

## REDEMPTION.

He sat there in an old stained leather armchair staring at the wall opposite, with its wallpaper hanging like a ragged row of wind torn flags. The dying red October sun cast bizarre, mutant shadows around the room, as its light pierced the window behind him. He turned slowly, his hand reaching out unconsciously for the bottle on the table beside him, lifted it robotically to his lips and tried to drink, until his alcohol soaked brain triggered a message signaling that the bottle was empty. A torturous, tormented moan left his lips as the bottle slipped from his fingers onto the floor. As he sat there spread-eagled in the chair, his arms dangling feebly over the sides, his brain began to urge him that it was time for another drink.

"No! No! No! Please leave me alone. I don't want another damn drink" his agonized anguished scream reverberating around the dank, drab room, as he struggled vainly to get out of the chair. He eventually gave up and allowed his body to flop back down into the chair. The alcoholic mist that blurred his thoughts began to disperse and Ills mind began to become pervaded with detached, distorted scenes of his past life. As the mist lifted completed, the pictures and memories that flooded Ill's mind became more ordered and lucid.

His name was James Lambourne, the only child of Phillip and Mary Lambourne. Born in 1962. in Stamford Brook, a small hamlet on the borders of Chiswick and Hammersmith, West London. His father was the manager of the local branch of Lloyds bank, whilst his mother was head librarian at the local library. He exhibited a natural ability in being able to understand and master any subject matter from a very early age. His parents realised that their son was an extremely clever and bright young boy and did everything in their power in nurturing his exceptional talents.

He attended a local preparatory school, before progressing, when he was ten years old. To Chiswick Grammar School, a privately run institution for boys. His development at the school was phenomenal, by the age of fourteen he had passed ten 'O' level examinations, all with A\* grades, at sixteen he achieved A\* grades in four 'A' level subjects. At this stage in his life. the headmaster at the school suggested to James that he should sit the Oxford University entrance examinations, a recommendation endorsed wholeheartedly by his parents. James duly agreed, sat the examinations, which he passed with distinction. He was awarded a place at St. John's College. Oxford, to study Accountancy, Economics and French.

James was a tall, muscular youth, with raven black hair, dark blue eyes, and chiseled Adonis-like features, whose exceptional talents were not only confined to the academic field, but which were also apparent in the sporting arena, particularly on both the cricket field and tennis court. He was a quiet spoken, modest young man who had an innate quality to master and succeed at everything he undertook, and although recognised as the school's star pupil, got on well with his fellow students.

He enjoyed the life at St. John's College, where it soon became apparent to his tutors that here was a student with a prodigious aptitude to attain the highest academic accomplishments. He did not disappoint his mentors; at the end of the two-year course he graduated with first class honours in all three subjects, a triple first, a rare achievement for any student at Oxford. Samuel Cohen, his roommate and close friend for the past two years, said to him on hearing the results "God! James you are without

any doubt whatsoever, a bloody genius".

Then on the last day of term came the traumatic news. He and Samuel were in their room saying their final farewells. James had been awarded a scholarship to study for a doctorate in Economics at St. John's, whilst Samuel had decided to go and work in the family banking business. The telephone rang, Samuel picked it up and then turned to James and told him he was to go to the Dean's office, immediately. On arrival at the office, he instantly realised that something was wrong.

"Please sit down James; I'm afraid I have some very bad news for you. Your Uncle David has contacted me and told me, I'm sorry but there is no easy way of telling you, but your father has had an extremely serious heart attack and has been admitted to Hammersmith hospital".

As he lay back in the chair he saw a clear vision of his mother as she walked towards him along the hospital corridor uttering the dreaded words as tears streamed down her cheeks.

"I'm sorry James, but your father has just passed away".

He remembered holding her close to him and saying, "Don't worry Mum; I'll look after you, now".

After the funeral when all the family and friends had left he told his mother that he was not returning to St. John's College. He had informed the Dean of his decision. who had in turn offered to help him find a position with a Merchant Bank in the City. Two weeks after the funeral he received a telephone call from the Dean. who told him that an interview had been arranged with Holbrook and Mardon, a Merchant Bank. In the City of London, on the following Wednesday.

He duly attended the interview, at the end of which he was offered a position as a Junior Investment Manager in the Fund Management section of the company. After a brief, but intensive training period, he was given charge of a few private investment portfolios, which through his ability to make sound, expeditious assessments of market trends became highly, profitable units. It soon became obvious to the Senior Executives within the company that they had employed an extremely, talented individual, who, at the end of his first year's employment was promoted to the position of a Senior Investment Analyst. However, it was in October 1987. that his exceptional talents were exhibited fully. when through his foresight and enterprise, the bank and its customers were able to avoid the effects of Black Monday; 19<sup>th</sup> October, 1987. when stock exchanges all over the world crashed heavily and suddenly. It was after this particular incident that he was spoken of as the superstar of the financial world, something he disliked intensely.

