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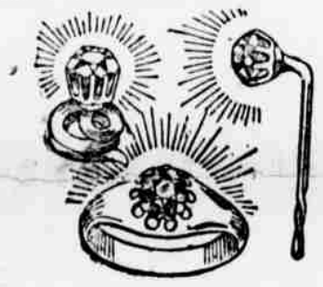

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THE CRUCIFIXION OF PHILIP STRONG.

By REV. CHARLES M. SHELDON,

Author of "In His Steps: What Would Jesus Do?" "Malcom Kirk," "Robert Hardy's Seven Days," Etc.

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[CONTINUED.]

CHAPTER XVII.

The letter which Philip had received and which his wife now read was as follows:

Rev. Philip Strong, Pastor Calvary Church, Milton:

Dear Sir and Brother—The seminary at Fairview has long been contemplating the addition to its professorship of a chair of sociology. The lack of funds and the absolute necessity of sufficient endowment for such a chair have made it impossible hitherto for the trustees to make any definite move in this direction. A recent legacy, of which you have doubtless heard, has made the founding of this new professorship possible. And now the trustees by unanimous vote have united upon you as the man best fitted to fill this chair of sociology. We have heard of your work in Milton and know of it personally. We are assured you are the man for this place. We therefore tender you most heartily the position of professor of sociology at Fairview seminary at a salary of $2,500 a year and a preliminary year's absence, either abroad or in this country, before you begin actual labors with the seminary.

With this formal call on the part of the trustees goes the most earnest desire on the part of all the professors of the seminary who remember you in your marked undergraduate success as a student here. You will meet with the most loving welcome, and the seminary will be greatly strengthened by your presence in this new department. We are, in behalf of the seminary, very cordially yours,

THE TRUSTEES.

Here followed their names, familiar to both Philip and his wife.

There was a moment of astonished silence, and then Sarah said:

"Well, Philip, that's what I call the finger of Providence!"

"Do you call it the finger of Providence because it points the way you want to go?" asked Philip, with a smile. But his face instantly grew sober. He was evidently very much excited by the call to Fairview. It had come at a time when he was in a condition to be very much moved by it.

"Yes, Philip," replied his wife as she smoothed back his hair from his forehead, "it is very plain to me that you have done all that any one can do here in Milton, and this call comes just in time. You are worn out. The church is opposed to your methods. You need a rest and a change, and, besides, this is the very work that you have always had a liking for."

Philip said nothing for a moment. His mind was in a whirl of emotion. Finally he said: "Yes; I would enjoy such a professorship. It is a very tempting call. I feel drawn toward it. And yet"—he hesitated—"I don't know that I ought to leave Milton just now."

Mrs. Strong was provoked. "Philip Strong, you have lived this kind of life long enough! All your efforts in Calvary church are wasted. What good have all your sermons done? It is all a vain sacrifice, and the end will be defeat and misery for you. Add to all this the fact that this new work will call for the best and most Christian labor and that some good Christian man will take it if you don't—and I don't see, Philip, how you can possibly think of such a thing as refusing this opportunity."

"It certainly is a splendid opportunity," murmured Philip. "I wonder why they happened to pitch on me for the place?"

"That's easy enough. Every one knows that you could fill that chair better than almost any other man in the country."

"Do you mean by 'every one' a little woman of the name of Sarah?" asked Philip, with a brief return of his teasing habit.

"No, sir. I mean all the professors and people in Fairview and all the thinking people of Milton and every one who knows you, Philip. Every one knows that whatever else you lack it isn't brains."

"I'd like to borrow a few just now, though, for I seem to have lost most of mine. Lend me yours, won't you, Sarah, until I settle this question of the call?"

"No, sir. If you can't settle a plain question like this with all your brains, you couldn't do any better with the addition of the little I have."

"Then you really think, do you, Sarah, that I ought to accept this as the leading of the spirit of God and follow without hesitation?"

Mrs. Strong replied with almost tearful earnestness:

"Philip, it seems to me like the leading of his hand. Surely you have shown your willingness and your courage and your sacrifice by your work here. But your methods are distasteful, and your preaching has so far roused only antagonism. Oh, I dread the thought of this life for you another day. It looks to me like a suicidal policy, with nothing to show for it when you have gone through with it."

Philip spread the letter out on the couch, and his face grew more and more thoughtful as he gazed into the face of his wife, and his mind went over the ground of his church experience. If only—he was perhaps thinking—if only the good God had not given him so sensitive and fine tempered a spirit of conscientiousness. He almost envied men of coarse, blunt feelings, of common ideals of duty and service.

