

THE COST OF A CRIME

The Story of Yielding to Temptation and the Tragedy Ensuing

By ANNIE S. SWAN



"BUT Turner, it's impossible. My uncle knew Reedham quite well. He could not have been taken in like that."

"But you've seen this Charlton yourself, Mr. Stephen," said Turner shrewdly. "More than once haven't you, and you did not recognize him?"

"You're right, but I can't believe it. I tell you it's impossible, why it was an awful thing to do."

"It was, but he'll stick at nothing, makin' love even to Miss Wrede an' his own wife livin', an' his very boy in the office beside him."

Stephen Currie stared helplessly.

"Of course, the lad Reedham was in the office, didn't he recognize him then?"

"No, he didn't, but Charlton he was always messin' round 'im. It was that that made me suspect fust. You see it warn't natural for a bounder like that to take such an interest in a boy from nowhere, so to speak, one that couldn't give him a leg up in his own ambitious schemes."

"And Turner, Mrs. Reedham married again. She's Mrs. George Lidgate now, don't you know that, and Charlton must know it."

"He may know it by now, he didn't afore he went away. But then I warn't sure quite. One day jes before he went to the Cape I went into his room sudden with a cable for him to look at, and he was sitting there with his goggles off, and I saw his eyes. Remember Reedham's eyes? They weren't like nobody else's; they seemed to look right through you. It gave me a start, and from that minute I was nearly sure, but to-day, when I saw him speak to the boy, I knew. What's got to be done, Mr. Stephen?"

"Well, in the first place my uncle will have to be told."

"And then the perlice, Mr. Stephen," said Turner anxiously. "Scotland Yard, ain't that our first duty?"

"Not just yet, Turner, we must go cautiously, because I don't grasp the truth just yet. We must be absolutely certain. My uncle is at Hyde Park Square, you say?"

"Yes, sir, they will come up from Southampton together."

"Well, if you wait just a moment I'll go back to town with you."

He stepped out of the room, and stood a moment irresolute in the hall. It was not half-past eight. Reflecting that it would take him at least three-quarters of an hour to get to Hyde Park Square, he decided to slip out without saying anything to the rest of the family.



To throw such a bomb in their midst and afterwards listen to the babel of horrified discussion, would be to waste the entire evening. Besides, before saying a word to a living creature he must make sure of the truth of this extraordinary, almost incredible story.

He believed it to be true. He could not see what benefit a man like Turner could achieve by concocting it. Besides he had not sufficient imagination. He rang a bell in the hall, and as he took down his overcoat the parlourmaid appeared looking somewhat surprised.

"Just help me on, Jane, and tell them I have been called out unexpectedly. Wait till I have been gone a few minutes. It's important business, tell my father I'll explain it when I come back."

"Yes, sir."

She pulled up the velvet collar of his coat, brushed a few specks from his shoulders, and gave him his gloves and hat. She observed the pallor of his face, and wondered whether he had got into any private scrape. She had not particularly liked the look of the individual she had admitted to the breakfast-room, his oily familiarity had incensed her greatly. Jane was one of the props of Fair Lawn, an excellent servant, priding herself on her long years of unimpeachable character.

She withdrew before the two passed out, which they did rather quietly, closing the inner door without a sound.

"I brought a 'ansom, sir," said Turner, as they turned into the dark shrubbery. "I guessed it would be Hyde Park Square, and told him to wait."

"That was wise, Turner, it will save time. I can drive you so far on your way, unless you'll come to Hyde Park Square too, and substantiate your story. I really think you ought."

"No, sir, not to-night, thank you. I've done enough. To-morrow if there's any dispute or trouble you may call on me, but now I must be getting 'ome to my wife and kids."

"Where do you live then?"

"Kennington, sir. If we go down 'aversack 'ill I can get a Elephant omnibus, that'll do me near enough."

The hansom was waiting outside the front gate under the light of the lamp which spanned it. Stephen gave his directions to the man, and they both got in. They spoke little as they drove rapidly down the hill, but Stephen Currie was in a fever of excitement.

At the junction of Euston Road and Hampstead

Road Turner got out and sought the 'bus to convey him to the Elephant and Castle. Stephen continued his way alone. His hands were clenched, he bit his lips to keep down the rising excitement. His rage against Reedham was the noblest, manliest passion that had ever made ferment in his soul. It was this that had come between Katherine Wrede and himself, this double-dyed scoundrel, who not content with desolating his own home, had tried to wreck an innocent life—surely no punishment could be too great for such an one.

By the time he reached Hyde Park Square, just after nine, he had worked himself up into a perfect tempest of indignation.

"Mr. Currie is at home, sir, yes," said the butler. "A gentleman had just gone into the boudoir, Mr. Charlton, perhaps you know him. He was expected to dinner, but he did not come."



"Yes, I know him," said Stephen thickly. "Put me into the library and ask my uncle to come to me at once. Tell him, if you like, that it is a matter of life and death."

Stephen was perfectly familiar with the house, he went to the library himself and the butler proceeded to the boudoir to deliver his message.

Mr. Currie did not delay, he followed the butler immediately out of the room, leaving Charlton and Katherine alone together.

"What has happened, Stephen?" he said good-humoredly, seeing his nephew standing by the table with his overcoat on, as if in a hurry. "Have you been ordered South, or what, and is this good-bye?"

"No, Uncle Archie, it is nothing of that sort. Come in and shut the door. A terrible thing has happened."

"Where? Not at Fair Lawn, I hope? I saw your father to-day. He said all were well."

