

THE CRUCIFIXION OF PHILIP STRONG

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(CONTINUED.)

CHAPTER XI.

"I heard your sermon this morning," said Philip's guest while Mrs. Strong was removing the small table to the dining room.

"Did you?" asked Philip, because he could not think of anything wiser to say.

"Yes," said the strange visitor simply. He was so silent after saying this one word that Philip did what he never was in the habit of doing. He always shrank back sensitively from asking for an opinion of his preaching from any one except his wife. But now he could not help saying:

"What did you think of it?"

"It was one of the best sermons I ever heard. But somehow it did not seem sincere."

"What?" exclaimed Philip almost angrily. If there was one thing that felt sure about, it was the sincerity of his preaching. Then he checked his feeling as he thought how foolish it would be to get angry at a passing tramp who was probably a little out of his mind. Yet the man's remark had a strange power over him. He tried to shake it off as he looked harder at him. The man looked over at Philip and repeated gravely, shaking his head, "Not sincere."

Mrs. Strong came back into the room, and Philip motioned her to sit down near him while he said, "And what makes you think I was not sincere?"

"Yes, said the man in which we lived demanded that people live in a far simpler, less extravagant style."

"Yes, that is what I said. I believe it, too," replied Philip, clasping his hands over his knee and gazing at his singular guest with earnestness. The man's thick white hair glistened in the open firelight like spun glass.

"And you said that Christ would not approve of people spending money for flowers, food, and dress on those who did not need it when it could more wisely be expended for the benefit of those who were in want."

"Yes, those were not my exact words, but that was my idea."

"Your idea. Just so. And yet we have had here in this little lunch, or as you called it, a 'bite of something,' three different kinds of meat, two kinds of bread, hot-house grapes and the richest kind of milk."

The man said all this in the quietest, calmest manner possible, and Philip stared at him, more assured than ever that he was a little crazy. Mrs. Strong looked amused and said, "You seemed to enjoy the lunch pretty well."

The man had eaten with a zest that was redeemed from greenness only by a delicacy of manner that no tramp ever possessed.

"My dear madam," said the man, "perhaps this was a case where the food was given to one who stood really in need of it."

Philip started as if he had suddenly caught a meaning from the man's words which he had not before heard in them.

"Do you think it was an extravagant lunch then?" he asked, with a very slight laugh.

The man looked straight at Philip and replied simply, "Yes, for the times in which we live."

A sudden silence fell on the group of three in the parlor of the parsonage, lighted up by the soft glow of the coal fire. No one except a person thoroughly familiar with the real character of Philip Strong could have told why that silence fell on him instead of a careless laugh at the crazy remark of a half-witted stranger tramp. Just how long the silence lasted he did not know; only, when it was broken, he found himself saying:

"Man, what is your name? Where are you from? And what is your name?"

His guest turned his head a little and replied: "When you called me in here you stretched out your hand and called me 'brother.' Just now you called me by the great term, 'man.' These are my names. You may call me 'Brother Man.'"

"Well, then, 'Brother Man,'" said Philip, smiling a little to think of the very strangeness of the whole affair, "your reason for thinking I was not sincere in my sermon this morning was because of the extravagant lunch this evening?"

"Not altogether. There are other reasons." The man suddenly bowed his head between his hands, and Philip's wife whispered to him: "Philip, what is the use of talking with a crazy man? You are tired, and it is time to put out the lights and go to bed. Get him out of the house now as soon as you can."

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scoutily. There was an air of decided comfort, bordering on luxury, in the different pieces of furniture and the whole appearance of the room.

"You understand," said Philip, as his glance traveled back to his visitor, "that this house is not mine. It belongs to my church. It is the parsonage, and I am simply living in it as the minister."

"Yes, I understand. You, a minister, are living in this princely house while other people have not where to lay their heads."

Again Philip felt the same temptation to anger steal into him, and again he checked himself at the thought: "The man is certainly insane. I will get rid of him. And yet."

He could not shake off a strange and powerful impression which the stranger's words had made upon him. Crazy or not, the man had hinted at the possibility of an insincerity on his part which made him restless. He determined to question him and see if he really would develop a streak of insanity that would justify him in getting rid of him for the night.

"Brother Man," he said, using the term his guest had given him, "do you think I am living too extravagantly to live as I do?"

"Yes, in these times and after such a sermon."

"What would you have me do?" Philip asked the question half seriously, half amused at himself for asking advice from such a source.

"Do as you preach that others ought to do."