His wife watched him anxiously. She knew it was a crisis with him. At last he said:

"Well, Sarah, I don't know but you're right. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak. The professorship would be free from the incessant worry and anxiety of a parish, and then I might be just as useful in the seminary as I am here—who knows?"

"Who knows, indeed?" exclaimed Sarah joyfully. At the same time she was almost crying. She picked up the letter and called Philip's attention to the clause which granted him a year abroad in case he accepted. "Think of that, Philip! Your dream of foreign travel can come true now!"

"That is"—Philip looked out of the window over the dingy roof of a shed near by to the gloomy tenements—"that is, supposing I decide to accept."

"Supposing! But you almost the same as said— Oh, Philip, say you will! Be reasonable! This is the opportunity of a lifetime!"

"That's true," replied Philip.

"You may not have another such chance as this as long as you live. You are young now and with every prospect of success in work of this kind. It is new work, of the kind you like. You will have leisure and means to carry on important experiments and influence for life young men entering the ministry. Surely, Philip, there is as great opportunity for usefulness and sacrifice there as anywhere. It must be that the will of God is in this. It comes without any seeking on your part."

"Yes, indeed!" Philip spoke with the only touch of pride he ever exhibited. It was pride in the knowledge that he was absolutely free from self glory or self seeking.

"Then say you will accept. Say you will, Philip!"

The appeal, coming from the person dearest to him in all the world, moved Philip profoundly. He took the letter from her hand, read it over carefully and again laid it down on the couch. Then he said:

"Sarah, I must pray over it. I need a little time. You will have reason"—Philip paused, as his habit sometimes was, and at that moment the bell rang, and Mrs. Strong went down stairs. As she went along she felt almost persuaded that Philip would yield. Something of his tone seemed to imply that the struggle in his mind was nearly ended.

The callers at the door were three men who had been to see Philip several times to talk with him about the mill troubles and the labor conflict in general. They wanted to see Philip. Mrs. Strong was anxious about the condition of Philip's health. She asked the men to come in and went up stairs again.

"Can you see them? Are you strong enough?" she asked.

"Yes; tell them to come up. I am comfortable now."

Philip was resting easily, and after a careful look at him Mrs. Strong went down stairs.

To her surprise two of the men had gone. The one who remained explained that he thought three persons would excite or tire the minister more than one. He had staid and would not trouble Philip very long. But the business on which he came was of such an important nature that he felt obliged to see the minister if he could do so without danger to him.

So the man went up, and Philip greeted him with his usual heartiness, excusing himself for not rising. The man took a chair, moved up near the couch and sat down. He seemed a good deal excited, but in a suppressed and cautious way.

"I came to see you, Mr. Strong, to tell you about a thing you ought to know. There is danger of your life here."

"Where?" asked Philip calmly.

"Here, in this neighborhood."

"Well?" Philip waited for more explanation.

"I didn't want to tell your wife for fear of scaring her, but I thought you ought to know, Mr. Strong, and then you could take steps to protect yourself or get away."

"Go on. Tell me the worst," said Philip quietly as the man paused.

"Well," the man went on in a low tone, "two others and me overheard a talk last night by the men who run the Star saloon and Gen down by the Falls. They have a plan to waylay you, rob you and injure you, sir, and do it in such a way as to make it seem a common hold up. They seemed to know about your habit of going around through the alleys and cross streets of the tenements. We heard enough to make us sure they really and truly meant to deal foully by you the first good chance, and we thought best to put you on your guard. The rummies are down on you, Mr. Strong, you have been so outspoken against them. And your lecture in the hall last week has made them mad, I tell you. They hate you worse than poison, for that's the article they seem to sell and make a living out of."

Philip had the week before addressed a large meeting of workingmen, and in the course of his speech he had called attention to the saloon as one of the greatest foes of the wage earner.

"Is that all?" Philip asked.

"All, man alive! Isn't it enough? What more do you hanker after?"

"Of course I don't 'hanker after' being held up or attacked, but these men are mistaken if they think to frighten me."

"They mean more than frighten, Mr. Strong; they mean business."

"Why don't you have them arrested, then, for conspiracy? If you overheard their talk, they are guilty and could be convicted."

"Not in Milton, Mr. Strong. Besides, there was no name mentioned, and the talk was scatteringlike. They are shrewd devils. But we could tell they meant you plain enough. Not to prove anything in court, though."

"And you came to warn me? That was kind of you, my brother." Philip spoke with the winsome affection for men that made his hold on common people like the grappling vine with loving tendrils.

