man, what on earth is all this jargon you wrote me about, the return of CHRIST, and -"

He paused suddenly. His eyes had just' caught sight of the great placard. His gaze was riveted on it. He read the two words aloud:-



TO-DAY?
PERHAPS!

In a voice of wondering amaze, he gasped: "What's that, Tom? What does it mean?"

Tom Hammond repeated, in a few sentences, what he had previously written to his friend, as to his conversion, then, passing on to the subject of the Lord's second coming, he said:

"I am so impressed, Ralph, with the imminence of our Lord's return, that I have had that placard done to arrest the attention of callers upon me, and give me an opportunity of speaking to them about their eternal destiny. To-day, too, I have been impressed so with the necessity of speaking to the world - "*The Courier's*" world, I mean of course - on this great, this momentous subject, that I have made it the subject of my 'Prophet's Chamber' column."

He gathered up the sheets of his M.S. he had written, and passed them over the table to Ralph Bastin.

"You will see, I have written it in the most simple, almost colloquial style, Ralph," he said. "I wanted it to be a man's quiet, earnest, simple utterance to his fellow man, and not a journalist's article."

Ralph Bastin's eyes raced over the papers. His face was a strange study, while he read, reflecting a score of different, ever-changing emotions, but amid them all never losing a constant deepening amaze.

As he finished the last sheet, he looked Tom Hammond hard and searchingly in the face.

"My dear Tom," he began. His voice was very grave, very serious. "You'll ruin *The Courier!* You will ruin yourself! The world will call you mad -- !"

"They called my Lord mad, Ralph, and they have called His servants mad, over and over again, ever since."

There was not a shadow of cant in his voice and manner, as he went on:-

"The word of our GOD, Ralph - which is the only real rule of life, tells us that CHRIST, whose name I profess, said:-

" Whosoever shall confess me, before men, him will I confess also before my Father which is in Heaven . . . If any man will come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me. For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: but whosoever will lose his life, for My sake, the same shall save it. For what is a man advantaged, if he gain the whole world and lose his own soul . . .

" For whosoever shall be ashamed of me and of My words: ('Surely I come quickly,' Ralph, is one of His very last recorded words,) 'of him shall the Son of Man be ashamed, when He shall come in His own glory, and in His Father's, and of the holy angels.' "

Tom Hammond leant forward in his chair to lay his hand on the wrist of the other; to plead with him. But, with an exclamation of angry impatience, Ralph, cried:

"Hang it, old man, you must be going dotty!"

With an expression of annoyance, almost amounting to disgust, he swung round on his heel.

"Look here, Tom," he began.

He swirled back to meet his friend face to face.

Then, with a startled cry, he stared at the chair, in which, an instant before, Tom Hammond had been sitting.

The chair was empty!

"Good GOD!" he gasped.

Instinctively, he knew what had happened! - Involuntarily his eyes travelled to the Placard, and in the same moment he recalled the closing words of Tom Hammond's M.S. which he had just read:-

“ 'Then shall it come to pass, that which is written, "ONE SHALL BE TAKEN, THE OTHER LEFT.' ”

A strange, unnatural trembling seized him. He dropped into the chair he had been occupying, and stared at the empty revolving chair opposite.

"Good GOD!" He slowly repeated the words.

There was no thought of irreverence in the utterance. It was the unconscious acknowledgment of GOD's Presence and Power.

For a time - he never knew how long - he sat still and silent like a man stunned. Then, as his eyes travelled slowly to where the sheets of M.S.'s lay, he smiled wearily, drew them towards him, and took his stylo from his pocket. Putting the most powerful pressure of his will upon himself, he began to write after the last works penned by his translated chief:-

(P.S.- Written by the sub-editor of "*The Courier*."

By the time this printed sheet is being read, the world will have learned that a section of the community has been suddenly taken from our midst. The Editor of *The Courier*, the giant mind and kindly heart of Tom Hammond, have been taken from us.

