

THE CRUCIFIXION OF PHILIP STRONG.

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Philip Strong, with a smile and a sigh, took up his pen and wrote replies to the calls he had received, refusing the call to Elmdale and accepting the one to Milton. And so the strange story of a great-hearted man really began.

When he had finished writing these two letters, he wrote another, which throws so much light on his character and his purpose in going to Milton that we will insert that in this story as being necessary to its full understanding. This is the letter:

My Dear Alfred—Two years ago, when we left the seminary, you remember we promised each other in case either of us left his present parish he would let the other know at once. I did not suppose when I came that I should leave so soon, but I have just written a letter which means the beginning of a new life to me. The Calvary church in Milton has given me a call, and I have accepted it. Two months ago my church here practically went out of existence through a union with the other church on the street. The history of that movement is too long for me to relate here, but since I took place I have been preaching as a supply, pending the final settlement of

very well that his action was unalterable.

CHAPTER II.

Within a week Philip Strong had moved to Milton, as the church wished him to occupy the pulpit at once. The parsonage was a well planned house next the church, and his wife soon made everything look very homelike. The first Sunday evening after Philip preached in Milton, for the first time, he chatted with his wife over the events of the day as they sat before a cheerful open fire in the large grate. It was late in the fall and the nights were sharp and frosty.

"Are you tired tonight, Philip?" asked his wife.

"Yes, the day has been rather trying. Did you think I was nervous? Did I preach well?" Philip was not vain in the least. He simply put the question to satisfy his own exacting demand on himself in preaching. And there was not a person in the world to whom he would have put such a question except his wife.

"No, I thought you did splendidly. I felt proud of you. You made some queer gestures, and once you put one of your hands in your pocket. But your sermons were both strong and effective. I am sure the people were impressed. It was very still at both services."

Philip was silent a moment. And his wife went on:

"I am sure we shall like it here, Philip. What do you think?"

"I cannot tell yet. There is very much to do."

"How do you like the church building?"

"It is an easy audience room for my voice. I don't like the arrangement of the choir over the front door. I think the choir ought to be down on the platform in front of the people, by the side of the minister."

"That's one of your hobbies, Philip. But the singing was good, didn't you think so?"

"Yes, the choir is a good one. The congregation didn't seem to sing much, and I believe in congregational singing, even when there is a choir. But we can bring that about in time, I think."

"Now, Philip," said his wife, in some alarm, "you are not going to meddle with the singing, are you? It will get you into trouble. There is a musical committee in the church, and such committees are very sensitive about any interference."

"Well," said Philip, rousing up a little, "the church is a very important part of the service. And it seems to me I ought to have something important to say about it. But you need not fear, Sarah. I'm not going to try to change everything all at once."

His wife looked at him a little anxiously. She had perfect faith in Philip's honesty of purpose, but she sometimes had a fear of his impetuous desire to reform the world. After a little pause she spoke again, changing the subject.

"What did you think of the congregation, Philip?"

"I enjoyed it. I thought it was very attentive. There was a larger number out this evening than I had expected."

"Did you like the looks of the people?"

"They were all very nicely dressed."

"Now, Philip, you know that isn't what I mean. Did you like the people's faces?"

"You know I like all sorts and conditions of men."

"Yes, but there are audiences and audiences. Do you think you will enjoy preaching to this one in Calvary church?"

"I think I shall," replied Philip, but he said it in a tone that might have meant a great deal more. Again there was silence and again the minister's wife was the first to break it.

"There was a place in your sermon tonight, Philip, where you appeared the least bit embarrassed, as you seem sometimes at home when you have some writing or some newspaper article on your mind and someone suddenly interrupts you with a question a good way from your thoughts. What was the matter? Did you forget a point?"

"No, I'll tell you. From where I stand on the pulpit platform I can see through one of the windows over the front door. There is a large electric lamp burning outside, and the light fell directly on the sidewalk across the street. From time to time groups of people went through that band of light. Of course I could not see their faces very well, but I soon found out that they were mostly the young men and women operatives of the mills. They were out strolling through the street, which, I am told, is a favorite promenade with them. I should think as many as 200 passed by the church, while I was preaching. Well, after awhile I began to ask myself whether there was any possible way of getting those young people to come into the church instead of strolling past? And then I looked at the people in front of me and saw how different they were from those outside and wondered if it wouldn't be better to close up the church and go and preach on the street where the people are. And so, carrying on all that questioning with myself, while I tried to preach, causing a little 'embarrassment,' as you kindly

call it, in the sermon."

