

"It is because I do think of them I want to act for the best now," said the old man patiently, and in no way resenting his nephew's attitude, which was not only natural, but by the circumstances entirely justified.

"Listen, Stephen, you speak truly enough when you say ruined lives, but if the whole story is exposed now, there will be outer darkness indeed. Take Reedham's wife, for instance. She is very happy with Lidgate; happier, perhaps, than she deserves to be, for her taste in marrying, but we must not judge any woman. Take Lidgate, who up till now has had no happiness in life, what sense would there be in throwing this bomb into their home?"

"But it's immoral!" pursued Stephen. "She isn't his wife, and no amount of charitable humbug will make her so."



"Your words are within the strict province of truth but I hold to what I say. She is not strong, your father tells me she is to have a child in a few months. Picture to yourself, Stephen, what will be the result if you persist in your intention of proclaiming this wretched story on the housetops."

Stephen remained silent, and the lines of his mouth relaxed. He was not a hard man by nature, though circumstances and training had given him the outward semblance of one. And there was something here, some influence emanating from his uncle, which somehow altered as in a flash, his whole philosophy.

"He made love to Katherine," he said sullenly. "That surely in your eyes would be the unforgivable sin?"

"He has never made love to Katherine. He has held himself so aloof from us, accepted so few of our offers of intimacy, that I have resented it. At least, we must be just, Stephen."

"What would you do with him, then? It doesn't seem right, but I'd like to hear what you're going to do. By-the-bye," he added suddenly, "do you really believe you'll find him there when you go back? By this time he is probably out in the Edgware Road."

Archibald Currie faintly smiled.

"He is there," was all he said.

"Stephen," he added after a moment. "I think you are going to help me in this. Remember that any fool can send a man down. It takes a better man than himself to lift him up. If you can promise to hold your tongue, Reedham shall go out to London, out of our lives, and the place shall know him no more. Will you promise?"

"I could keep quiet, but there's Turner, the man who ferreted things out."

"I can silence him, I think," replied Archibald Currie.

"But what will you do with Reedham? How shall we be certain that he won't turn up again in a new role?"

"He will go to the war, Stephen, he has spoken of it already."

There was a moment's silence, great issues hung in the balance. There was a brief struggle between personal resentment and something nobler in Stephen Currie's mind.

"All right, Uncle Archie. I don't know what you're driving at, or whether I'm doing right, but I'll do what you ask. I'll keep my mouth shut, it's only ten days anyhow, the C.I.V.'s embark on Thursday week."

"Thank you, my boy."

Archibald Currie came nearer, and looked for a moment with a strange kindness into his nephew's face.

"I'm a lonely man, Stephen. Many have wondered why I have never married. But for my own folly I might have had a son like you to comfort my old age. The solitary life is the price I have paid for—the time when I have went down into the pit and another man lifted me up."

Stephen Currie stared in bewilderment, scarcely crediting what he heard.

"Uncle Archie, it can't be true! Why you, you have always been the model we've been taught to regard and copy from afar."

"I speak the truth, lad. All the eccentricities which have puzzled and vexed my relatives and others, have been my reasonable atonement. The men who could have sent me down refrained. It was Abraham Willett, and he lived to see his mercy justified."



Stephen continued to stare, and a little rush of affection warmed his heart and went out to his uncle.

"I'm glad you told me this, Uncle Archie. I won't forget it, and it has helped me to understand."

Their hands met and the compact was sealed. With what different feelings did Stephen Currie leave Hyde Park Square! He returned to Hampstead a better, because a more merciful man, and he never breathed to his home circle or to others what had passed in his uncle's library that night.

Archibald Currie saw his nephew off, and then went back to the boudoir, this time with a heavier, more reluctant step.

He even paused more than once, and the lines on his face deepened, until they seemed to have been ploughed by some invisible force.

But his mind was clear, his decision quite unshaken he knew what he would do with John Reedham, but, he was wounded in his dearest part.

Reedham was sitting down in a curious attitude, with his hands crossed on his knees, his now uncurtained eyes staring into space. He drew a sharp breath and stood up, when the door opened, as a man would stand to receive the sentence he expects, but scarcely dreads.

