

**THE SON OF HIS
FATHER**

VOL. III.

BY
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CONTENTS

CHAPTER

I.The Great Scheme

II.Mr. Sandford's
Secretary

III.John on his Trial

IV.Deefeated and
Wronged

V.The Culprit

VI.A Crisis

VII.Mrs. Sandford's View

VIII.The Convict

IX.The First Shock

X.Mother and Son

XI.Susie and her Lovers

XII.John's Letter

XIII.The Darkness that
could be Felt

XIV.The Valley of
Humiliation

XV.The Father and
Children

XVI.The Great Scheme

XVII.Elly's Pledge

XVIII.A Suspended Solution

THE SON OF HIS FATHER.

CHAPTER I.

THE GREAT SCHEME.

JOHN'S imagination, though it was so full of other matters, was affected more than he could understand by his strange visitor. He felt himself going back a hundred times in the course of the evening to this man, and those curious sophistries which he produced, always with that half smile in his eyes, as if he himself saw the absurdity in them, and as if morals and reason were something outside of himself to be treated with entire impartiality.

John wondered how far he believed or disbelieved what he had been saying, and whether these dispassionate discussions of what was formally right or wrong took away from a conscience, which could not be very delicate or sensitive, anything of the burden. They set him thinking too, following the career of such a being, trying to understand. Drink—was not in the decalogue, as his visitor had said: and John had seen enough even in his short life to know with what facility, with what innocence of evil meaning, the first step may be taken in that most general, most destructive of all vices—the one which leads to so many other developments, and which involves, as that philosopher had allowed, consequences more terrible, and penalties more prompt and inevitable than any other. John was very strenuous against it, almost bitter, having seen, as everyone has seen, its disastrous effects upon both body and soul. And yet, perhaps it was true what the other had said. Perhaps there were sins which brought no immediate evil consequences, which yet were blacker in the sight of heaven.

He felt himself wondering, with an indulgent feeling which was strange to him, how it was that a man who had nothing in him of the criminal air, a man full of thoughtfulness and humorous observation, and a knowledge of the workings of the mind, should have fallen into crime, and should have sunk into those depths and abysses of misery where he had no friend but Joe. A man must have reduced all the motives of human life to their elements, he must have banished all consideration of the outward and visible, all thoughts of the alleviations, the consolations, the comforts and stays of existence before he could have sunk contentedly to the bottom, and cynically, stoically, smilingly, despairingly, made himself believe that his brutal 'mate' was as good as any other, being all that remained to him.

And what, John asked himself, could remain for a convict whose world for so many years had been limited to the interior of a prison, and who in the course of working out his sentence had lost everything? What remained? One would suppose the poor wretch's family, somebody who belonged to him, some wife or sister, or daughter. And then came his story: It is Corban—a gift. John felt his own heart bleed at the mere thought of this hopeless, succourless, yet uncomplaining misery. A man who could manage still to smile in the face of all that, to maintain still the attitude of a thinker, of an observer looking on at his own entire destitution with impartial eyes, with that calm and full understanding and humorous despair—the young man shuddered in the midst of his own success and prosperity, and love and hope. Could there be a more complete and absolute contrast? It was so great that his heart seemed to stand still as he contemplated it—a distance as of heaven from hell.

The evening was spent in very close work; for he found that a great many details had to be filled in and made clear before the plan, worked out in his own brain, could be made presentable to the experienced and critical eyes to which he meant to submit it. And he was at his writing-table again early in the morning, arranging his papers so as to make the copying easy, with much question in his own mind whether his new *protégé* would really come, whether he would prove capable of such work. John thought that in all likelihood the man would not come, and was giving up with a regret which seemed even to himself quite uncalled for—regret as for a pet project which he gave up most unwillingly—the plan of active charity which he had so hastily adopted—when his visitor of the previous day suddenly appeared. He came alone, trim and well-brushed, but with a shaking hand, and eyes which were red and muddy, and made his excuses with a deprecating smile.

‘I’m late,’ he said, ‘you must make allowance for bad habits. And I’ve had to get up as other people pleased for so long that I can’t help indulging a little now; but I work quickly and I’ll soon make it up.’