The writer of this postscript, who was in the room, when the "Prophet" of *The Courier* was taken, was in the act of scorning his message as to the nearing of the great translation. **"In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye"** he was gone.

The writer has not left the room since, and has no means of knowing who else among those known to him are missing,- not many personal acquaintances, he fears, since one's personal clique has never shown any very marked signs of what one has hitherto considered an ultra type of Christianity, a condition of "righteous overmuch."

"When we pass out of this room, presently, and touch the great outside world once more, what shall we find? How soon will it be generally known that a section of the community - a larger section, maybe, than we conceive possible - has been silently, suddenly, secretly taken from our midst? What will follow? Where are the prophets who shall teach us where we are, and what we may expect? Does the end of the world follow next? Is there any order of events, specified in the Bible, that follows this mysterious translation? if so, what is it? Who will show us these things?"

"Again, since I, the writer of this postscript, am left, while my friend, Hammond, is taken, why am I left. and why shall I find - as of course I shall when I begin to go abroad among mine acquaintance - hundreds of others left! I have been christened, confirmed, have occasionally 'communicated,' - this is the clerical term, though as I write, it occurs to me that there must have been some flaw, somewhere, in the 'communicating.'

"I have always supposed myself a Christian by virtue of these things, to which a clean, decent life has been added. Thousands upon thousands, I feel sure, will be puzzled by this same contemplation, when this wonderful Translation becomes generally known.

"If we are not made Christians by christening, confirmation, communicating, why have we always been taught so, by our clergy? How many of these same clergy shall we find left behind.

"And I suppose there will have been some kind of kindred process at work among the Nonconformists bodies - in pulpit and pew, alike. For ourselves, we have come little in contact with Nonconformity, but, if what is accepted generally, to-day, as to the religious situation, be true - that the curse of the Ritualism of the 'Establishment,' finds its parallel in the Rationalism, Unitarianism; Socialism, etc., of Nonconformity - then I shall expect to find as many Nonconformists, lay and ministerial, left behind from this mysterious, spiritual translation, as churchmen."

There came a tap at the door. The messenger boy Charley, appeared. He glanced towards the empty Editor's chair, then stammered.

"I beg pardon, sir, I thought. Mr. Hammond was here, sir. They have jest blown up the tube to know if the 'Prophet's' column was ready."

Ralph Bastin noticed that the eyes of the boy flitted from his face to the placard.

"Know what that means, Charley?" Bastin asked.

"Yus, sir, leastways, I knows what Mr. Hammond means by it! 'E sez that JESUS CHRIST's comin' back, an' goin' to take all the real Christians out 'er the world, an' nobody won't see 'em go, nor nothink. I 'eard Mr. Hammond 'splainin' it all to a gent, t'other day."

Curious to know if the boy himself had thought seriously at all of the matter, Bastin said:-

"What do you think of it, Charley?"

"Wal, it's like this, sir, I aint been to no Sunday School since I was quite a young 'un, 'bout eight perhaps. An' I never goes to no Church nor Chapel, cos why? Why 'cos Sunday's the only day- 'cepts my 'olidays when I gits any chance fur any rickreation or fresh hair. So I aint up much in 'ligious things. But my sister, Lulu, she walks out wi' a chap as teaches in a Sunday School - leastways, he oosed to afore he took up wi' our Lulu, but now 'e wants 'is Sunday School time fur spoonying, an' 'e can spoon, sir, there's no error - well, knowin' as 'e oosed to do summat at 'ligion, I ups an' arks 'im about what Mr. Hammond said, about that takin' away business, an' 'e (Jimmy Doubleyou, Lulu's chap, I mean, sir); laded, an' said, "Don't yer b'lieve any sich rot! D'yer think Gawd 'ud go an' kidnap all 'Is people like that?" *

** At a Bible-Reading in Malvern in the house of one of GOD's choicest saints, Miss Ann Boobbyer, where the precious truth of "The Rapture" was being unfolded, a minister present, who was much used of GOD, as an evangelist, started up, and cried.*

"What! My Lord coming to Kidnap all His people? Never! Never! I'll not believe that!"

