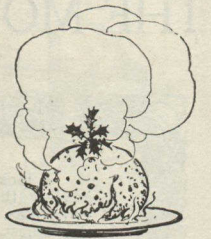




THE COST OF A CRIME

A Story of Yielding to Temptation and the Tragedy Ensuing

By ANNIE S. SWAN



SYNOPSIS OF PRECEDING CHAPTERS.

John Reedham steals thirteen thousand pounds of trust money, held by the firm of Lowther, Currie and Company in London, England. He confesses to his friend, Lidgate, who allows him to escape, and who afterwards informs Mrs. Reedham of the crime. The only child, Leslie, is at school in Surrey. Leslie is brought home from school. Reedham, in the meantime, has found shelter in lodgings with Mrs. Webber, an old servant, and assumes the name of Thomas Charlton.

It was a beautiful and sunshiny morning; comforted and refreshed by his safe shelter, good food, and wholesome breakfast, and perhaps most of all by the sympathy of the only living being to whom he had spoken more than a few words during these horrible days, he was conscious of some slight lifting of the terrible gloom in his soul. Someone got on the omnibus with him, a man in clergyman's dress, with a fine, strong, kind face and a mobile mouth, which had almost a woman's sweetness. The top of the omnibus being nearly full, they had to share a seat, and the clergyman bade him a pleasant good morning.

Reedham at first scarcely responded. For the moment all men were his enemies, and he feared ulterior motives where none could possibly exist.

"London is a pleasant place on a morning like this," said the clergyman, apparently unconscious of any unresponsiveness on the part of his fellow passenger. "And this is quite a pleasant neighborhood. The Camden Road on a morning like this is hard to beat."

"Going down as a neighborhood, I should think?" observed Reedham brusquely. "If one is to judge by the number of notice boards on the houses."

"It has gone down of late, but possibly we may have a renaissance later on," observed the clergyman cheerfully. "People come back after they have tried other parts of London. It has many advantages and conveniences."

"You live here, I suppose?" hazarded Reedham. "Yes, I am the vicar of St. Etheldred's in Seton Square. If you look along the first opening to the left you'll see the square tower of my church."

They passed it at the moment, and Reedham nodded as his companion pointed out a singularly ugly tower of dull smoke-bitten brick.

"A poor neighborhood, and my people are wholly of the working class, but I would not change it. Yes, I could have moved several times in the last ten years, but I am still here. Are you a stranger to London?"

"No, I have lived in it all my life."

The clergyman regarded his clear-cut profile with the interest peculiar to the real and discriminating student of human nature. He gathered from his speech and manner that he was an educated man, and a certain suggestion of power was in his face. But he seemed to be under a cloud. A quickened interest in him filled the good man's soul; it was his business to heal and help and save, and his name was known as a friend to the troubled far beyond the bounds of his own parish.

"Ah, then you know something of the stress of London life. Yet it has its charm. I could not live, I think, outside of it now, unless I happened to get into ill-health. London is no place for those who are not fully equipped for the race."

"You speak truly, sir," said Reedham, with some bitterness. "And it has been the ruin of many who imagined themselves, as you express it, fully equipped."

The note of personal bitterness rang insistently through the words, and the clergyman knew that in thinking that a troubled soul dwelt in the bosom of the man by his side, he had made no mistake.

"You have had misfortune, perhaps?"

"Yes, brought about by my own incredible folly," admitted Reedham, more and more amazed at himself. But there was really nothing to marvel at in the sudden craving for human sympathy. Only the man who has been wholly cut off from it, even for a period of days, knows how real is the deprivation. To Reedham it was a wholly new experience; he had up till then only tasted the sweets of life.

"But misfortunes pass," said the clergyman quietly. "And to all they have their uses. I hope I do not intrude if I express the hope that you see a way out of your misfortunes."

"No," replied Reedham, and a guarded note crept into his voice. "At present I see no way out."

"May I inquire whether you are what is commonly called out of work, though I see that you are a gentleman?"

"Yes, I am out of work."

"And what is your line of things?"

Reedham hesitated a moment.

"I am a clerk," he replied at hazard.

A faint disappointment, almost touched with incredulity, overspread the clergyman's face.

"It is not a profession affording many possibilities," he remarked kindly. "I hope that you have something in view?"

"No, nothing, and I have to get down here," he said, as the omnibus drew up with a jerk at the corner of Euston Road.

"A moment, friend," said the clergyman quickly, as he drew out a card from his pocket and a pencil, with which he proceeded to write something on the back of the card.

"There, that is my name and address, and on the back you will find the address of a gentleman who delights in helping those who are down. He is an intimate friend of mine, we met in connection with a case in which we were both interested, and I have often thanked God for him since. He will see you if you present that card. I have his permission to send him whom I like, and I feel strangely interested in you. I hope we shall meet again."

He offered his hand, and after a moment's hesitation Reedham accepted it.



"Perhaps if you knew my history you would not touch my hand," he said thickly. "Good-bye, sir, and thank you."

He raised his hat and made haste down the steps of the omnibus to the ground. Immediately he turned towards Gower Street, and in a quiet doorway stopped and looked at the card.

On the one side was written:

"The Rev. Cyrus Fielden, St. Etheldred's Vicarage, Camden Town."

On the reverse side a name which caused Reedham to laugh aloud:

"Archibald Currie, Esq., 98, Hyde Park Square, and 18, Old Broad Street, E.C."

The brother of his own partner, James Currie, though a very different type of man.

He thrust the piece of pasteboard into his vest pocket, and strode on, having no particular object in view. He had merely got down to escape the kindly but embarrassing attentions of the vicar of St. Etheldred's.