‘There is no hurry,’ said John: which was not exactly true, nor what he would have said to anyone else. And they worked together for the greater part of the day, not talking much, though John’s secretary now and then paused, leaned back upon his chair, raised his eyes to the ceiling, and seemed on the eve of resuming the philosophisings of last night. But John was too busy to take any notice, and his companion presently would fall to work again.

He had no special knowledge of John’s subject, but he had a great deal of intelligence, and asked reasonable questions and led John into explanations which were very useful to him, showing

him how to recommend and elucidate his plan. They had their chop together in the middle of the day, and John found his companion more and more agreeable. There was something natural, familiar, in the relations into which they fell. John was a young man not too easy, as his fellow-workers knew, to 'get on with.' He was very exacting in the matter of attention to work. He was apt to conceive a contempt for the people who did not care for what they were employed on—and the young men who did just what they were compelled to do and no more, found no favour in his eyes. But even those periods of idling which occurred in the work of this grey-haired secretary did not produce that effect upon his young employer.

A gentleness of feeling, little habitual to him, stole over John. He did not feel critical—he felt friendly, oh, so compassionate, afraid even to think anything that could add a pang to this man, so forlorn and miserable, denuded of all things. The less he made of his own wretchedness the more profoundly did John feel it. He kept thinking, as he gave him his instructions, of all that this clear intelligence must have suffered shut up in the strait routine of a prison. He could not copy a page or make a calculation without some little running-over of remark, something that brought a smile, that betrayed the lively play of a mind unsubdued by the most tremendous burdens, by all the heavy and horrible experiences of such a life. How could he have borne that, day by day and year by year? A sort of awe, and almost reverence of the tragedy that this humorous, light-hearted being must have lived through, rose in John's musing soul.

It was not until they were finishing their little meal together that the absence of one very natural and usual explanation between them struck the young man.

‘By-the-by,’ John said, suddenly—he was making corrections in one of the papers and did not raise his head—‘By-the-by, it seems very absurd. I don’t even know your name.’

There was a moment’s silence, and then John looked up. He found his companion’s eyes fixed upon him with his usual half smile of observation, and dubious humorous uncertainty. When John met his eye he changed his position a little with a momentary laugh.

‘I have been so long out of the habit of thinking a name necessary,’ he said. ‘My name is——’ He paused again, and once more looked at John, in whose face there was no suspicious anxiety, but only a friendly alertness of interest. Something mischievous and mirthful lighted up in the stranger’s eyes: ‘My name is—March,’ he said.

‘And mine is Sandford,’ replied John.

The mischievous light went out of the other’s look. His face grew serious; he nodded his head two or three times with gravity.

‘I know that,’ he said. ‘It is a name that I have had a great deal to do with in my life; but I don’t suppose you ever heard of me.’

John shook his head. He cleared away with his own hand the last remnants of the luncheon, over which enough time had been expended.

‘Now we’ll get to work again if you are ready,’ he said.

He knew nothing of any March. He was not aware that he had ever heard the name. And then they set to work again together

pleasantly, cheerfully; John finding something inspiring in the companionship for all the rest of the afternoon.

Next day the young man presented himself at the office, though his leave was not yet exhausted. But he did not go naturally to his own desk, to look if there were letters or special orders for him. He marched straight to the door within which the younger partner, the son of the Mr. Barrett who had received him into the office, and whom John had always found severe, had his throne. The younger Mr. Barrett was far more favourable to the young man than his father had ever been, and never spoke to him of the hospital, or the duty which lay upon him to repay his mother for her kindness, which was what the elder invariably did. It is not a subject which is agreeable even to the most dutiful of children. Repay your mother for all that she has done for you! Who could bear that odious advice? John was not angelic enough to be pleased by it. And when he had the choice it was to Mr. William Barrett that he betook himself. He found that personage in a very cheerful condition, and delighted to see him.

‘You are the very man I want. You must go off at once to those works at Hampstead. They’ve got into a mess, and no one can clear it up better than you. I was just wishing for you. But your leave is not out: how is it you’ve come back before your time?’

Then John explained that he had been privately working for a long time at a scheme of which his mind was very full. And he gave on the spot an account of it which made the junior partner open his eyes.

‘If you’ve done that, my boy, you’ve made your fortune, and ours too,’ he said, listening with great attention to John’s exposition.

