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[Man and Wife](#)

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Chapter 54 - The Manuscript

1.

"MY Confession: To be put into my coffin; and to be buried with me when I die.

"This is the history of what I did in the time of my married life. Here--known to no other mortal creature, confessed to my Creator alone--is the truth.

"At the great day of the Resurrection, we shall all rise again in our bodies as we have lived. When I am called before the Judgment Seat I shall have this in my hand.

"Oh, just and merciful Judge, Thou knowest what I have suffered. My trust is in Thee.

2.

"I am the eldest of a large family, born of pious parents. We belonged to the congregation of the Primitive Methodists.

"My sisters were all married before me. I remained for some years the only one at home. At the latter part of the time my mother's health failed; and I managed the house in her place. Our spiritual pastor, good Mr. Bapchild, used often to dine with us, on Sundays, between the services. He approved of my management of the house, and, in particular, of my cooking. This was not pleasant to my mother, who felt a jealousy of my being, as it were, set over her in her place. My unhappiness at home began in this way. My mother's temper got worse as her health got worse. My father was much away from us, traveling for his business. I had to bear it all. About this time I began to think it would be well for me if I could marry as my sisters had done; and have good Mr. Bapchild to dinner, between the services, in a house of my own.

"In this frame of mind I made acquaintance with a young man who attended service at our chapel.

"His name was Joel Dethridge. He had a beautiful voice. When we sang hymns, he sang off the same book with me. By trade he was a paper-hanger. We had much serious talk together. I walked with him on Sundays. He was a good ten years younger than I was; and, being only a journeyman, his worldly station was below mine. My mother found out the liking that had grown up between us. She told my father the next time he was at home. Also my married sisters and my brothers. They all joined together to stop things from going further between me and Joel Dethridge. I had a hard time of it. Mr. Bapchild expressed himself as feeling much grieved at the turn things were taking. He introduced me into a sermon--not by name, but I knew who it was meant for. Perhaps I might have given way if they had not done one thing. They made inquiries of my young man's enemies, and brought wicked stories of him to me behind his back. This, after we had sung off the same hymn-book, and walked together, and agreed one with the other on religious subjects, was too much to bear. I was of age to judge for myself. And I married Joel Dethridge.

3.

"My relations all turned their backs on me. Not one of them was present at my marriage; my brother Reuben, in particular, who led the rest, saying that they had done with me from that time forth. Mr. Bapchild was much moved: shed tears, and said he would pray for me.

"I was married in London by a pastor who was a stranger; and we settled in London with fair prospects. I had a little fortune of my own--my share of some money left to us girls by our aunt Hester, whom I was named after. It was three hundred pounds. Nearly one hundred of this I spent in buying furniture to fit up the little house we took to live in. The rest I gave to my husband to put into the bank against the time when he wanted it to set up in business for himself.

"For three months, more or less, we got on nicely--except in one particular. My husband never stirred in the matter of starting in business for himself.

"He was once or twice cross with me when I said it seemed a pity to be spending the money in the bank (which might be afterward wanted) instead of earning more in business. Good Mr. Bapchild, happening about this time to be in London, staid over Sunday, and came to dine with us between the services. He had tried to make my peace with my relations--but he had not succeeded. At my request he spoke to my husband about the necessity of exerting himself. My husband took it ill. I then saw him seriously out of temper for the first time. Good Mr. Bapchild said no more. He appeared to be alarmed at what had happened, and he took his leave early.

"Shortly afterward my husband went out. I got tea ready for him--but he never came back. I got supper ready for him--but he never came back. It was past twelve at night before I saw him again. I was very much startled by the state he came home in. He didn't speak like himself, or look like himself: he didn't seem to know me--wandered in his mind, and fell all in a lump like on our bed. I ran out and fetched the doctor to him.

"The doctor pulled him up to the light, and looked at him; smelled his breath, and dropped him down again on the bed; turned about, and stared at me. 'What's the matter, Sir?' I says. 'Do you mean to tell me you don't know?' says the doctor. 'No, Sir,' says I. 'Why what sort of a woman are you,' says he, 'not to know a drunken man when you see him!' With that he went away, and left me standing by the bedside, all in a tremble from head to foot.

"This was how I first found out that I was the wife of a drunken man.

4.

"I have omitted to say any thing about my husband's family.

"While we were keeping company together he told me he was an orphan--with an uncle and aunt in Canada, and an only brother settled in Scotland. Before we were married he gave me a letter from this brother. It was to say that he was sorry he was not able to come to England, and be present at my marriage, and to wish me joy and the rest of it. Good Mr. Bapchild (to whom, in my distress, I wrote word privately of what had happened) wrote back in return, telling me to wait a little, and see whether my husband did it again.

