

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. He obtains employment with Archibald Currie, a brother of his former partner and is unrecognized.

"HE has left his situation," he added, and in a word explained what had happened. Her eyes filled with tears.

"He is so loyal to his father's memory, it is a perfect passion with him. And so jealous he is, too, about it. I believe he would cease to care for me if he thought I could forget."

"It is a fine trait, later he will get more sense of proportion," observed Lidgate quietly. "I'll do what I can for him to-morrow, I promise you. And wherever he may go he will not find the time he has been in the Clapton shop lost. It will have taught him to appreciate better things. And now, let us talk about yourself. You are sadly changed. You have had a terrible year."

"Not quite terrible; there have been gleams of peace," she said, but her eyes did not meet his. "How did you like America?"

"Oh, it is not new to me, I went as far as the Argentine," he added carelessly. Her lips parted in breathless interest.

"That is where you thought John would go. You did not hear anything, I suppose?"

"No, I made very full enquiries. Of course, it is difficult to find a man there, and he might easily evade recognition, but I am nearly certain that he never left this country."

"And equally certain that he is dead, perhaps," she said in a dispirited voice.

Lidgate made no reply.

He could not tell her of the visits he had paid to mortuaries, where unclaimed and unidentified bodies could be seen, neither could he say that certain news of John Reedham's death would simplify life for a good many people.

"I must go on hoping with Leslie that something will happen, that things will be cleared up; though the sort of life I have been living lately does not conduce to cheerfulness," she went on, after a brief space.

"You have had a terrible year, and Leslie tells me you have sordid anxiety now."

She neither denied nor admitted. Lidgate sat forward in his chair and began to speak rapidly.

"I cannot bear to see you like this, and there is no reason why I should bear it. I am, comparatively speaking, a rich man. I cannot, even if I would, spend my money on myself. I have few ties, none of them binding or obligatory. You must let me help you for old acquaintance sake, if for no other reason. Try to think of me as a brother, and let me order you to leave Clapton."

He tried to speak with a sort of bantering gaiety and an assumption of naturalness which did not in the least deceive her.

"You have already done too much in becoming guarantee for my rent. I am afraid you will have to make that guarantee good this time. I have not been able to get the money together."

"For heaven's name don't speak of it. I can't bear it. I tell you it is a mere bagatelle. Don't let it ever be mentioned between us. But honestly, now, do you think it is any good keeping on this house, or in pursuing the life which you admit can't bring you in a living wage?"

"Can you suggest a substitute for it, one which would come within the region of possibility?" she asked with a faint smile.

"I will think of it. Meanwhile the first thing is to get something better for Leslie. Have you ever met Archibald Currie, Mrs. Reedham?"

"Once or twice at Fair Lawn. A delightful man, I thought him, and I often said to John it seemed incredible that he and James could be brothers."

"Many have had such a thought. It would be a fine thing for Leslie to get into his office in New Broad Street. I shall call there to-morrow morning and see if he can suggest anything. It is the sort of thing he would delight to do. The record of his good deeds in the city would fill a book."

"Thank you very much, I shall indeed be grateful if you will do that. It would be the making of Leslie. He does not lack brains, Mr. Lidgate."

They used to be George and Bessie to one another in the old days of their friendship, but in the last year had adopted by common consent the more

formal address. In Lidgate's case at least it was a safeguard.

"I am sure that Leslie has plenty of brains. He is a bit fiery and impulsive, and takes strong likes and dislikes. He does not care much about me for instance."

"Oh, I am sure you are mistaken," she said, but her color faintly rose.

"No, I don't think we make mistakes of that kind, but I understand his feelings, partly at least, and can respect him for it."

She did not ask him to explain, and when she spoke again it was of a different theme.

"Miss Wrede came to see me twice after it all happened, once just before I left Norwood and once here. But I am afraid I was not very cordial to her when she came last."

"Don't you like her? Everybody reports her charming, and Stephen Currie is madly in love with her."

"She is very clever and bright I think and—dangerously sympathetic. I did not want to become intimate with her, Mr. Lidgate, and if she had gone on coming it must have ended in that."

"You were quite frank with her, then?"

"Yes, I told her I would prefer that she did not come, that I should always be grateful to her for her sympathy and would send for her if I were in any special trouble."

"And she understood?"

"She quite understood. That is what I say, she is dangerously sympathetic; one would talk too much to her. It is better not to see her."

"But for you it would have been good."

"No, bad, thoroughly bad, and besides I wanted to be detached from all those who knew me in happier times. But I cannot conceive of her and Stephen Currie."

"I don't think she encourages him, but everyone knows of Stephen's infatuation. In fact it won't hide."

Bessie Reedham sat still for a moment, and then looked him more straightly in the face than she had yet done.

"Tell me truly. Is the loss so great as was said at the time John disappeared?"

"Yes, it was in no way exaggerated."

"And how was it met?"

"The firm met it," he replied evading her straight look.

"Then it is Sir Philip Lowther and James Currie and you who are actually out of pocket."

"Yes, I suppose so, if you put it like that."

"And how much? Tell me the exact sum."

"Why open up all this painful business again?" he asked almost impatiently. "It can make no difference now."