‘That’s what I hope, sir,’ the young man said, with all the confidence of youth.

Mr. William Barrett listened half-bantering, half-believing. To think of so young a man having hit upon an expedient which had baffled so many older brains, seemed to him half-incredible, and he laughed and rubbed his hands even while he seriously inclined to hear all the details of the scheme.

‘It all depends upon whether it’s practicable,’ he said. ‘Do you know the lie of the country? Have you calculated the cost even of what will be required as a basis of operations?’

‘I have calculated everything,’ said John, with that enthusiastic conviction which is so contagious. Mr. Barrett looked in his face with a laugh, half-sceptical, half-sympathetic.

‘I like young men to think well of their own schemes,’ he said; ‘and I like them to plan big works even if they should never come to anything. Show me your papers——’

‘I am having them copied out. I am making the statement as clear as possible. I will bring them as soon as they are ready.’

‘Oh, they are not ready, then!’ Mr. Barrett cooled perceptibly. ‘You should not have said anything about it until they were in a state to be inspected—copying was not necessary—the rough notes are what I should have liked to see. You had better go off to Hampstead at once, and when you have finished that job you can

bring me your plan, if it is ready then. There may be something in it—one can never tell.'

John felt that this was a very summary dismissal after the gleam of favour with which he had been regarded. He felt as if the plan which had been so much in the forefront of his imagination had been cast all at once into the background, which discouraged him for the moment: all the more that his own judgment agreed with what his chief said, and he felt now that it would have been better to place the scribbles of his rising invention before the experienced eyes which could see at a glance what was practicable in them, instead of the fair copy written out in a strange hand, which his impulse in favour of poor March had alone moved him to make. However, he set out at once for Hampstead, according to his orders, and there forgot his discouragement, and even, for a time, his great scheme, in the counter excitement of bringing order out of chaos. There is a certain satisfaction in finding that a piece of business has been horribly mismanaged, when one feels that one can put it all right. For some days John was fully occupied with this work, with scarcely time even to think of anything else. He got home at night late and very tired with his day's work, feeling able for little more than to give a glance at what March had been doing and to feel the comfort and satisfaction of having an amanuensis who arranged his papers so carefully and copied so neatly, in a handwriting, which, John remarked with surprise, was very like though better than his own. Everything was carefully arranged in the most orderly manner, the scraps of calculation in their proper succession, and the work going on, though slowly. It was indeed going on very slowly, and John never found his secretary at work when he returned: but he reflected that in all likelihood that philosopher, left to himself, took things easily; and there was no

hurry: and he was too tired in the evenings when he came back from his work to give his full attention to anything else.

The Hampstead work occupied him for about a fortnight. On the morning after its completion he got up with a new start of energy, and with a revival of interest and enthusiasm betook himself to his great scheme. To his surprise, however, he found the little collection of calculations, sketches, and estimates, in the very same condition in which he had placed them in March's hand, all very neatly arranged and in proper order, but without a trace of the fair copy for which he had given instructions. John was exceedingly startled, and did not know what to think. Had it not been done at all? had the patience of the unfortunate amanuensis or his self-control given way, and the work been thrown up? But then John had seen a considerable part of it completed. He had even, as has been said, looked over a portion of it, and remarked that March's handwriting was like his own. What could this mean? An alarm which he felt to be absurd, at least excessive, most likely altogether uncalled-for, took possession of him. He called his landlady and asked her if Mr. March had said anything, if he had left any message, if he had been at work the day before? John's landlady was the impersonation of respectability: she did not lose her temper or break forth into abuse. But her air was that of an offended woman, and she immediately replied that she had been about to speak to him on the subject, that she could not have such persons in her house.

'Persons?' John said, with surprise, and then Mrs. Short, keeping her composure with difficulty, informed him that she had nothing to say against 'the old gentleman,' who she allowed was pleasant-spoken, and looked respectable, though she much feared

he liked a drop: but that the other was the one as she could not abide.

John learned with some annoyance that Joe had come daily while he was absent, and had made his way into the room where March sat at work—but that for the last two days neither of them had appeared at all.