The old man closed the door and came forward. "I am ready," he said slowly, "to bear what you have to say."

The life had gone from the tones which had so often breathed hope and encouragement to Reedham's ears, and the coldness of the features seemed to say there was no hope.

"I have nothing to say. I am guilty, sentence me, Believe me I am ready to take that sentence, which has been too long delayed."

The old man raised his hand with a slight impatience. "The motive might be explained in detail. It is impossible to believe that a man like you should have entered upon his life deliberately, without taking the smallest trouble to review possible consequences. What was the idea?"

"I was down. I wanted to get up. I vowed that I should get up by my own efforts. You gave me my chance—that is all."

"Yes, yes, that part I understand, but your wife? Had you told her all might have been well. Man, did you never pause to think what would inevitably happen to an unprotected woman? Either she comes to grief wrongly, by being exposed to temptation in circumstances which make it difficult for her to withstand it, or—the other man is given his chance. It is inconceivable that you should have lived as you have done for the past years without informing yourself of your wife's welfare, of finding some means to reassure her. Nothing can ever explain that away, Reedham, in my opinion it is the heaviest part of your guilt."

Reedham bowed his head. It was just censure. He had not a word to say.

"Then the boy?"

"The boy knows, Mr. Currie, I revealed myself to him to-day when he told me that his mother had married again."

"I see. Do you realize, I wonder, what has happened even now? The woman who was your poor wife, and who is now a happy one, for Lidgate is an honorable man, and he has loved her for a long time. She is to have a child in a few months' time. This I fear will kill her."

Reedham's face became as that of the dead.

"Need she know?" he asked in a hollow voice.

"Let me go for her sake. I promise that before the morning light I shall have passed from the world of men and gone to take my just punishment at the hands of the great Judge."

Archibald Currie rebuked him with one scathing word.



"There is another way out. I offer it to you, not for your own sake, but for the sake of those to whose suffering you did not give sufficient heed. Listen, this is Thursday, on Saturday another boat goes to the Cape. You will go by it." Reedham tried to answer him but his tongue clave to the roof of his mouth.

"What you do there matters little to me. The best course would, probably, be to offer yourself for service at the war. Meantime the secret will be kept. The whole object of our lives, of those I mean who are in possession of the facts, will be to keep them from your wife."

"But the boy!" gasped Reedham. "He will never be able to keep it; and, further, he will not leave me. He only left me to-night when I promised that some way would be considered whereby we could be together. To-night he has altered my whole outlook, and left only the desire to get away with him where none could come between us."

"Selfish even in this," murmured the old man; and even as he spoke and saw Reedham wince, a sense of his own injustice struck him. "His mother could not spare him. It could never be explained to her satisfaction."

"She could spare him, I think," said Reedham sadly and humbly. "So far as I can gather from Leslie, she has put him outside. Perhaps we need not wonder at it. He is like me, they say; and, anyhow, he is a too painful reminder of the past."

"It is incredible. Do you see what havoc has been wrought even in natural affections by your conduct? Do you realize, I wonder, the extent and magnitude of it?"

Reedham bowed his head.

"I think I do. I can't speak, but I see it. My God, if I did not I should not be where I am at this present moment?"

Archibald Currie took a turn across the room. Reedham's words concerning the boy added a new complication. Once more his active brain had to include that fact in his sweep of the horizon of affairs.

"You say positively he will not leave you?"

"To-night when he opened his heart to me," said the man—and the misery of his soul, the rent passion of his heart, betrayed themselves in the harsh vibration of his voice—"he begged me to take him away to another country, or at least to let him live with me where I am now. I pointed out to him how impossible it was. He would hardly leave me. He walked to this very door with me, and, but for my promise to you, I could not have left him even then."

"Would he go home, do you think?" asked the old man sharply.

"He promised that he would."

At that moment there was a knock at the door, and the butler appeared, with seeming reluctance.

"Someone for Mr. Charlton, sir—a young lad. He is waiting outside."

"Show him in," said his master curtly; and Reedham stood up more like a man than he had been at any time during that painful interview.

A moment more and Leslie appeared. The lad's face was white and drawn; under his eyes lurked great shadows. He was visibly laboring under intense excitement.