Again that silence fell over the room. And again Philip felt the same impression of power in the strange man's words.

The "Brother Man," as he wished to be called, bowed his head between his hands again, and Mrs. Strong whispered to her husband: "Now it is certainly worse than foolish to keep this up any longer. The man is evidently insane. We cannot keep him here all night. He will certainly do something terrible. Get rid of him, Philip. This may be a trick on the part of the whiskey men."

Never in all his life had Philip been so puzzled to know what to do with a human being. Here was one, the stranger he had ever met, who had come into his house; it is true he had been invited, but once within he had invited himself to stay all night and had accused his entertainer of living too extravagantly and called him an insincere preacher. Add to all this the singular fact that he had declared his name to be "Brother Man," and that he spoke with a calmness that was the very incarnation of peace, and Philip's wonder reached its limit.

In response to his wife's appeal Philip rose abruptly and went to the front door. He opened it, and a whirl of snow danced in. The wind had changed, and the moan of a coming heavy storm was in the air.

The moment that he opened the door his strange guest also arose, and putting on his hat he said, as he moved slowly toward the hall: "I must be going. I thank you for your hospitality, madam."

Philip stood holding the door partly open. He was perplexed to know just what to do or say.

"Where is your stay tonight?"

"My home is with my friends," replied the man. He laid his hand on the door, opened it and had stepped one foot out on the porch when Philip, seized with an impulse, laid his hand on his arm, gently but strongly pulled him back into the hall, shut the door and placed his back against it.

"You cannot go out into this storm until I know whether you have a place to go to for the night."

The man hesitated curiously, shuffled his feet on the mat, put his hand up to his face and passed it across his eyes with a gesture of great weariness.

"Where will you stay tonight?"

"My home is with my friends," replied the man. He laid his hand on the door, opened it and had stepped one foot out on the porch when Philip, seized with an impulse, laid his hand on his arm, gently but strongly pulled him back into the hall, shut the door and placed his back against it.

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CHAPTER XII.

In the morning Philip knocked at his guest's door to wake him for breakfast. Not a sound could be heard within. He waited a little while and then knocked again. It was as still as before. He opened the door softly and looked in.

To his amazement, there was no one there. The bed was made up neatly, everything in the room was in its place, but the strange being who had called himself "Brother Man" was gone.

Philip exclaimed, and his wife came in.

"So our queer guest has flown! He must have been very still about it. I heard no noise. Where do you suppose he is? And who do you suppose he is?"

"Are you sure there ever was such a person, Philip? Don't you think you dreamed all that about the 'Brother Man'?" Mrs. Strong had not quite forgiven Philip for his skeptical questioning of the reality of the man with the lantern who had driven the knife into the desk.

"Yes, it's your turn now, Sarah. Well, if our 'Brother Man' was a dream he was the most curious dream this family ever had, and if he was crazy he was the most remarkable insane person I ever saw."

"Of course he was crazy. All that he said about our living so extravagantly!"

"Do you think he was crazy in that particular?" asked Philip in a strange voice. His wife noticed it at the time, but it is true she did not become real to her until afterward. He went to the front door and found it was unlocked. Evidently the guest had gone out that way. The heavy storm of the night had covered up any possible signs of footsteps. It was still snowing furiously.

Philip went into his study for the forenoon as usual, but he did very little writing. His wife could hear him pacing the floor restlessly.

About 10 o'clock he came down stairs and declared his intention of going out into the storm, to see if he couldn't settle down to work better.

He went out and did not return until the middle of the afternoon. Mrs. Strong was a little alarmed.

"Where have you been all this time, Philip? In this terrible storm too! You are a monument of snow. Stand out here in the kitchen while I sweep you off."

Philip obediently stood still while his wife walked around him with a broom and good naturedly submitted to being swept down, "as if I were being worked into shape for a snow man," he said.

"Where have you been? Give an account of yourself."

"I have been seeing how some other people live. Sarah, the 'Brother Man' was not so very crazy after all. He has more than half converted me."

"Did you find out anything about him?"

"Yes; several of the older citizens here recognized my description of him. They say he is harmless and has quite a history; was once a wealthy mill owner in Clinton. He wanders about the country, living with any one who will take him in. It is a queer case. I must find out more about him. But I'm hungry. Can I have a bite of something?"

"Haven't you had dinner?"

"No; haven't had time."

"Where have you been?"

"Among the tenements."

"How are the people getting on there?"

"I cannot tell. It almost chokes me to eat when I think of it."