But the name on the reverse side of the card pursued him as he walked. Something in the mere thought of presenting himself to Archibald Currie, who had known him quite well in the old days, which already seemed so far away, attracted him with a sort of weird fascination.

He was a very different man from his brother James, and if by means of his sympathy and assistance he could climb back to the paths of self-respect, how great would be the irony of his triumph!

There was something adventurous in the mere idea which appealed.

All day long he wandered in the byways of London, pondering on this strange chance that had come in his way. And from the beginning he seemed to know what the end would be.

Four o'clock in the afternoon found him in the very heart of the city standing with his face turned towards Old Broad Street.

CHAPTER IV.

THE HEIGHTS OF HAMPSTEAD.

THE office boy knocked at the door of Mr. Archibald Currie's private room.

"The carriage is at the door, sir, and Miss Wrede wishes to know if she is to come up."

"No, Baddeley, tell Miss Wrede I shall join her in less than five minutes."

"And please, sir, there a man wishes to see you very particular. Could you spare him five minutes? No name, sir, but he gave me this."

He handed a small piece of pasteboard to his master, who read both the printed words and the name scribbled on the back.

"Another of Fielden's proteges. I don't think I can see him now, Baddeley. But there, yes, I will! Tell Miss Wrede I am engaged for a few more minutes and that if she prefers to come up she will find Mr. Willett's room empty."

"Yes, sir, and shall I show the party up, the gentleman I mean, sir?"

"Yes, now."



Baddeley went off cheerfully. Everybody was cheerful under that roof. The note was struck by the principal himself each morning, when he appeared spick and span and smiling at his business house. The world could have told you that Archibald Currie had good reason for cheerfulness, and that he had been an extraordinarily successful man, that he had amassed great wealth, and had most of the gifts that men prize.

But personally he was a singularly lonely man, without ties of the kind which make the chief joy of life. He was estranged, through no fault of his own, from his only brother. They had never, even as boys, been intimate. It was indeed hard to believe that two men so different could have been born of one parentage and shared the same early home-

life. Archibald, the elder, was large-hearted, sunny-natured, generous to a fault, combining with the highest business gifts a breadth of view and a benevolent spirit which his brother James continually condemned.

"Archie makes paupers, and adds to the problems of existence," he was fond of saying, and would then launch into condemnation of his indiscriminate charity.

Mr. James Currie did not err in that direction. He distributed no charity whatsoever, but required all he earned for himself and his family.

The astonishing thing, however, was, that the more Archibald gave away, the more money flowed in upon him. He did all sorts of unnecessary and expensive kindnesses. His latest was to adopt as his daughter one Katherine Wrede, the orphan child of a woman they had known in their youth, and who had married disastrously and suffered much. This latest indiscretion the James Curries condemned very loudly, because they feared that it might divert the channels of their uncle's money from themselves.

Archibald Currie was a very fine-looking man, resembling his brother somewhat in figure and feature, though on a larger scale. The generous largeness of his life seemed to have written themselves all over his personality; his eyes beamed kindness; his beautiful white hair, which gave him at too early an age a singularly benevolent look, framed a face in which there was nothing to repel.

He drew a sheet of paper before him on the desk, and was busy writing when the door opened, and Mr. Charlton was announced.

"In a moment, sir," he said, partly wheeling round, but not taking a good look at the stranger. "Pray take a chair."

It gave the man whom we must henceforth call Charlton the necessary moment for self-recovery. The very fact that the glance bestowed upon him conveyed not the smallest recognition was in itself most reassuring. He looked round the room with interest, and tried to still his nerves, which threatened to get out of hand. Up till now Charlton had not had any occasion to play a part; he was astonished at his own ability to play it. Surely it was the very madness of daring to venture into the presence of this man, noted as much for his shrewd knowledge and judgment of human nature as for his benevolence! It was said in the city that Archibald Currie had never been known to make a mistake in his man.



To pass the bar of his judgment, therefore, was to go forth hall-marked to the world.

The risk for Charlton was colossal; only success could justify it. The man whose verdict might decide his whole fate and future, signed the letter and rang for it to be taken away.

Then he turned to give courteous attention to the stranger, rising to his feet and standing before the empty fireplace, with his hands folded behind his back. To the day of his death Charlton thought he would remember the pattern of his clothes, the curiously-wrought link of the old-fashioned fob, which dangled from beneath his ample waistcoat, the keenness as well as the kind lines in his deep-set eyes.

"You are a friend of the Vicar of St. Etheldred's?"

"Not exactly a friend, sir—a waif on whom he chanced this morning on the top of an omnibus," replied Charlton, striving to meet Currie's eyes, and succeeding wonderfully.

"You want help? What can I do for you?"

"I am out of work, sir," replied Charlton quietly. "A post of some kind, however humble in this place, would be at once the saving and making of me."

"You have been in another position," remarked the elder man, easily detecting the educated note, the ease of manner which singled him out from other applicants. "You have been, I could almost swear, an employer of labour yourself?"

"Yes, sir, I have."

"It does not seem to come readily to you to use the prefix, 'sir,'" continued Currie in an even, quiet voice. "Is there anything you would wish to tell me of a private nature before we consider how you are to be helped?"

Charlton seemed to struggle a moment with himself.

"Sir, if my own fate only were involved I should speak out freely. I cannot do so. I am here without character or credentials, asking you for the love of God to give me one more chance."

Currie remained silent a full minute, during which he regarded the pleader steadily. There was not he felt himself puzzled not so much by a haunting sense of familiarity as by the desire becoming momentarily more insistent to give the desired aid against his better judgment. Something in the low, eyes appealed. And to sum up, the chance to