"No, no, we're all right, Uncle Archie. It's something else—a horrible thing. The man Charlton you've had so long, in whom you've placed such implicit confidence, who—damn him—has put me out with Katherine—"

"Softly, softly, Stephen; I don't allow that kind of language in my house. What have you to say against Charlton? Remember that moderation brings conviction."

"But, Uncle Archie, I can't be moderate about such an awful thing," stammered Stephen. "Do you know what has happened?—who he is? He isn't Charlton at all. He's John Reedham."

The old man stared at him stupidly, his ruddy face beginning to look a little grey in the soft light.

"Yes, I tell you it's true. Turner has found it out. He came to me to-night. He says there's no doubt at all about it. Isn't there anything about the man that convinces you? You've seen him often. Did you ever suspect?"

Still Archibald Currie did not speak. A weight seemed to settle upon his soul. Incredible as the suggestion might seem, some inward intuition pointed to it as true.

"I can't take it in," he murmured at last, and feebly like a man who has been suddenly stricken. For he had just welcomed the man of whom he had spoken to his inmost home. He had felt his own heart warm to him, he had seen the light in Katherine's eyes. If this were true—But surely, he told himself, God would never permit it to happen.

"Well, I don't wonder. I couldn't at first. It was only after Turner began to explain it a little, to fill in the details, that it took shape as a likely thing in my mind. It was through two things he betrayed himself—his attention to the boy Leslie, and one day Turner saw him without his glasses, then he knew. And all the time he had been lodging with a woman at Camden Town who used to be a servant in his house at Norwood. Turner has been to the house and interviewed her, and she has known it all along. Of course, she has been in his pay."



Archibald Currie straightened his bent shoulders suddenly, and turned towards the door. His face had now become very white, and there were depths of anguish in his eyes which betokened the severity of the blow.

"Charlton is in the house now," he said steadily. "We will go in and clear this awful thing up once and for all. Come."

For the shadow of a moment only Stephen drew back. For the ordeal they were about to face was one from which even the least sensitive might shrink. Archibald Currie—courteous, but obviously impatient—began to lead the way. They crossed the hall, went under the little archway, and he opened the boudoir door.

It was a pretty picture within. Katherine was fond

of golden hues, of amber and saffron intermingled; the room was a perfect harmony of colour and tone, and she, in her sweeping robe of softest brown velvet, harmonized with it. She was sitting on the couch, Charlton in front of her, talking eagerly. The light on her face came from within. She turned with evident reluctance to the door, and distinctly frowned at sight of Stephen Currie following her uncle. But she rose, and Charlton rose with her, both turning simultaneously to the door.

Archibald Currie stepped forward. His tall, spare figure seemed to have taken on a new and pathetic dignity. His white face terrified Katherine.

Charlton, seeing the menace in Stephen Currie's eyes, knew that his hour had come.

"Charlton," said Archibald Currie in a low voice, which, however, was calm and judicial, "my nephew has come here to-night to bring a terrible and almost incredible charge. He says that your name is not Charlton, that you are John Reedham. What have you to say?"

The silence was so intense that the sound of their breathing seemed to fill the room. Charlton put his hand up, nor did it tremble, and took the blue glasses from his face.

"Yes," he said, in a low, clear voice, perfectly heard in every corner of the room, "I am John Reedham."

CHAPTER XII

PAID IN FULL

KATHERINE gave a little cry.

Archibald Currie turned to her with an infinity of tenderness, and touched her arm.

"Go upstairs, my dear. I will come to you in a few moments. Go now."

He guided her to the door where she stopped and threw up her head. There were no tears in her eyes, but her expression Archibald Currie carried with him to the day of his death. It was the one barrier in the way of his complete forgiveness of John Reedham.

"Be merciful," she whispered.

He put her outside the door, gently closed it, and walked back.

Reedham stood silently there, not a muscle of his face moving, looking with unseeing eyes upon Stephen Currie's flushed, indignant face.

They waited, both for the directing hand.

It came in a moment, making itself felt with no sort of indecision. He was ever the man for a crisis, this glorious old Scotchman, with the iron and wine of kings' blood in his veins.



While other men hesitated over the wisdom of this course or that, he determined, and it was done.

"I wish to speak to you privately, Stephen, no, not a word here. Go to the library. I will come to you there."

Stephen went at once. It was a moment for obedience, and the tone of his uncle's voice, the expression of his face, admitted of no demur. He was a compelling force, rather than an imperious one, however, moral suasion acting instantaneously on the mind it sought to influence.

"You will wait here," the old man said then, turning to Reedham, "I have your word that you will wait here till I come back to deal with you? I promise you it will not be long."

"I will wait," said Reedham quietly, and the next moment he was alone.

Archibald Currie stood for a moment in the middle of the hall, ere he went to his nephew, and in that wonderful moment he reviewed the whole ground and saw the way clear. But a colossal task was before him, the most colossal, perhaps, that he had ever essayed, to shut the mouths and seal the lips of other men.

Stephen was waiting impatiently by the table and sprang forward with eager words on his lips.

"Quiet, a moment, boy, it is I who will speak first."

Again Stephen was hushed, and stood waiting for what should come.

"You and I have not been so very intimate, Stephen," began the old man; "we have never understood one another fully. Our outlook upon things has been different all along the line."

"I suppose it has, Uncle Archie, though I don't know what that has to do with the case."

"It has everything to do with it, for I am going to try and find a platform upon which we can meet. I am going to ask you to co-operate with me to save a man's soul. I wonder whether I shall succeed?"

"You mean you are going to wait, to let Reedham off scot free?" was the harsh reply. "By God no, I can't do that; sorry not to oblige, but just think of what he has done. Why, the mere embezzlement was nothing to this! Think of all the lives he has ruined!"