

## **CHAPTER II. THE MURDERESS ASKS QUESTIONS.**

The first of the events which I must now relate was the conviction of The Prisoner for the murder of her husband.

They had lived together in matrimony for little more than two years. The husband, a gentleman by birth and education, had mortally offended his relations in marrying a woman of an inferior rank of life. He was fast declining into a state of poverty, through his own reckless extravagance, at the time when he met with his death at his wife's hand.

Without attempting to excuse him, he deserved, to my mind, some tribute of regret. It is not to be denied that he was profligate in his habits and violent in his temper. But it is equally true that he was affectionate in the domestic circle, and, when moved by wisely applied remonstrance, sincerely penitent for sins committed under temptation that overpowered him. If his wife had killed him in a fit of jealous rage--under provocation, be it remembered, which the witnesses proved--she might have been convicted of manslaughter, and might have received a light sentence. But the evidence so undeniably revealed deliberate and merciless premeditation, that the only defense attempted by her counsel was madness, and the only alternative left to a righteous jury was a verdict which condemned the woman to death. Those mischievous members of the community, whose topsy-turvy sympathies feel for the living criminal and forget the dead victim, attempted to save her by means of high-flown petitions and contemptible correspondence in the newspapers. But the Judge held firm; and the Home Secretary held firm. They were entirely right; and the public were scandalously wrong.

Our Chaplain endeavored to offer the consolations of religion to the condemned wretch. She refused to accept his ministrations in language which filled him with grief and horror.

On the evening before the execution, the reverend gentleman laid on my table his own written report of a conversation which had passed between the Prisoner and himself.

"I see some hope, sir," he said, "of inclining the heart of this woman to religious belief, before it is too late. Will you read my report, and say if you agree with me?"

I read it, of course. It was called "A Memorandum," and was thus written:

"At his last interview with the Prisoner, the Chaplain asked her if she had ever entered a place of public worship. She replied that she had occasionally attended the services at a Congregational Church in this town; attracted by the reputation of the Minister as a preacher. 'He entirely failed to make a Christian of me,' she said; 'but I was struck by his eloquence. Besides, he interested me personally--he was a fine man.'

"In the dreadful situation in which the woman was placed, such language as this shocked the Chaplain; he appealed in vain to the Prisoner's sense of propriety. 'You don't understand women,' she answered. 'The greatest saint of my sex that ever lived likes to look at a preacher as well as to hear him. If he is an agreeable man, he has all the greater effect on her. This preacher's voice told me he was kind-hearted; and I had only to look at his beautiful eyes to see that he was trustworthy and true.'

"It was useless to repeat a protest which had already failed. Recklessly and flippantly as she had described it, an impression had been produced on her. It occurred to the Chaplain that he might at least make the attempt to turn this result to her own religious advantage. He asked whether she would receive the Minister, if the reverend gentleman came to the prison. 'That will depend,' she said, 'on whether you answer some questions which I want to put to you first.' The Chaplain consented; provided always that he could reply with propriety to what she asked of him. Her first question only related to himself.

"She said: 'The women who watch me tell me that you are a widower, and have a family of children. Is that true?'

"The Chaplain answered that it was quite true.

"She alluded next to a report, current in the town, that the Minister had resigned the pastorate. Being personally acquainted with him, the Chaplain was able to inform her that his resignation had not yet been accepted. On hearing this, she seemed to gather confidence. Her next inquiries succeeded each other rapidly, as follows:

"'Is my handsome preacher married?'

"'Yes.'

"'Has he got any children?'

"He has never had any children.'

"How long has he been married?'

"As well as I know, about seven or eight years.

"What sort of woman is his wife?'

"A lady universally respected.'

"I don't care whether she is respected or not. Is she kind?'

"Certainly!'

"Is her husband well off?'

"He has a sufficient income.'

"After that reply, the Prisoner's curiosity appeared to be satisfied. She said, 'Bring your friend the preacher to me, if you like'--and there it ended.

"What her object could have been in putting these questions, it seems to be impossible to guess. Having accurately reported all that took place, the Chaplain declares, with heartfelt regret, that he can exert no religious influence over this obdurate woman. He leaves it to the Governor to decide whether the Minister of the Congregational Church may not succeed, where the Chaplain of the Jail has failed. Herein is the one last hope of saving the soul of the Prisoner, now under sentence of death!"

In those serious words the Memorandum ended. Although not personally acquainted with the Minister I had heard of him, on all sides, as an excellent man. In the emergency that confronted us he had, as it seemed to me, his own sacred right to enter the prison; assuming that he was willing to accept, what I myself felt to be, a very serious responsibility. The first necessity was to discover whether we might hope to obtain his services. With my full approval the Chaplain left me, to state the circumstances to his reverend colleague.