"Yes, Mr. Strong, I tell you the rummies will almost hold a prayer meeting when you leave Milton. And they mean to make you trouble enough until you do leave. If I was you"—the man paused curiously—"if I was you, I'd get up and leave this God forsaken town, Mr. Strong."

"You would?" Philip glanced at the letter which still lay upon the couch beside him. "Suppose I should say I had about made up my mind to do just that thing?"

"Oh, no, Mr. Strong, you don't mean that!" The man made a gesture toward Philip that revealed a world of longing and of hunger for fellowship that made Philip's heart throb with a feeling of intense joy, mingled with an ache of pain. The man at once repressed his emotion. It had been like a lightning flash out of a summer cloud.

"Yes," said Philip, as if continuing, "I have been thinking of leaving Milton."

"That might be best. You're in danger here. No telling when some harm may come to you."

"Well, I'm thinking I might as well leave. My work here has been a failure anyway."

"What, a failure? Mr. Strong, you don't know the facts. There has never been a minister in Milton who did so much for the poor and the workingman as yourself! Let me tell you," the man continued, with an earnestness that concealed an emotion he was trying to subdue, "Mr. Strong, if you were to leave Milton now it would be a greater loss to the common people than you can imagine. You may not know it, but your influence among us is very great. I have lived in Milton as boy and man for 30 years, and I never knew so many laboring men attend church and the lectures in the hall as during the few months you have been here. Your work here has not been a failure; it has been a great success."

A tear stole out of Philip's eye and rolled down and fell with a warm splash on the letter which lay beside him. If a $2,500 call could be drowned by one tear, that professorship in sociology in Fairview seminary was in danger.

"So you think the people in this neighborhood would miss me a little?" he asked almost as modestly as if he were asking a great favor.

"Would they, Mr. Strong! You will never know what you have done for them. If the mill men were to hear of your leaving, they would come down here in a body and almost compel you to stay. I cannot bear to think of your going. And yet the danger you are in, the whisky men"—

Philip roused himself up, interrupting his visitor. The old time flash of righteous indignation shot out of his eyes as he exclaimed: "I am more than half minded to stay on that account! The rummies would think they had beaten me out if I left!"

"Oh, Mr. Strong, I can't tell you how glad we would be if you would only stay! And yet"—

"And yet," replied Philip, with a sad smile, "there are many things to take into the account. I thank you out of my heart for the love you have shown

"Your work here has not been a failure; it has been a great success."

me. It means more than words can express." And Philip leaned back with a wearied look on his face, which nevertheless revealed his deep satisfaction at the thought of such friendship as this man had for him.

He was getting exhausted with the interview, following so soon on his illness of the night before. The visitor was quick to notice it, and after a warm clasp of hands he went away. Philip, lying there alone while his wife was busy down stairs, lived an age in a few minutes. All his life so far in Milton, the events of his preaching and his experiences in the church, his contact with the workmen, his evident influence over them, the thought of what they would feel in case he left Milton to accept this new work, the dissatisfaction at the thought of an unaccomplished work abandoned, the thought of the exultation of the whisky men—all this and much more surged in and out of his mind and heart like heavy tides of a heaving ocean as it rushes into some deep fissure and then flows back again with noise and power. He struggled up into a sitting position and with pain of body almost fell from the couch upon his knees and with his face bowed upon the letter, which he spread out before him with both hands, he sobbed out a yearning cry to his Master for light in his darkness.

It came as he kneeled down, and it did not seem to him at all strange or absurd that as he kneeled there came to his thought a picture of the Brother Man. And he could almost hear the Brother Man say: "Your work is in Milton, in Calvary church yet. Except a man shall renounce all that he hath he cannot be his disciple." It mattered not to Philip that the answer to his prayer came in this particular way. He was not superstitious or morbid or given to yielding to impulse or fancy. He lay down upon the couch again and knew in his heart that he was at peace with God and his own conscience in deciding to stay with Calvary church and refuse the call to Fairview.

CHAPTER XVIII.

When a few minutes later Mrs. Strong came up, Philip told her exactly how he had decided.