"I had not long to wait. He was in liquor again the next day, and the next. Hearing this, Mr. Bapchild instructed me to send him the letter from my husband's brother. He reminded me of some of the stories about my husband which I had refused to believe in the time before I was married; and he said it might be well to make inquiries.

"The end of the inquiries was this. The brother, at that very time, was placed privately (by his own request) under a doctor's care to get broken of habits of drinking. The craving for strong liquor (the doctor wrote) was in the family. They would be sober sometimes for months together, drinking nothing stronger than tea. Then the fit would seize them; and they would drink, drink, drink, for days together, like the mad and miserable wretches that they were.

"This was the husband I was married to. And I had offended all my relations, and estranged them from me, for his sake. Here was surely a sad prospect for a woman after only a few months of wedded life!

"In a year's time the money in the bank was gone; and my husband was out of employment. He always got work--being a first-rate hand when he was sober--and always lost it again when the drinking-fit seized him. I was loth to leave our nice little house, and part with my pretty furniture; and I proposed to him to let me try for employment, by the day, as cook, and so keep things going while he was looking out again for work. He was sober and penitent at the time; and he agreed to what I proposed. And, more than that, he took the Total Abstinence Pledge, and promised to turn over a new leaf. Matters, as I thought, began to look fairly again. We had nobody but our two selves to think of. I had borne no child, and had no prospect of bearing one. Unlike most women, I thought this a mercy instead of a misfortune. In my situation (as I soon grew to know) my becoming a mother would only have proved to be an aggravation of my hard lot.

"The sort of employment I wanted was not to be got in a day. Good Mr. Bapchild gave me a character; and our landlord, a worthy man (belonging, I am sorry to say, to the Popish Church), spoke for me to the steward of a club. Still, it took time to persuade people that I was the thorough good cook I claimed to be. Nigh on a fortnight had passed before I got the chance I had been looking out for. I went home in good spirits (for me) to report what had happened, and found the brokers in the house carrying off the furniture which I had bought with my own money for sale by auction. I asked them how they dared touch it without my leave. They answered, civilly enough I must own, that they were acting under my husband's orders; and they went on removing it before my own eyes, to the cart outside. I ran up stairs, and found my husband on the landing. He was in liquor again. It is useless to say what passed between us. I shall only mention that this was the first occasion on which he lifted his fist, and struck me.

5.

"Having a spirit of my own, I was resolved not to endure it. I ran out to the Police Court, hard by.

"My money had not only bought the furniture--it had kept the house going as well; paying the taxes which the Queen and the Parliament asked for among other things. I now went to the magistrate to see what the Queen and the Parliament, in return for the taxes, would do for _me._

" 'Is your furniture settled on yourself?' he says, when I told him what had happened.

"I didn't understand what he meant. He turned to some person who was sitting on the bench with him. 'This is a hard case,' he says. 'Poor people in this condition of life don't even know what a marriage settlement means. And, if they did, how many of them could afford to pay the lawyer's charges?' Upon that he turned to me. 'Yours is a common case,' he said. 'In the present state of the law I can do nothing for you.'

"It was impossible to believe that. Common or not, I put my case to him over again.

" 'I have bought the furniture with my own money, Sir,' I says. 'It's mine, honestly come by, with bill and receipt to prove it. They are taking it away from me by force, to sell it against my will. Don't tell me that's the law. This is a Christian country. It can't be.'

" 'My good creature,' says he, 'you are a married woman. The law doesn't allow a married woman to call any thing her own--unless she has previously (with a lawyer's help) made a bargain to that effect with her husband before marrying him. You have made no bargain. Your husband has a right to sell your furniture if he likes. I am sorry for you; I can't hinder him.'

"I was obstinate about it. 'Please to answer me this, Sir,' I says. 'I've been told by wiser heads than mine that we all pay our taxes to keep the Queen and the Parliament going; and that the Queen and the Parliament make laws to protect us in return. I have paid my taxes. Why, if you please, is there no law to protect me in return?'

" 'I can't enter into that,' says he. 'I must take the law as I find it; and so must you. I see a mark there on the side of your face. Has your husband been beating you? If he has, summon him here I can punish him for _that._'

" 'How can you punish him, Sir?' says I.

" 'I can fine him,' says he. 'Or I can send him to prison.'

" 'As to the fine,' says I, 'he can pay that out of the money he gets by selling my furniture. As to the prison, while he's in it, what's to become of me, with my money spent by him, and my possessions gone; and when he's _out_ of it, what's to become of me again, with a husband whom I have been the means of punishing, and who comes home to his wife knowing it? It's bad enough as it is, Sir,' says I. 'There's more that's bruised in me than what shows in my face. I wish you good-morning.'