In December, of that year. Lord Northwood, the chairman of the bank, invited James to lunch at his club. Whites in Piccadilly. He entered the beautifully oak-panelled dining room, furnished in the style of Louis XVI th, and saw Lord Northwood seated at a table in the far corner of the room. The headwaiter led him over to the table. "Welcome James, please be seated," his Lordship greeted him. "Thank you. Sir," he replied as he sat down in the chair opposite. "You must be wondering why I've invited you to lunch with me today. Well. first of all, I would like to thank you personally for the crucial action you initiated prior to 'Black Monday'. You saved the Bank and its clients millions; your perception of the situation was both faultless and exemplary". Lord Northwood paused and sipped his wine. "However, my prime reason for this meeting is that I want you to undertake a special assignment for me," he continued. "But I will explain further after we have eaten," he concluded, as a waiter approached the table with their food. After lunch, they retired to the members lounge, a comfortably furnished room with book-filled walls. They sat in spacious, black leather armchairs in a corner of the room, where

they were served coffee.

"James, I want you to take charge of our Paris branch. It has become quite apparent to me that the Branch is not performing effectively and some of its most valued clients are becoming extremely dissatisfied with current handling of their investments. I believe you are the person who has the necessary business acumen to reverse the present state of affairs. Will you do this for me James"?

"Certainly Sir," he replied without hesitation, whilst relishing the thoughts of the challenge this opportunity could offer. "When would you like me to start"?

"As soon as possible, but what if we set the date for the beginning of the New Year".  
"That would be ideal Sir. It allows me sufficient time to complete my current dealings and to make an appraisal of any available documentation on the present procedures in operation at the Paris Branch".

"A file on the past six month's dealings of the branch will be on your desk when you return to your office. There are just two stipulations, you report only to me and you have my complete and absolute authority to implement any changes you deem necessary to retrieve the current situation".

As they rose from the armchairs and shook hands. Lord Northwood looked directly at him and said passionately "I have every confidence that you will succeed, James and I won't forget what you've done for Holbrook and Mardon".

As he sat there in the chair, he thought to himself "Little did I know at the time that I had made the most momentous decision of my life".

He moved to Paris at the beginning of the year and soon realised that the problems at the bank were mainly due to a complete lack of leadership and guidance from Senior Management, together with the absence of any liaison between the various departments were the cause of the present decline. He immediately implemented a set of procedures and disciplines that would ensure the reversal of the prevailing trends. Within three months, it became quite apparent that the action he had taken was achieving significant changes in the performance of the bank.

One Thursday afternoon, as he was examining a summary of the day's transactions. he received a Fax informing him that Lord Northwood would be arriving in Paris the following day and he was to arrange to join His Lordship for lunch at the Ritz Hotel. The lunch turned out to be a pretext for James to fully up-date Lord Northwood on the current situation, at the bank. After he had finished his report. Lord Northwood thanked him and commented "It's quite obvious. James, that you have everything under control, just as I had expected". "Oh by the way." he added "We have been invited to a dinner party at our Embassy, tomorrow evening. Sorry about the short notice, I've arranged for my chauffeur to pick you up at seven o'clock, if that is all right with you".

"Certainly, sir" he replied "I will look forward to it".

They arrived at the Embassy at 7.30.p.m. Lord Northwood handed their invitation the attendant who announced in a loud, booming voice "Lord Northwood and Mr. James Lambourne". As they walked down the steps into an elegantly decorated reception area. a tall erect figure marched towards them "Charles, so pleased that you both could come," he said as he shook hands with Lord Northwood. He then turned to James "Mr. Lambourne welcome, I have heard quite a lot about you, all favourable I may add".

"Thank you. Your Excellency," he replied courteously.

"Now, allow me to introduce you to your companion for this evening. Catherine. please meet Mr. James Lambourne".

As James turned his head. his sight was filled with the most beautiful vision of another human being that he had ever seen. She stood before him. a lithe, graceful figure, with features of sculptured alabaster, haloed with shoulder-length burnished gold tresses, wearing a deep-blue velvet evening gown that complimented her sparkling sapphire eyes.

"Good evening, James," she said with a smile. "I hope you don't mind being my partner for this evening".

"It will be my pleasure and privilege," he replied ardently, whilst feeling completely enveloped by her exquisite beauty.

Over dinner they chatted amiably, where she portrayed an innate ability of making him feel completely at ease. At the end of night as they were preparing to say their goodbyes, he realised that she had skillfully steered the conversation in such a way that the focus had centered on him, so that he knew very little about her. On the journey back to the Ritz, Lord Northwood turned to him and asked, "Did *you* enjoy the evening, James".

"Absolutely, sir".

"What did you think of Catherine"?

"She is the most charming and beautiful woman I have ever met," he replied "But I feel so damn stupid, I hardly know anything about her, I don't even know her surname".

"Lady Catherine Seymour, the only child of Sir Thomas Seymour, recently retired Head of the Civil Service. She is the private and personal secretary to the Ambassador, a very lovely, intelligent, young woman; who also happens to be my god-daughter," stated his lordship proudly. Of course, he suddenly remembered her greeting Lord Northwood as 'Uncle Charles'.