"I should think so! But how do you know, Philip, that those people outside were in any need of your preaching?"

Philip appeared surprised at the question. He looked at his wife, and her face was serious.

"Why doesn't everybody need preaching? They may not stand in need of my preaching perhaps, but they ought to have some preaching. And I cannot help thinking of what is the duty of the church in this place to the great crowd outside. Something ought to be done."

"Philip, I am sure your work here will be blessed. Don't you think so?"

"I know it will," replied Philip, with the assurance of a very positive but spiritually minded man. He never thought his Master was honored by asking him for small things or doubting the power of Christianity to do great things.

And always when he said "I" he simply meant, not Philip Strong, but Christ in Philip Strong. To deny the power and worth of that incarnation was, to his mind, not humility, but treason.

The Sunday following Philip made this announcement to the people:

"Beginning with next Sunday morning, I shall give the first of a series of monthly talks on 'Christ and Modern Society.' It will be my object in these talks to suppose Christ himself as the one speaking to modern society on its sins, its needs, its opportunities, its responsibilities, its everyday life. I shall try to be entirely loving and just and courageous in giving what I believe Christ himself would give you if he were the pastor of Calvary church in Milton today. So, during the talks, I wish you would, with me, try to see if you think Christ would actually say what I shall say in his place. If Christ were in Milton today, I believe he would speak to us about a good many things in Milton, and he would speak very plainly, and in many cases he might seem to be severe. But it would be for our good. Of course I am but human in my weakness. I shall make mistakes. I shall probably say things Christ would not say. But always going to the source of all true help, the spirit of truth, I shall, as best a man may, speak as I truly believe Christ would if he were your pastor. These talks will be given on the first Sunday of every month. I cannot announce the subjects, for they will be chosen as the opportunities arise."

During the week Philip spent several hours of each day in learning the facts concerning the town. One of the first things he did was to buy an accurate map of the place. He hung it up on the wall of his study and in after days found occasion to make good use of it. He spent afternoons walking over the town. He noted with special interest and earnestness the great brick mills by the river, five enormous structures with immense chimneys, out of which poured great volumes of smoke. Something about the mills fascinated him. They seemed like monsters of some sort, grim, unfeeling, but terrible. As one walked by them he seemed to feel the throbbing of the hearts of five creatures. The unpainted tenements, ugly in their unfeeling similarity, affected Philip with a sense of almost anger. He had a keen and truthful taste in matters of architecture, and those boxes of houses offended every artistic and homelike feeling in him. Coming home one day past the tenements, he found himself in an unknown street, and for the curiosity of it he undertook to count the saloons on the street in one block. There were over 12. There was a policeman on the corner as Philip reached the crossing, and he inquired of the officer if he could tell him who owned the property in the block containing the saloons.

"I believe most of the houses belong to Mr. Winter, sir."

"Mr. William Winter?" asked Philip.

"Yes, I think that's the name. He is the largest owner in the Ocean mill yard."

Philip thanked the man and went on toward home. "William Winter!" he exclaimed. "Is it possible that man will accept a revenue from the renting of his property to these vestibules of hell? That man! One of the leading members in my church! Chairman of the board of trustees and a leading citizen of the place! It does not seem possible!"

But before the week was out Philip had discovered facts that made his heart burn with shame and his mind rouse with indignation. Property in the town which was being used for saloons, gambling houses and dens of wickedness was owned in large part by several of the most prominent members of his church. There was no doubt of the fact. Philip, whose very nature was frankness itself, resolved to go to these men and have a plain talk with them about it. It seemed to him like a monstrous evil that a Christian believer, a church member, should be renting his property to these dens of vice and taking the money. He called on Mr. Winter, but he was out of town and would not be back until Saturday night. He went to see another member who was a large owner in one of the mills and a heavy property owner. It was not a pleasant thing to do, but Philip boldly stated the precise reason for his call and asked his member if it was true that he rented several houses in a certain block where saloons and gambling houses were numerous. The man looked at Philip, turned red and finally said it was a fact, but none of Philip's business.

"My dear brother," said Philip, with a sad but winning smile, "you cannot imagine what it costs me to come to you about this matter. In one sense it may seem to you like an impertinent meddling in your business. In another sense it is only what I ought to do as pastor of a church which is dearer to me than my life. And I have come to you as a brother in Christ to ask you if it seems to you like a thing which Christ would approve that you, his

representative, should allow the property which has come into your hands that you may use it for his glory and the building up of his kingdom to be used by the agents of the devil while you reap the financial benefit. Is it right, my brother?"