6.

"When I got back the furniture was gone, and my husband was gone. There was nobody but the landlord in the empty house. He said all that could be said--kindly enough toward me, so far as I was concerned. When he was gone I locked my trunk, and got away in a cab after dark, and found a lodging to lay my head in. If ever there was a lonely, broken-hearted creature in the world, I was that creature that night.

"There was but one chance of earning my bread--to go to the employment offered me (under a man cook, at a club). And there was but one hope--the hope that I had lost sight of my husband forever.

"I went to my work--and prospered in it--and earned my first quarter's wages. But it's not good for a woman to be situated as I was; friendless and alone, with her things that she took a pride in sold away from her, and with nothing to look forward to in her life to come. I was regular in my attendance at chapel; but I think my heart began to get hardened, and my mind to be overcast in secret with its own thoughts about this time. There was a change coming. Two or three days after I had earned the wages just mentioned my husband found me out. The furniture-money was all spent. He made a disturbance at the club, I was only able to quiet him by giving him all the money I could spare from my own necessities. The scandal was brought before the committee. They said, if the circumstance occurred again, they should be obliged to part with me. In a fortnight the circumstance occurred again. It's useless to dwell on it. They all said they were sorry for me. I lost the place. My husband went back with me to my lodgings. The next morning I caught him taking my purse, with the few shillings I had in it, out of my trunk, which he had broken open. We quarreled. And he struck me again--this time knocking me down.

"I went once more to the police court, and told my story--to another magistrate this time. My only petition was to have my husband kept away from me. 'I don't want to be a burden on others' (I says) 'I don't want to do any thing but what's right. I don't even complain of having been very cruelly used. All I ask is to be let to earn an honest living. Will the law protect me in the effort to do that?'"

"The answer, in substance, was that the law might protect me, provided I had money to spend in asking some higher court to grant me a separation. After allowing my husband to rob me openly of the only property I possessed--namely, my furniture--the law turned round on me when I called upon it in my distress, and held out its hand to be paid. I had just three and sixpence left in the world--and the prospect, if I earned more, of my husband coming (with permission of the law) and taking it away from me. There was only one chance--namely, to get time to turn round in, and to escape him again. I got a month's freedom from him, by charging him with knocking me down. The magistrate (happening to be young, and new to his business) sent him to prison, instead of fining him. This gave me time to get a character from the club, as well as a special testimonial from good Mr. Bapchild. With the help of these, I obtained a place in a private family--a place in the country, this time.

"I found myself now in a haven of peace. I was among worthy kind-hearted people, who felt for my distresses, and treated me most indulgently. Indeed, through all my troubles, I must say I have found one thing hold good. In my experience, I have observed that people are oftener quick than not to feel a human compassion for others in distress. Also, that they mostly see plain enough what's hard and cruel and unfair on them in the governing of the country which they help to keep going. But once asked them to get on from sitting down and grumbling about it, to rising up and setting it right, and what do you find them? As helpless as a flock of sheep--that's what you find them.

"More than six months passed, and I saved a little money again.

"One night, just as we were going to bed, there was a loud ring at the bell. The footman answered the door--and I heard my husband's voice in the hall. He had traced me, with the help of a man he knew in the police; and he had come to claim his rights. I offered him all the little money I had, to let me be. My good master spoke to him. It was all useless. He was obstinate and savage. If--instead of my running off from him--it had been all the other way and he had run off from me, something might have been done (as I understood) to protect me. But he stuck to his wife. As long as I could make a farthing, he stuck to his wife. Being married to him, I had no right to have left him; I was bound to go with my husband; there was no escape for me. I bade them good-by. And I have never forgotten their kindness to me from that day to this.

"My husband took me back to London.

"As long as the money lasted, the drinking went on. When it was gone, I was beaten again. Where was the remedy? There was no remedy, but to try and escape him once more. Why didn't I have him locked up? What was the good of having him locked up? In a few weeks he would be out of prison; sober and penitent, and promising amendment--and then when the fit took him, there he would be, the same furious savage that he had been often and often before. My heart got hard under the hopelessness of it; and dark thoughts beset me, mostly at night. About this time I began to say to myself, 'There's no deliverance from this, but in death--his death or mine.'

"Once or twice I went down to the bridges after dark and looked over at the river. No. I wasn't the sort of woman who ends her own wretchedness in that way. Your blood must be in a fever, and your head in a flame--at least I fancy so--you must be hurried into it, like, to go and make away with yourself. My troubles never took that effect on me. I always turned cold under them instead of hot. Bad for me, I dare say; but what you are--you are. Can the Ethiopian change his skin, or the leopard his spots?"