"Excuse me, father," he said tremblingly. "And please, sir, don't be angry," he added to Mr. Currie; "but I couldn't stop away. I went home. My mother had gone to the theatre, and I left a message that I would not be home to-night. I thought I would walk home with you, father, and stay there. I—I can't go home—to the other home—never any more."

He walked to his father's side and stood there, and his hand slipped into his. The old man's face softened, the hardness died out of his heart. He cleared his throat.

"You, at least, bear no malice, my boy. Yes, I know all," he said kindly. "You are willing, I see, to stand by your father, even after all he has done."

"I will never leave him, sir," said the boy quietly. "He belongs to me, and I to him. We will stay together now for always."



"Great is your faith!" said the old man, with a faint sigh. "See that you become worthy of it, Reedham. Now go. To-morrow I shall see you both, by which time I shall have formed a plan. Probably I shall find some occupation for you at the Cape, though not, of course, the former responsible post. In the meantime I will see your mother, my lad, and try and explain it to her so that her suspicions are not aroused. Now go."

He held out his hand to the boy, but he did not offer it to Reedham.

As they passed out, however, he called him back.

"It is love that has saved the sinner ever since the Lord Jesus Christ died," he said. "Take this lesson to your heart, Reedham, for the boy's sake, live henceforth the upright life before God and man."

This time the hand was offered but Reedham shook his head.

"Not yet," he said, in a low voice. "Some day, please God, but not yet, I cannot thank you. There are no words graven for the purpose."

He passed out, the boy clinging to him, and the door was shut.

The strain lifted, the old man permitted his feelings for a moment to have vent. He wept even as he prayed.

With the second closing of the door there was a swish of silk on the stair, and Katherine Wrede came in.

"Uncle Archie," she said in a low voice, "what have you done? It is no use to send me away or to tell me I must not ask questions. It will be best to tell me everything. Indeed, it is the only way."

He saw that it was, and in a few words he put her in the possession of the full facts and of the terms on which Reedham had left the house.

She listened quietly, and then, without comment rose and kissed him.

"I thank God for you, Uncle Archie. I thank God. But the story is not ended yet."

On Saturday afternoon from Southampton Dock sailed John Reedham and his boy. There were none to bid them God-speed, or to speak a word of farewell, but they needed none. They were sufficient one to the other. And in Reedham's heart there was a peace that had not lain there since the blight had fallen on his life. But he was impatient to be gone. Every moment now increased the fear lest any chance word might betray the secret to Leslie's mother. She had been entirely reassured by Archibald Currie, who had brought to bear upon the matter all the tact and diplomacy for which he was known.

When the boat began to glide out from its landing stage Reedham went below, his feelings were too much for him, he would be alone to unburden them. In the stateroom he found a letter.

Within there were only these words:

To wish you God-speed and hope, from your friend,
KATHERINE WREDE.

Reedham pressed the letter to his lips, then very carefully hid it in his breast. It would never leave him, he vowed, so long as life lasted.

So passed John Reedham once more from the world of men. Those who had known him kept the secret well, until the time came when there was not such pressing need for silence.

In the month of November Lidgate's wife died in childbirth. After one brief year of happiness, he had to return to the solitary life.

Archibald Currie and Katherine were at Clere Minster when the brief intimation appeared in the *Telegraph*. Katherine saw it first and passed it over in silence for her guardian to read.



"Ah!" he said, drawing a long breath, and that was all.

So, step by step, the drama was unfolded. A year later, Archibald Currie also entered upon his glorious rest, leaving the world incomparably poorer for his passing. Contrary to all expectations, his fortune was discovered to be comparatively small, accounted for, of course, by the fact that he had disbursed it so lavishly in his life. What was left, with the exception of Clere Minster, went absolutely to charity. Clere was left to Katherine to do with as she willed. Except for the old house, of no great value, she was as penniless as when she first came, a subdued and hopeless girl, from the dreary pension at Bruges.

She was not without friends, however, and received more than one offer of a home.

But Katherine, after converting Clere Minster into a Home of Rest for certain derelicts who had struggled on the drearier shores of life, left England. She went to those who needed her most.