"Oh, yes it can. It will be Leslie's debt. He has set it before him as a goal. Poor boy, it is a dreadful millstone about his neck even now, but I believe that it is a debt he will live to discharge."

"I hope he will not allow it to trouble him unduly; to be a millstone as you describe it," observed Lidgate, as he rose to his feet. "Well, I must go, and I will write to you to-morrow after I have seen Archibald Currie."

"You are very, very good to me," she murmured. Lidgate merely shook his head.

"I have done very little. Good-bye. You will hear from me to-morrow."

He left the house rather abruptly and retraced his steps to the station in doubt whether the visit had been a success. At least it had stayed the longing he had had to see her once more, and convinced him, if he needed any convincing, that he had not forgotten her in the smallest degree. She was ten thousand times more attractive to him now in her poverty and loneliness than she had ever been in the days of her happiest fortune.

He reached his chambers in the Albany half an hour late for dinner, a most unusual occurrence in his methodical, well-ordered life. His valet, Grimston, regarded him with a furtive anxiety, as he waited on him, fully conscious that something ailed his master. He ate sparingly that evening, and had very few remarks to make. Grimston saw that he was preoccupied, and full of serious thought, and began to fear that further business troubles might be looming ahead. Grimston had proved, even in his uneventful life, that misfortunes come not as single spies, but in battalions.

The real trend of his master's thoughts would have surprised and dismayed him had they suddenly been revealed. Grimston's fears regarding the amenity of that comfortable bachelor establishment had not received any shocks for a long time, and he had arrived at the definite conclusion that Lidgate was not a marrying man.

He went out immediately after he had drunk

his coffee, lighting a favorite cigar as he left the house. In the street he hailed the first hansom, and gave the address of Hyde Park Square, where he arrived soon after nine o'clock. He was not on terms of sufficient intimacy with Archibald Currie to warrant dropping in of an evening for a friendly visit, but he knew enough of the man to feel assured at least that it would not be resented, and that the nature of his errand would be sufficient to justify a departure from the usual routine. In the daytime they were both busy men with their time fully occupied, and a quiet half an hour at night would be infinitely better for arranging something concerning the future of Reedham's son.

Mr. Currie was at home, the butler informed him, but was engaged for a few moments. Would he step in? As Lidgate put his hat down in the inner hall the door of a room at the further side suddenly opened, and Katherine Wrede appeared. She started a little at the sight of Lidgate, and, then recognizing him, came forward with a ready smile.

"Mr. Lidgate, isn't it? You wish to see my uncle? He is engaged for a few moments. Will you come in here?"

Lidgate thanked her with his pleasant smile, and followed her into the room she had just left; once the morning room, but which Katherine had converted into a small drawing-room, where she sat a great deal. The big double drawing-room on the first floor was now seldom used, except on the occasion of the large and rather stately dinner parties which Archibald Currie gave once or twice in the course of a year.

"We have not met for a very long time, Mr. Lidgate," she said. "Did I hear from someone that you had been to America, or have I dreamed it?"

"You heard aright; I have only just returned—last Saturday, in fact."

"You had a pleasant voyage, I hope. My uncle won't be long. He is engaged with a gentleman from the office. He dined with us this evening, and they have had a little private matter to discuss. They may be back here again. Has the man taken your name to uncle, I wonder?"

"It doesn't matter," said Lidgate quickly. "I shall be very glad of an opportunity to talk to you. You might even be interested in the matter about which I have come to-night."

He could not help admiring her as she sat under the soft shade of the lamp, the delicate light falling on her beautiful face and giving wonderful sheen and richness to the folds of her brown velvet gown. It was a very simply-made gown, all straight lines and folds, but it had true artistic effect.

"I am sure I shall, if it interests you. Tell me about it."

"I have been this evening to see Mrs. Reedham—you know who I mean?"

Her face instantly assumed an expression of the deepest interest.

"Mrs. Reedham—why, yes, of course. Tell me about her, all about her, at once. I would like to go to see her sometimes, but—but she told me quite frankly it would be better not; and when she said it, from her point of view, it really seemed better. But I often think about her. How is she getting on?"

"Not well," he answered without hesitation. "It is a frightfully sad case, and a case which it is difficult, if not impossible to help."

"Is—she in need of any kind?" she enquired, with a wistful, eager note in her voice. "It is dreadful to associate her with such a question; but you know how I, and a great many other people, feel about her, and how terrible it is to stand by and do nothing."

"I quite understand. She has had a very bad year. She has had boarders at her house in Clapton, but she is not the sort of woman to make such a business pay. She gives them too much for their money. I am afraid she is very poor. I wished to talk over her affairs with Mr. Currie, if he would give me a few minutes of his time. If he would take the boy and give him a helping hand, that would mean everything to them. I would take him myself at London Wall, but, as you know, I am only a junior partner, and I would not dare to suggest it."

"Don't I know it?" she said, with a little grimace. "It is a very sad case, hedged about with every conceivable kind of difficulty and hardship. She is so innocent and so sweet. It is hard how the innocent have to suffer in this world. The injustice of it all often stings me."

Her voice quickened, and her eyes were full of eloquent feeling.

"I am so glad you have come to Uncle Archie. He will think of some way. He always does. At