"I got away from him once more, and found good employment once more. It don't matter how, and it don't matter where. My story is always the same thing, over and over again. Best get to the end.

"There was one change, however, this time. My employment was not in a private family. I was also allowed to teach cookery to young women, in my leisure hours. What with this, and what with a longer time passing on the present occasion before my husband found me out, I was as comfortably off as in my position I could hope to be. When my work was done, I went away at night to sleep in a lodging of my own. It was only a bedroom; and I furnished it myself--partly for the sake of economy (the rent being not half as much as for a furnished room); and partly for the sake of cleanliness. Through all my troubles I always liked things neat about me--neat and shapely and good.

"Well, it's needless to say how it ended. He found me out again--this time by a chance meeting with me in the street.

"He was in rags, and half starved. But that didn't matter now. All he had to do was to put his hand into my pocket and take what he wanted. There is no limit, in England, to what a bad husband may do--as long as he sticks to his wife. On the present occasion, he was cunning enough to see that he would be the loser if he disturbed me in my employment. For a while things went on as smoothly as they could. I made a pretense that the work was harder than usual; and I got leave (loathing the sight of him, I honestly own) to sleep at the place where I was employed. This was not for long. The fit took him again, in due course; and he came and made a disturbance. As before, this was not to be borne by decent people. As before, they were sorry to part with me. As before, I lost my place.

"Another woman would have gone mad under it. I fancy it just missed, by a hair's breadth, maddening me.

"When I looked at him that night, deep in his drunken sleep, I thought of Jael and Sisera (see the book of Judges; chapter 4th; verses 17 to 21). It says, she 'took a nail of the tent, and took a hammer in her hand, and went softly unto him, and smote the nail into his temples, and fastened it into the ground: for he was fast asleep and weary. So he died.' She did this deed to deliver her nation from Sisera. If there had been a hammer and a nail in the room that night, I think I should have been Jael--with this difference, that I should have done it to deliver myself.

"With the morning this passed off, for the time. I went and spoke to a lawyer.

"Most people, in my place, would have had enough of the law already. But I was one of the sort who drain the cup to the dregs. What I said to him was, in substance, this. 'I come to ask your advice about a madman. Mad people, as I understand it, are people who have lost control over their own minds. Sometimes this leads them to entertaining delusions; and sometimes it leads them to committing actions hurtful to others or to themselves. My husband has lost all control over his own craving for strong drink. He requires to be kept from liquor, as other madmen require to be kept from attempting their own lives, or the lives of those about them. It's a frenzy beyond his own control, with _him_--just as it's a frenzy beyond their own control, with _them_.' There are Asylums for mad people, all over the country, at the public disposal, on certain conditions. If I fulfill those conditions, will the law deliver me from the misery of being married to a madman, whose madness is drink?--'No,' says the lawyer. 'The law of England declines to consider an incurable drunkard as a fit object for restraint, the law of England leaves the husbands and wives of such people in a perfectly helpless situation, to deal with their own misery as they best can.'

"I made my acknowledgments to the gentleman and left him. The last chance was this chance--and this had failed me.

7.

"The thought that had once found its way into my mind already, now found its way back again, and never altogether left me from that time forth. No deliverance for me but in death--his death, or mine.

"I had it before me night and day; in chapel and out of chapel just the same. I read the story of Jael and Sisera so often that the Bible got to open of itself at that place.

"The laws of my country, which ought to have protected me as an honest woman, left me helpless. In place of the laws I had no friend near to open my heart to. I was shut up in myself. And I was married to that man. Consider me as a human creature, and say, Was this not trying my humanity very hardly?"

"I wrote to good Mr. Bapchild. Not going into particulars; only telling him I was beset by temptation, and begging him to come and help me. He was confined to his bed by illness; he could only write me a letter of good advice. To profit by good advice people must have a glimpse of happiness to look forward to as a reward for exerting themselves. Religion itself is obliged to hold out a reward, and to say to us poor mortals, Be good, and you shall go to Heaven. I had no glimpse of happiness. I was thankful (in a dull sort of way) to good Mr. Bapchild--and there it ended.

"The time had been when a word from my old pastor would have put me in the right way again. I began to feel scared by myself. If the next ill usage I received from Joel Dethridge found me an unchanged woman, it was borne in strongly on my mind that I should be as likely as not to get my deliverance from him by my own hand.