‘And very glad I was: for I couldn’t have stood it another day, not another day, Mr. Sandford, much as I think on you, sir. A fellow like that slouching in as if the place belonged to him: and who could tell what he mightn’t bring—disease, or vermin, or dirt: dirt sure enough, for Jane did nothing but sweep up after him. Glad was I when they both went away.’

‘The day before yesterday?’ said John, ‘and no message, not a word to explain.’

‘The old gentleman came in the morning. He had the papers out as usual, and was a-going to begin: and then the other one came for him, and they both went away.’

All John’s questions could elicit nothing more than this. He said to himself that March must have taken something to finish at home; that perhaps he might have fallen into one of those paroxysms of drinking with which John was acquainted among his men. He was angry with himself for the apprehensions that stole into his mind. If this man had not been what he was—a convict, a man without a character, John said to himself, it never would have occurred to him to fear. Joe, indeed, was not to be trusted with spoons or even great-coats or anything portable; but what could Joe know about the value of his papers? It was ridiculous to think of any theft. No doubt the easiest explanation was the true one—

that March had taken the papers to complete at home. With this he tried to content himself, and, with the idea that after all he was but doing what he ought to have done at once, gathered up his own rough notes and calculations, and set out for the office. There seemed a slight excitement there at his appearance, or so he thought. The vague uneasiness in his own mind no doubt gave a certain aspect of curiosity and commotion to the clerks in the outer office, who looked up at him as he came in.

‘Mr. Barrett, I think, was looking for you, Sandford. You will find them both in Mr. William’s room,’ said the principal of the outer office.

John walked in, not without a growing sense of trouble to come; he did not know what it might be, but he felt it in the air. Some thunder-bolt or other was about to fall upon his unaccustomed head.

CHAPTER II.

MR. SANDFORD'S SECRETARY.

THIS was what had happened in the meantime, while John had been about his other work. The man whom he had so readily taken up, knowing nothing of him except harm, had begun with quite an *élan* of sympathetic industry while the young man was with him. It was his nature so to do; had John remained with him all the time he would have continued so, with a generous desire to second and carry out all his wishes. But, when left alone to his work, his interest flagged. He settled everything in the most neat and orderly way, for he was always orderly, always ready to arrange and keep a certain symmetry in his surroundings, a kind of gratifying occupation which was not work.

When he had spread out his ink, his pens, his pencil, and ruler, his blotting-paper, and all the scraps he had to copy on the table before him, he began his work, and wrote on for half-an-hour at least with the air of a man who knew no better pleasure. But when he got to the conclusion of the page he laid down his pen and began to think. He had a quickly working mind, readily moved by any suggestion, taking up a cue and running on from it in lines of thought which amused him sometimes with a certain appearance of originality, enough to impose upon any chance listener, and always upon himself. This led him into mental amplifications of the text that was before him, and gave him a certain pleasure at first even in his work of copying. He thought of two or three things which he felt would be great improvements upon John's plan as he went on, and at the end of each page he mused for an hour or so upon that and a hundred other subjects into which it ran. And then he roused

up suddenly and turned the leaf and wrote a few sentences more; and then it occurred to him that it was time to eat something, as his breakfast had been a very light one.

He went out accordingly, having still money in his pocket, to get his luncheon, and lingered a little to wash down the hot and savoury sausage which was agreeable to a stomach not in very good order, and met Joe, who was hanging about on the outlook for his mate. Joe returned with him to pilot his friend safely through the little-known streets to the room in which John, in his simplicity, had believed his protégé would be safe from all such influences, and went in with him to bear him company. Then, after March had rested from these fatigues, his comrade aroused his interest not unskilfully.

‘I ’eard him say,’ remarked Joe, ‘as them papers would make ‘is fortin.’

‘So he thinks, poor lad; and I hope they may, for he’s a good lad and has been very kind to me.’

‘Droll to think you can make a fortin’ by writin’ on bits of paper,’ said Joe, touching John’s notes with his grimy hand (and indeed that opinion is shared by many people), ‘is it story-books, or wot is it!’

Mr. March laughed with genuine enjoyment, leaning back in his chair.

‘No, you ignoramus,’ he said; ‘don’t you see its figures, calculations, things you can understand still less than story-books? It’s a great scheme, Joe, my fine fellow, for turning the water out of the river and making the floods into dry land.’

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