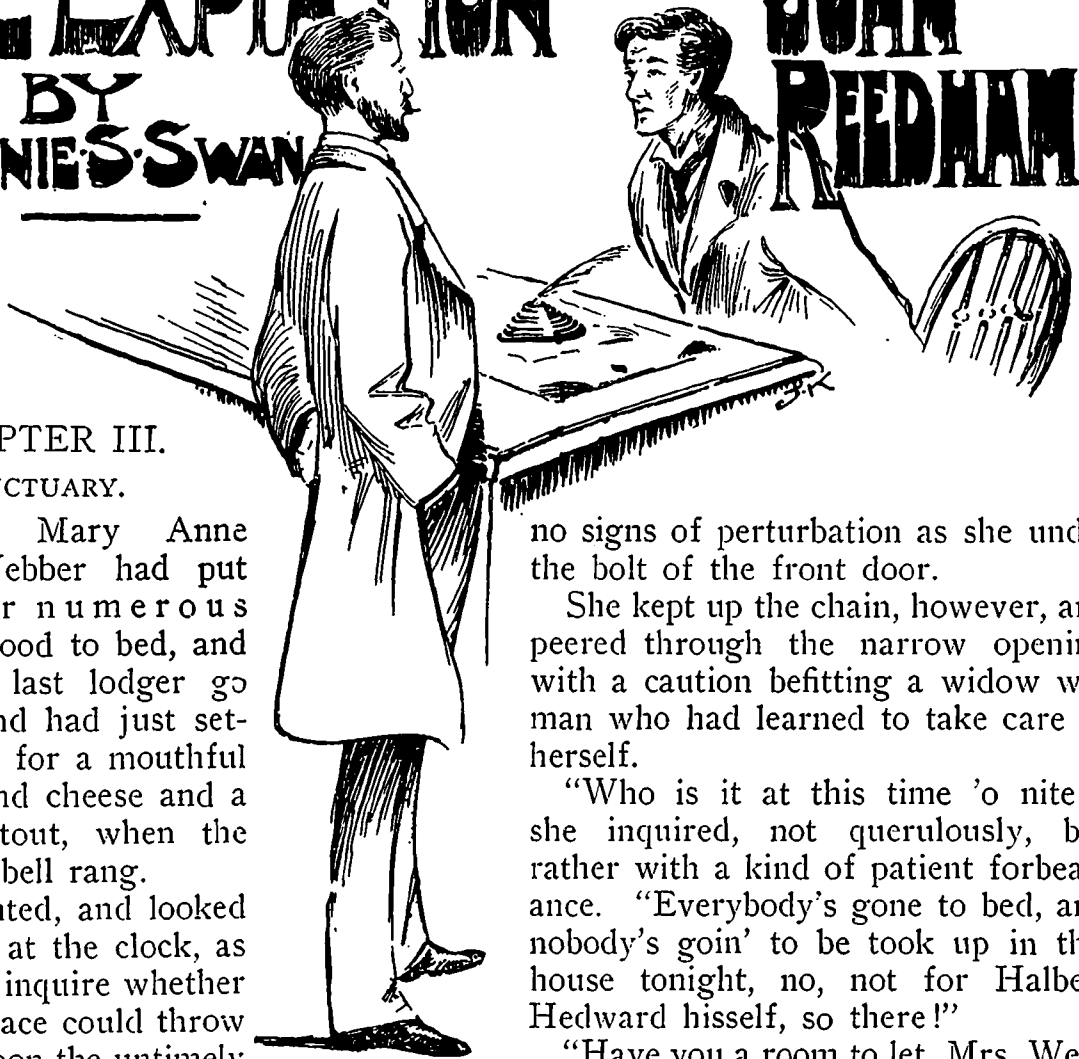


# THE EXPIATION OF JOHN REEDHAM

BY ANNIE'S SWAN



## CHAPTER III.

### SANCTUARY.

MRS. Mary Anne Webber had put her numerous brood to bed, and heard her last lodger go upstairs, and had just settled herself for a mouthful of bread and cheese and a glass of stout, when the front door bell rang.

She grunted, and looked inquiringly at the clock, as much as to inquire whether its honest face could throw any light upon the untimely ring.

It was now twenty minutes to eleven o'clock.

"The Bobby, maybe that tiresome Tommy's left the area window open, as like as not."

She pushed back her chair, and wiping her mouth, proceeded in leisurely fashion out to the hall, where she produced a box of matches from her pocket and lit the gas. All her movements were leisurely, because she was of ample figure, and, moreover, did not believe in hurrying herself. Yet it was astonishing what an amount of actual bodily exertion that ample figure managed to get through in a day; the immaculate state of the house proclaimed that someone toiled early and late for the comfort of the household. That somebody was Mary Anne herself. Her face was very comely and placid, and betrayed

no signs of perturbation as she undid the bolt of the front door.

She kept up the chain, however, and peered through the narrow opening with a caution befitting a widow woman who had learned to take care of herself.

"Who is it at this time 'o nite?" she inquired, not querulously, but rather with a kind of patient forbearance. "Everybody's gone to bed, and nobody's goin' to be took up in this house tonight, no, not for Halbert Hedward hisself, so there!"

"Have you a room to let, Mrs. Webber," a low voice inquired, "I want a bed for the night, perhaps longer. Open the door."

"Not ef I knows it," replied Mrs. Webber firmly. "Respectable folks don't come to respectable houses at sech a time o' nite. There's a common lodging house down to College street; that'll just suit yer, I guess."

Mrs. Webber seldom minced her words, and had a habit of saying precisely what she meant. The lodger who disliked plain speech was at liberty to shift his camp. She could afford to be independent, for her house had a high reputation for cleanliness and honesty, and first rate cooking. Mary Anne had found that independence pays.

The stranger without the gates cleared his throat a little for another attempt.

"I'll pay you well," he said desperately. "I—I have reasons for wishing