"Goaded to it, by the fear of this, I humbled myself before my relations for the first time. I wrote to beg their pardon; to own that they had proved to be right in their opinion of my husband; and to entreat them to be friends with me again, so far as to let me visit them from time to time. My notion was, that it might soften my heart if I could see the old place, and talk the old talk, and look again at the well-remembered faces. I am almost ashamed to own it--but, if I had had any thing to give, I would have parted with it all, to be allowed to go back into mother's kitchen and cook the Sunday dinner for them once more.

"But this was not to be. Not long before my letter was received mother had died. They laid it all at my door. She had been ailing for years past, and the doctors had said it was hopeless from the first--but they laid it all at my door. One of my sisters wrote to say that much, in as few words as could possibly suffice for saying it. My father never answered my letter at all.

8.

"Magistrates and lawyers; relations and friends; endurance of injuries, patience, hope, and honest work--I had tried all these, and tried them vainly. Look round me where I might, the prospect was closed on all sides.

"At this time my husband had got a little work to do. He came home out of temper one night, and I gave him a warning. 'Don't try me too far, Joel, for your own sake,' was all I said. It was one of his sober days; and, for the first time, a word from me seemed to have an effect on him. He looked hard at me for a minute or so. And then he went and sat down in a corner, and held his peace.

"This was on a Tuesday in the week. On the Saturday he got paid, and the drinking fit took him again.

"On Friday in the next week I happened to come back late--having had a good stroke of work to do that day, in the way of cooking a public dinner for a tavern-keeper who knew me. I found my husband gone, and the bedroom stripped of the furniture which I had put into it. For the second time he had robbed me of my own property, and had turned it into money to be spent in drink.

"I didn't say a word. I stood and looked round the empty room. What was going on in me I hardly knew myself at the time, and can't describe now. All I remember is, that, after a little, I turned about to leave the house. I knew the places where thy husband was likely to be found; and the devil possessed me to go and find him. The landlady came out into the passage and tried to stop me. She was a bigger and a stronger woman than I was. But I shook her off like a child. Thinking over it now, I believe she was in no condition to put out her strength. The sight of me frightened her.

"I found him. I said--well, I said what a woman beside herself with fury would be likely to say. It's needless to tell how it ended. He knocked me down.

"After that, there is a spot of darkness like in my memory. The next thing I can call to mind, is coming back to my senses after some days. Three of my teeth were knocked out--but that was not the worst of it. My head had struck against something in falling, and some part of me (a nerve, I think they said) was injured in such a way as to affect my speech. I don't mean that I was downright dumb--I only mean that, all of a sudden, it had become a labor to me to speak. A long word was as serious an obstacle as if it was a child again. They took me to the hospital. When the medical gentlemen heard what it was, the medical gentlemen came crowding round me. I appeared to lay hold of their interest, just as a story-book lays hold of the interest of other people. The upshot of it was, that I might end in being dumb, or I might get my speech again--the chances were about equal. Only two things were needful. One of them was that I should live on good nourishing diet. The other was, that I should keep my mind easy.

"About the diet it was not possible to decide. My getting good nourishing food and drink depended on my getting money to buy the same. As to my mind, there was no difficulty about _that_ if my husband came back to me, my mind was made up to kill him.

"Horrid--I am well aware this is horrid. Nobody else, in my place, would have ended as wickedly as that. All the other women in the world, tried as I was, would have risen superior to the trial.

9.

"I have said that people (excepting my husband and my relations) were almost always good to me.

"The landlord of the house which we had taken when we were married heard of my sad case. He gave me one of his empty houses to look after, and a little weekly allowance for doing it. Some of the furniture in the upper rooms, not being wanted by the last tenant, was left to be taken at a valuation if the next tenant needed it. Two of the servants' bedrooms (in the attics), one next to the other, had all that was wanted in them. So I had a roof to cover me, and a choice of beds to lie on, and money to get me food. All well again--but all too late. If that house could speak, what tales that house would have to tell of me!

"I had been told by the doctors to exercise my speech. Being all alone, with nobody to speak to, except when the landlord dropped in, or when the servant next door said, 'Nice day, ain't it?' or, 'Don't you feel lonely?' or such like, I bought the newspaper, and read it out loud to myself to exercise my speech in that way. One day I came upon a bit about the wives of drunken husbands. It was a report of something said on that subject by a London coroner, who had held inquests on dead husbands (in the lower ranks of life), and who had his reasons for suspecting the wives. Examination of the body (he said) didn't prove it; and witnesses didn't prove it; but he thought it, nevertheless, quite possible, in some cases, that, when the woman could bear it no longer, she sometimes took a damp towel, and waited till the husband (drugged with his own liquor) was sunk in his sleep, and then put the towel over his nose and mouth, and ended it that way without any body being the wiser. I laid down the newspaper; and fell into thinking. My mind was, by this time, in a prophetic way. I said to myself 'I haven't happened on this for nothing; this means that I shall see my husband again.'