Ralph Bastin would have smiled, at any other time, at this curious reply. But, to-night, his soul was too sobered. Gathering up the sheets of M.S.'s, he clipped them together, stamped them with Hammond's mechanical imprimatur, and handed the sheaf to the lad, giving him instructions to deliver them in the Composing Room. As the lad left the room, he sat back in his chair, and tried to think out the position of affairs. He had hardly settled himself down, before the messenger boy returned.

"'Scuse me, sir," the lad began, "but summat curious hev 'appened. There's two 'holy Joes,' in the Composing room, an' one in the Steno room - leastways, they oosed to be - an' they's all three bunked off, somewheres, nobody seed 'em go, an' their coats an' 'hats is 'ung hup where they ussally is, an' some o' the chaps says as they's translated. Alf Charman, one o' the comp's, oosed to talk like Mr. 'Ammond did, sir -"

The boy looked a trifle fearsomely at the empty editor's chair, as he added.

"Mr. 'Ammond, sir, I-er-I suppose as-'e-'e ain't -?"

"Mr. Hammond has gone out!" Bastin rapped out the words quite sharply. All this talk of the missing men was getting on his nerves.

"That will do, Charley!" he added.

The lad walked slowly to the door, his eyes fixed on the placard, his lips moving to the words,

"To-day?"

"Perhaps !"

"Coorius!" he muttered as he passed out of the room. Ralph Bastin tried again to settle himself down for a quiet think. Suddenly he started to his feet, wild of eye, and with horror in his face.

"Viola?" he muttered. "My beautiful little Viola? She has talked continuously of CHRIST of late. Has she been -?"

He seized his hat, and with a crushed down sob of literal fear, he rushed away.

Outside the office he came upon a hansom. He leaped into it, shouting the Bloomsbury address to the man.

"Drive for your life!" he yelled. "A sovereign for you if you get me there quickly!"

The man's horse was fresh. They rushed through the streets. Arriving at the house, he tossed the driver his promised sovereign, and letting himself in with his latch key, he dashed into the drawing room. It was empty!

He was leaving the room hurriedly, when he encountered the landlady. "Miss Viola has gone to bed, sir," she overtired herself, visiting the sick-poor with her flowers, and all that, to-day, and she -"

"Thanks!" with a hurried nod he raced up the stairs.

The child's bedroom was next to his own. He entered it without knocking. He was too much agitated to stand upon ceremony.

The room was in darkness, he struck a match, laid it to the gas nipple, then shot a quick glance at the bed. In that first glance, he saw that it was empty. He went close up to the bed, it had been occupied, he could see that. He thrust his hand well down under the clothes. There was faint body warmth left in the bedding - or it seemed so to him.

"GOD help me?" he groaned. And two great tears fell glittering from his eyes.

"Viola! Viola! my precious darling!" he moaned. "You were my life, my- -"

His emotion choked him. He was dropping into the chair by the bed-side, when he noticed that the back and seat of the chair were strewn with the under-clothing, which the child had evidently placed there when disrobing.

With eyes blinded with tears, he lifted the dainty garments in a pile, and laid them on the foot of the bed. Then he dropped back into the chair, buried his face in the pillow - the impress of the lost, beautiful head was left in the pillow - and wept.

For five minutes he remained thus. Then rousing himself, he muttered:- "I must play the man! and get back to the office and lay hold of things."

He left the room, and managed to clear the house without encountering his landlady. Lucky in finding a hansom, he had himself driven first to the central News Agency. He wanted to find out if anything of the mystery was generally known.

The careless-minded, light-hearted tapists, clerks and journalists, were laughing over the few vague rumors of the translation that had reached them.

He said nothing of what he knew, and drove on to the office.

"If the world has to go on, for a time, just as it has been going, in spite of this wonderful thing," he muttered, "then, as acting editor of *The Courier*, I had better stifle every feeling, save the professional, and give London – England - the best morning issue under the new condition of things."

~ end of chapter 25 ~

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