"Now, Philip, what makes you take it so seriously? How can you help all that suffering? You are not to blame for it."

"Maybe I am for a part of it. But whether I am or not there the suffering is. And I don't know that we ought to ask who is to blame in such cases. At any rate, supposing the fathers and mothers in the tenements are to blame themselves by their own sinfulness, does that make innocent children and helpless babes any warmer or better clothed and fed? Sarah, I have seen things in these four hours' time that make me want to join the bomb throwers of Europe almost."

Mrs. Strong came up behind his chair as he sat at the table eating and placed her hand on his brow. She grew more anxious every day over his growing personal feeling for others. It seemed to her it was becoming a passion with him, veering him out, and she feared its results as winter deepened and the strike in the mills remained unbroken.

"You cannot go out in this storm, Philip," she said, with a slight smile.

"No, but if I can only make the church see its duty at this time and act the Christlike way a great many persons will be saved." He dropped his knife and fork, wheeled around abruptly in his chair and faced her with the question, "Would you give up this home and be content to live in a simpler fashion than we have been used to since we came here?"

"Yes," replied his wife quietly. "I will go anywhere and suffer anything with you. What is it you are thinking of now?"

"I need a little more time. There is a crisis near at hand in my thought of what Christ would require of me. My duty to man shall be led by the spirit of truth to do what is necessary and for the better saving of men."

He kissed his wife tenderly and went up stairs again to his work. All through the rest of the afternoon and in the evening, as he shaped his church and pulpit work, the words of the "Brother Man" rang in his ears and the situation at the tenements rose in the successive panoramas before his eyes. As the storm increased in fury with the coming darkness, he felt that it was typical in a certain sense of his own condition. He abandoned the work he had been doing at his desk, and kneeling down at his couch he prayed. Mrs. Strong, coming up to the study, found him kneeling there and went and knelt beside him, while together they sought the light through the storm.

So the weeks went by, and the first Sunday of the next month found Philip's Christ message even more direct and personal than any he had brought to his people before. He had spent much of the time going into the workmen's houses. The tenement district was becoming familiar territory

to him now. He had settled finally with his own action ought to be. In that action his wife fully concurred. And the members of Calvary church, coming in that Sunday morning, were astonished at the message of their pastor as he spoke to them from the standpoint of modern Christ.

"I said a month ago that the age in which we live demands a simpler, less extravagant style of living. I did not mean by that to condemn the beauties of art or the marvels of science or the products of civilization. I merely emphasized what I believe is a mighty but neglected truth in our modern civilization—that if we would win men to Christ we must adopt more of his spirit of simple and consecrated self-denial. I wish to be distinctly understood as I go on that I do not condemn any man simply because he is rich or lives in a luxurious house, enjoying every sort of modern civilization, even the delusions of the senses, and all physical desires. What I do do, and what I have been burned deep into me ever since coming to this town, that if the members of this church wish to honor the Head of the church and bring men to believe him and save them in this life and the next they must be willing to do far more than they have yet done to make use of the physical comforts and luxuries of their homes for the blessing and Christianizing of this country. In the particular I have myself failed to set you an example. The fact that I have so failed is my only reason for making this matter public this morning."

"The situation in Milton today is exceedingly serious. I do not need to prove it to you by figures. If any business man will go through the tenements, he will acknowledge my statements. If any woman will contrast those dens with her own home, she will, if Christ is a power in her heart, stand in horror before such a travesty on the sacred thought of honor. The destruction of the neighborhood is alarming. The number of men out of work is dangerous. The complete removal of all sympathy between the church up here on this street and the tenement district is sadder than death. Oh, my beloved!"—Philip stretched out his arms and uttered a cry that rang in the ears of those who heard it and remained with some of them a memory for years—"these things ought not so to be! Where is the Christ spirit with us? Have we not sat in our comfortable houses and eaten our pleasant food and dressed in the finest clothing and gone to amusements and entertainments without number while God's gift has shivered on the streets and his sinful ones have sneered at Christianity as they have walked by our church doors?"

"It is true we have given money to charitable causes, it is true the town council has organized a bureau for the care and maintenance of those in want, it is true members of Calvary church, with other churches at this time, have done something to relieve the immediate distress of the town, but how much have we given of ourselves to those in need? Do we reflect that to reach souls and win them, to bring back humanity even to amusements and entertainments without number while God's gift has shivered on the streets and his sinful ones have sneered at Christianity as they have walked by our church doors?"

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