"It was then just after my dinner-time--two o'clock. That same night, at the moment when I had put out my candle, and laid me down in bed, I heard a knock at the street door. Before I had lit my candle I says to myself, 'Here he is.'

"I huddled on a few things, and struck a light, and went down stairs. I called out through the door, 'Who's there?' And his voice answered, 'Let me in.'

"I sat shaking on a chair in the passage, and shook all over like a person struck with palsy. Not from the fear of him--but from the prophetic way. I knew I was going to be driven to it at last. Try as I might to keep from doing it, my mind told me I was to do it now. I sat shaking on the chair in the passage; I on one side of the door, and he on the other.

"He knocked again, and again, and again. I knew it was useless to try--and yet I resolved to try. I determined not to let him in till I was forced to it. I determined to let him alarm the neighborhood, and to see if the neighborhood would step between us. I went up stairs and waited at the open staircase window over the door.

"The policeman came up, and the neighbors came out. They were all for giving him into custody. The policeman laid hands on him. He had but one word to say; he had only to point up to me at the window, and to tell them I was his wife. The neighbors went indoors again. The policeman dropped hold of his arm. It was I who was in the wrong, and not he. I was bound to let my husband in. I went down stairs again, and let him in.

"Nothing passed between us that night. I threw open the door of the bedroom next to mine, and went and locked myself into my own room. He was dead beat with roaming the streets, without a penny in his pocket, all day long. The bed to lie on was all he wanted for that night.

"The next morning I tried again--tried to turn back on the way that I was doomed to go; knowing beforehand that it would be of no use. I offered him three parts of my poor weekly earnings, to be paid to him regularly at the landlord's office, if he would only keep away from me, and from the house. He laughed in my face. As my husband, he could take all my earnings if he chose. And as for leaving the house, the house offered him free quarters to live in as long as I was employed to look after it. The landlord couldn't part man and wife.

"I said no more. Later in the day the landlord came. He said if we could make it out to live together peaceably he had neither the right nor the wish to interfere. If we made any disturbances, then he should be obliged to provide himself with some other woman to look after the house. I had nowhere else to go, and no other employment to undertake. If, in spite of that, I had put on my bonnet and walked out, my husband would have walked out after me. And all decent people would have patted him on the back, and said, 'Quite right, good man--quite right.'

"So there he was by his own act, and with the approval of others, in the same house with me.

"I made no remark to him or to the landlord. Nothing roused me now. I knew what was coming; I waited for the end. There was some change visible in me to others, as I suppose, though not noticeable by myself, which first surprised my husband and then daunted him. When the next night came I heard him lock the door softly in his own room. It didn't matter to me. When the time was ripe ten thousand locks wouldn't lock out what was to come.

"The next day, bringing my weekly payment, brought me a step nearer on the way to the end. Getting the money, he could get the drink. This time he began cunningly--in other words, he began his drinking by slow degrees. The landlord (bent, honest man, on trying to keep the peace between us) had given him some odd jobs to do, in the way of small repairs, here and there about the house. 'You owe this,' he says, 'to my desire to do a good turn to your poor wife. I am helping you for her sake. Show yourself worthy to be helped, if you can.'

"He said, as usual, that he was going to turn over a new leaf. Too late! The time had gone by. He was doomed, and I was doomed. It didn't matter what he said now. It didn't matter when he locked his door again the last thing at night.

"The next day was Sunday. Nothing happened. I went to chapel. Mere habit. It did me no good. He got on a little with the drinking--but still cunningly, by slow degrees. I knew by experience that this meant a long fit, and a bad one, to come.

"Monday, there were the odd jobs about the house to be begun. He was by this time just sober enough to do his work, and just tipsy enough to take a spiteful pleasure in persecuting his wife. He went out and got the things he wanted, and came back and called for me. A skilled workman like he was (he said) wanted a journeyman under him. There were things which it was beneath a skilled workman to do for himself. He was not going to call in a man or a boy, and then have to pay them. He was going to get it done for nothing, and he meant to make a journeyman of _me._ Half tipsy and half sober, he went on talking like that, and laying out his things, all quite right, as he wanted them. When they were ready he straightened himself up, and he gave me his orders what I was to do.

"I obeyed him to the best of my ability. Whatever he said, and whatever he did, I knew he was going as straight as man could go to his own death by my hands.

"The rats and mice were all over the house, and the place generally was out of repair. He ought to have begun on the kitchen-floor; but (having sentence pronounced against him) he began in the empty parlors on the ground-floor.