The man to whom the question was put made the usual excuses, that if he did not rent to these people other men would, that there was no call for the property by other parties and if it were



"Is it right, my brother?"

not rented to objectionable people it would lie empty at a dead loss, and so forth. To all of which Philip opposed the plain will of God, that all a man has should be used in clean and honest ways, and he could never sanction the getting of money through such immoral channels. The man was finally induced to acknowledge that it was not just the right thing to do and especially for a church member. But when Philip pressed him to give up the whole iniquitous revenue and clear himself of all connection with it the property owner looked aghast.

"Why, Mr. Strong, do you know what you ask? Two-thirds of the most regular part of my income is derived from these rents. It is out of the question for me to give them up. You are too nice in the matter. All the property owners in Milton do the same thing. There isn't a man of any means in the church who isn't deriving some revenue from this source. Why, a large part of your salary is paid from these very rents. You will get into trouble if you try to meddle in this matter. I don't take offense. I think you have done your duty. And I confess it doesn't seem exactly the thing. But, as society is organized, I don't see that we can change the matter. Better not try to do anything about it, Mr. Strong. The church likes you and will stand by in giving you a handsome support, but men are very touchy when their private business is meddled with."

Philip sat listening to this speech, and his face grew whiter and he clinched his hands tighter as the man went on. When he had finished, Philip spoke in a low voice:

"Mr. Bentley, you do not know me if you think any fear of the consequences will prevent my speaking to the members of my church on any matter where it seems to me I ought to speak. In this particular matter I believe it is not only my right but my duty to speak. I would be shamed before my Lord and Master if I did not declare his will in regard to the uses of property. This question passes over from one of private business, with which I have no right to meddle, into the domain of public safety, where I have a right to demand that places which are fatal to the life and morals of the young men and women of the town shall not be encouraged and allowed to subsist through the use of property owned and controlled by men of influence in the community and especially by the members of Christ's body. My brother," Philip went on after a painful pause, "before God, in whose presence we shall stand at last, am I not right in my view of this matter? Would not Christ say to you just what I am now saying?"

Mr. Bentley shrugged his shoulders and said something about not trying to mix business and religion. Philip sat looking at the man, reading him through and through, his heart almost bursting in him at the thought of what a man would do for the sake of money. At last he saw that he would gain nothing by prolonging the argument. He rose, and with the same sweet frankness which characterized his opening of the subject he said: "Brother, I wish to tell you that it is my intention to speak of this matter next Sunday in the first of my talks on 'Christ and Modern Society.' I believe it is something he would talk about in public, and I will speak of it as I think he would."

"You must do your duty, of course," replied Mr. Bentley, somewhat coldly, and Philip went out, feeling as if he had grappled with his first dragon in Milton and found him to be a very ugly one and hard to kill. What hurt him as much as the lack of spiritual fitness of apprehension of evil in his church member was the knowledge that, as Mr. Bentley so coarsely put it, his salary was largely paid out of the rentals of those vile abodes. He grew sick at heart as he dwelt upon the disagreeable fact, and as he came back to the parsonage and went up to his cozy study he groaned to think that it was possible through the price that men paid for souls.

"And this because society is as it is!" he exclaimed, as he buried his face in his hands and leaned his elbows on his desk, while his cheeks flushed and his heart quivered at the thought of the filth and vileness the money had seen and heard which paid for the very desk at which he wrote his sermons.

But Philip Strong was not one to give way at the first feeling of seeming defeat. He did not too harshly condemn his members. He wondered at their lack of spiritual life; but to his credit be it said, he did not harshly condemn. Only, as Sunday approached, he grew more clear in his own mind as to his duty in the matter. Expe-

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"I am convinced that I must go to Milton."

Philip Strong, in this letter he said nothing about his call to Elmdale and did not tell his college chum what salary was offered him by the church at Milton. As a matter of fact, he really forgot all about everything, except the one important event of his decision to go to Milton. He regarded it, and rightly so, as the most serious step of his life, and while he had apparently decided the matter very quickly it was, in reality, the result of a deep conviction that he ought to go. He was in the habit of making his decisions rapidly. This habit sometimes led him into embarrassing mistakes and once in a great while resulted in humiliating reversals of opinion, so that people who did not know him thought he was fickle and changeable. In the present case Philip acted with his customary quickness and knew