"Thank you. sir. at least I know a little more about her," he responded in a somewhat relieved tone.

The following day he telephoned the Embassy and asked to speak to Catherine. He was told that she was unavailable, but was asked that if he wished to leave his number, then it would be passed on to her. That evening as he sat watching the news on television, the telephone rang, it was Catherine.

"Hello James, you rang this morning"?

"Yes. I just wanted to thank once again for last night and invite you to dine with me one evening".

"I'd like that very much" came the instant reply.

"Is Wednesday evening convenient" he asked hopefully.

"That would be perfect" she replied.

They met that Wednesday, as arranged, in a small, but exclusive restaurant in Montmartre. Over dinner she told him all about herself. Her mother had died when she

was seven and because of the nature of her father's work, she was a senior official at the Foreign Office, she had gone to live with her aunt. She had attended Rodean Public school and then Girton College, Cambridge University, from where she had graduated with honours in both French and Italian. After leaving Cambridge, she joined the Foreign Office, where she had worked in various departments before taking up her present position about two years ago. At the end of the evening they agreed to meet at the weekend. It was the beginning of a whirlwind romance. From then on they spent every free moment together and it soon became quite obvious to everyone who knew them that they were totally infatuated with one another.

A month after their first meeting, Lord Northwood had telephoned him and told him that a major American corporation had asked the bank to act as their agent in a proposed multi-national takeover. He wanted James to return to London, as soon as possible; to take charge of all aspects associated with the planned merger.

The night before he was to return to London, they met at their favourite restaurant, Jean Jacques, in Montmartre. As they sat there sipping their after dinner coffee, he reached into his coat pocket and placed a small, black, velvet-covered box on the table.

"What is it?" she asked curiously.

"Please, open it. It's for you, my darling".

She opened the box carefully and saw a beautiful sapphire ring. "Oh James! It's absolutely gorgeous" she exclaimed.

He took her hands in his and asked in a quiet, but passionate tone "Catherine, will you please marry me"?

"Oh yes. yes, yes, of course I will, my darling," came her immediate, joyous response. A month later, she transferred from the Embassy in Paris to the Foreign Office in London and moved in with him in his penthouse flat in Canary Wharf. Three months later they were married in the Parish Church, in Aldbury, Berkshire, the village where she had been brought up by her aunt.

Their life together was serene; they lived for each other. They dined out occasionally, usually in the company of a few close friends, but every weekend they travelled to a small cottage in the country, where they totally relaxed in each other's company. One particular weekend, he recalled, as he sat there staring into the darkness that now pervaded the whole room, they were enjoying an evening meal at the local pub, when Catherine had said to him "James, I think we should start looking for a bigger place than the flat". "Why, my darling?" he asked curiously.

"Well, by the end of the year we are going to have an addition to the family. I went to see my doctor yesterday and he confirmed that the tests show that I'm seven weeks pregnant".

"That's wonderful news," he exclaimed joyfully, as he clasped her hands, leant forward and kissed her gently. Two months later they moved to a large five-bedroom house on the banks of the Thames in Windsor.

The next image that started to fill his memory he tried to obliterate, but it would not go away. It was Lord Northwood standing in his office telling him that Catherine had been involved in a serious accident. He had rushed to the hospital, but he was too late. Both she and her unborn child had died of the injuries sustained in a horrendous crash on the M4, near Windsor.

His world fell apart, the only vision that filled his mind was of Catherine's torn and lacerated body lying on the slab in the hospital mortuary. His friends tried to help to overcome his grief but he withdrew into himself. He sold the house in Windsor and went

to live in his parents' old house in Stamford Brook. He resigned from his job and more or less became a recluse. It was not long before the drinking began, at first, a half bottle of spirits, which soon became a litre bottle every day.

A Niagara of tears flooded his cheeks, as he remembered that today was exactly one year to the day that she been killed. Suddenly, he heard a faint, but tender voice, like an echo, calling his name. He looked up and there silhouetted in the darkness was tins beautiful vision of his Catherine, wearing the same deep-blue velvet gown that she had worn on the night they had first met at the Embassy. He tried to speak, but she held a finger to her lips and then said "Please listen to me my darling. You must stop grieving for me, I will never be able to rest in peace, whilst I can see you like this. In a few moments the telephone will ring, someone will ask for your help. please do as they ask, for my sake, my darling". As her vision faded like a melting snowflake, the silence was jarred by the ringing telephone. He picked up the phone and a voice asked Urgently "Is that you James? It's Sam here, Samuel Cohen. I have a very big favour to ask of you. Our bank is encountering some serious problems, which I believe you are the only person who has the ability to sort them out. Please say you'll help. .James".

One year later he knelt beside the grave in Aldbury Parish Church, his black cashmere overcoat covered with a film of fine raindrops, as he laid a huge bouquet of red roses on the gravestone. He stood up and leaned forward and kissed her name carved on the headstone "Thank you my darling Catherine, my great redeemer, rest in peace".