"These parlors were separated by what is called a 'lath-and-plaster wall.' The rats had damaged it. At one part they had gnawed through and spoiled the paper, at another part they had not got so far. The landlord's orders were to spare the paper, because he had some by him to match it. My husband began at a place where the paper was whole. Under his directions I mixed up--I won't say what. With the help of it he got the paper loose from the wall, without injuring it in any way, in a long hanging strip. Under it was the plaster and the laths, gnawed away in places by the rats. Though strictly a paperhanger by trade, he could be plasterer too when he liked. I saw how he cut away the rotten laths and ripped off the plaster; and (under his directions again) I mixed up the new plaster he wanted, and handed him the new laths, and saw how he set them. I won't say a word about how this was done either.

"I have a reason for keeping silence here, which is, to my mind, a very dreadful one. In every thing that my husband made me do that day he was showing me (blindfold) the way to kill him, so that no living soul, in the police or out of it, could suspect me of the deed.

"We finished the job on the wall just before dark. I went to my cup of tea, and he went to his bottle of gin.

"I left him, drinking hard, to put our two bedrooms tidy for the night. The place that his bed happened to be set in (which I had never remarked particularly before) seemed, in a manner of speaking, to force itself on my notice now.

"The head of the bedstead was set against the wall which divided his room from mine. From looking at the bedstead I got to looking at the wall next. Then to wondering what it was made of. Then to rapping against it with my knuckles. The sound told me there was nothing but lath and plaster under the paper. It was the same as the wall we had been at work on down stairs. We had cleared our way so far through this last--in certain places where the repairs were most needed--that we had to be careful not to burst through the paper in the room on the other side. I found myself calling to mind the caution my husband had given me while we were at this part of the work, word for word as he had spoken it. _'Take care you don't find your hands in the next room.'_ That was what he had said down in the parlor. Up in his bedroom I kept on repeating it in my own mind--with my eyes all the while on the key, which he had moved to the inner side of the door to lock himself in--till the knowledge of what it meant burst on me like a flash of light. I looked at the wall, at the bedhead, at my own two hands--and I shivered as if it was winter time.

"Hours must have passed like minutes while I was up stairs that night. I lost all count of time. When my husband came up from his drinking, he found me in his room.

"I leave the rest untold, and pass on purposely to the next morning.

"No mortal eyes but mine will ever see these lines. Still, there are things a woman can't write of even to herself. I shal I only say this. I suffered the last and worst of many indignities at my husband's hands--at the very time when I first saw, set plainly before me, the way to take his life. He went out toward noon next day, to go his rounds among the public houses; my mind being then strung up to deliver myself from him, for good and all, when he came back at night.

"The things we had used on the previous day were left in the parlor. I was all by myself in the house, free to put in practice the lesson he had taught me. I proved myself an apt scholar. Before the lamps were lit in the street I had my own way prepared (in my bedroom and in his) for laying my own hands on him--after he had locked himself up for the night.

"I don't remember feeling either fear or doubt through all those hours. I sat down to my bit of supper with no better and no worse an appetite than usual. The only change in me that I can call to mind was that I felt a singular longing to have somebody with me to keep me company. Having no friend to ask in, I went to the street door and stood looking at the people passing this way and that.

"A stray dog, sniffing about, came up to me. Generally I dislike dogs and beasts of all kinds. I called this one in and gave him his supper. He had been taught (I suppose) to sit up on his hind-legs and beg for food; at any rate, that was his way of asking me for more. I laughed--it seems impossible when I look back at it now, but for all that it's true--I laughed till the tears ran down my cheeks, at the little beast on his haunches, with his ears pricked up and his head on one side and his mouth watering for the victuals. I wonder whether I was in my right senses? I don't know.

"When the dog had got all he could get he whined to be let out to roam the streets again.

"As I opened the door to let the creature go his ways, I saw my husband crossing the road to come in. 'Keep out' (I says to him): 'to-night, of all nights, keep out.' He was too drunk to heed me; he passed by, and blundered his way up stairs. I followed and listened. I heard him open his door, and bang it to, and lock it. I waited a bit, and went up another stair or two. I heard him drop down on to his bed. In a minute more he was fast asleep and snoring.

"It had all happened as it was wanted to happen. In two minutes--without doing one single thing to bring suspicion on myself--I could have smothered him. I went into my own room. I took up the towel that I had laid ready. I was within an inch of it--when there came a rush of something up into my head. I can't say what it was. I can only say the horrors laid hold of me and hunted me then and there out of the house.