"I cannot leave these poor fellows in the tenements yet. My work is just beginning to count with them. And the church—oh, Sarah, I love it, for it has such possibilities, and it must yield in time. And then the whisky men—I cannot bear to have them think me beaten, driven out, defeated. And in addition to all the rest I have a feeling that God has a wonderful blessing in store for me and the church very soon, and I cannot banish the feeling that if I accept the call to Fairview I should always be haunted by that ghost of Duty murdered and run away from which would make me unhappy in all my future work. Dear little woman," Philip went on as he drew his wife's head down and kissed her tenderly, while tears of disappointment fell from her—"little woman, you know you are the dearest of all earthly beings to me. And my soul tells me the reason you loved me enough to share earth's troubles with me was that you knew I could not be a coward in the face of my duty, my conscience and my God. Is it not so?"

The answer came in a sob of mingled anguish and happiness:

"Yes, Philip, but it was only for your sake I wanted you to leave this work. It is killing you. Yet"—and she lifted her head, with a smile through all the tears—"yet, Philip, 'whither thou goest I will go, and where thou lodgest I will lodge; thy people shall be my people and thy God my God. Where thou diest will I die, and there will I be buried; the Lord do so to me and more also if aught but death part thee and me.'"

There were people in Milton who could not understand how a person of such refined and even naturally expensive and luxurious habits as the minister's wife possessed could endure the life he had planned for himself and his idea of Christian living in general. Philip could have told them if he had been so minded. And this scene could have revealed it to any one who knew the minister and his wife as they really were. That was a sacred scene to husband and wife, something that belonged to them, one of those things which the world did not know and had no business to know.

When the first Sunday of another month had come, Mr. Strong felt quite well again. A rumor of his call to Fairview had gone out, and to the few intimate friends who asked him about it he did not deny, but he said little. The time was precious to him. He plunged into the work with an enthusiasm and a purpose which sprang from his knowledge that he was at last really gaining some influence in the tenement district.

The condition of affairs in that neighborhood was growing worse instead of better. The amount of vice, drunkenness, crime and brutality made his sensitive heart quiver a hundred times a day as he went his way through it all. His study of the whole question led him to the conviction that one of the great needs of the place was a new home life for the people. The tenements were owned and rented by men of wealth and influence. Many of these men were in the church. Discouraged as he had so often been in his endeavor to get the moneyed men of the congregation to consecrate their property to Christian uses, Philip came up to that first Sunday with a new phase of the same great subject which pressed so hard for utterance that he could not keep it back.

As he faced the church this morning he faced an audience composed of very conflicting elements. Representatives of labor were conspicuous in the galleries. People whom he had assisted at one time and another were scattered through the house, mostly in the back seats under the choir gallery. His own membership was represented by men who, while opposed to his idea of the Christian life and his interpretation of Christ, nevertheless continued to go and hear him preach. The incident of the sexton's application for membership and his rejection by vote had also told somewhat in favor of the minister. Many preachers would have resigned after such a scene. He had said his say about it and then refused to speak or be interviewed by the papers on the subject. What it cost him in suffering was his own secret. But this morning, as he rose to give his message in the person of Christ, the thought of the continued suffering and shame and degradation in the tenement district, the thought of the great wealth in the possession of the church which might be used almost to transform the lives of thousands of people if the men of riches in Calvary church would only see the kingdom of God in its demands on them—this voiced his cry to the people and gave his sermon the significance and solemnity of a prophet's inspiration.

"See!" he exclaimed as he went on after drawing a vivid picture of the miserable condition of life in the buildings which could not be called homes, "see what a change could be wrought by the use of a few thousand dollars down there. And here this morning in this house men are sitting who own very many of those tenements, who are getting the rent from them every month, who could, without suffering one single sorrow, without depriving themselves of one necessity or even luxury of life, so change the surroundings of these people that they would enjoy the physical life God gave them and be able to see his love in the lives of his disciples. Oh, my brethren, is not this your opportunity? What is money compared with humanity? What is the meaning of our discipleship unless we are using what God has given us to build up his kingdom? The money represented by this church could rebuild the entire tenement district. The men who own these buildings"— He paused as if he had suddenly become aware that he might be saying an unwise thing. Then after a brief hesitation, as if he had satisfied his own doubt, he repeated: "The men who own these tenements—and members of other churches besides Calvary are among the owners—are guilty in the sight of God for allowing human beings made in his image to grow up in such horrible surroundings when it is in the power of money to stop it. Therefore they shall receive greater condemnation at the last, when Christ sits on the throne of the universe to judge the world. For will he not say, as he said long years ago, 'I was an hungered and ye gave me no meat, naked and ye clothed me not, sick and in miserable dwellings reeking with filth and disease and ye drew the hire of these places and visited me not?' For are these men and women and children not our brethren? Verily God will require it at our hands, oh, men of Milton, if, having the power to use God's property so as to

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