"I put on my bonnet, and slipped the key of the street door into my pocket. It was only half past nine--or maybe a quarter to ten. If I had any one clear notion in my head, it was the notion of running away, and never allowing myself to set eyes on the house or the husband more.

"I went up the street--and came back. I went down the street--and came back. I tried it a third time, and went round and round and round--and came back. It was not to be done. The house held me chained to it like a dog to his kennel. I couldn't keep away from it. For the life of me, I couldn't keep away from it.

"A company of gay young men and women passed me, just as I was going to let myself in again. They were in a great hurry. 'Step out,' says one of the men; 'the theatre's close by, and we shall be just in time for the farce.' I turned about and followed them. Having been piously brought up, I had never been inside a theatre in my life. It struck me that I might get taken, as it were, out of myself, if I saw something that was quite strange to me, and heard something which would put new thoughts into my mind.

"They went in to the pit; and I went in after them.

"The thing they called the farce had begun. Men and women came on to the stage, turn and turn about, and talked, and went off again. Before long all the people about me in the pit were laughing and clapping their hands. The noise they made angered me. I don't know how to describe the state I was in. My eyes wouldn't serve me, and my ears wouldn't serve me, to see and to hear what the rest of them were seeing and hearing. There must have been something, I fancy, in my mind that got itself between me and what was going on upon the stage. The play looked fair enough on the surface; but there was danger and death at the bottom of it. The players were talking and laughing to deceive the people--with murder in their minds all the time. And nobody knew it but me--and my tongue was tied when I tried to tell the others. I got up, and ran out. The moment I was in the street my steps turned back of themselves on the way to the house. I called a cab, and told the man to drive (as far as a shilling would take me) the opposite way. He put me down--I don't know where. Across the street I saw an inscription in letters of flame over an open door. The man said it was a dancing-place. Dancing was as new to me as play-going. I had one more shilling left; and I paid to go in, and see what a sight of the dancing would do for me. The light from the ceiling poured down in this place as if it was all on fire. The crashing of the music was dreadful. The whirling round and round of men and women in each other's arms was quite maddening to see. I don't know what happened to me here. The great blaze of light from the ceiling turned blood-red on a sudden. The man standing in front of the musicians waving a stick took the likeness of Satan, as seen in the picture in our family Bible at home. The whirling men and women went round and round, with white faces like the faces of the dead, and bodies robed in winding-sheets. I screamed out with the terror of it; and some person took me by the arm and put me outside the door. The darkness did me good: it was comforting and delicious--like a cool hand laid on a hot head. I went walking on through it, without knowing where; composing my mind with the belief that I had lost my way, and that I should find myself miles distant from home when morning dawned. After some time I got too weary to go on; and I sat me down to rest on a door-step. I dozed a bit, and woke up. When I got on my feet to go on again, I happened to turn my head toward the door of the house. The number on it was the same number as ours. I looked again. And behold, it was our steps I had been resting on. The door was our door.

"All my doubts and all my struggles dropped out of my mind when I made that discovery. There was no mistaking what this perpetual coming back to the house meant. Resist it as I might, it was to be.

"I opened the street door and went up stairs, and heard him sleeping his heavy sleep, exactly as I had heard him when I went out. I sat down on my bed and took off my bonnet, quite quiet in myself, because I knew it was to be. I damped the towel, and put it ready, and took a turn in the room.

"It was just the dawn of day. The sparrows were chirping among the trees in the square hard by.

"I drew up my blind; the faint light spoke to me as if in words, 'Do it now, before I get brighter, and show too much.'

"I listened. The friendly silence had a word for me too: 'Do it now, and trust the secret to Me.'

"I waited till the church clock chimed before striking the hour. At the first stroke--without touching the lock of his door, without setting foot in his room--I had the towel over his face. Before the last stroke he had ceased struggling. When the hum of the bell through the morning silence was still and dead, _he_ was still and dead with it.

11.

"The rest of this history is counted in my mind by four days--Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday. After that it all fades off like, and the new years come with a strange look, being the years of a new life.

"What about the old life first? What did I feel, in the horrid quiet of the morning, when I had done it?"

"I don't know what I felt. I can't remember it, or I can't tell it, I don't know which. I can write the history of the four days, and that's all."

"Wednesday.--I gave the alarm toward noon. Hours before, I had put things straight and fit to be seen. I had only to call for help, and to leave the people to do as they pleased. The neighbors came in, and then the police. They knocked, uselessly, at his door. Then they broke it open, and found him dead in his bed."

"Not the ghost of a suspicion of me entered the mind of any one. There was no fear of human justice finding me out: my one unutterable dread was dread of an Avenging Providence."

I had a short sleep that night, and a dream, in which I did the deed over again. For a time my mind was busy with thoughts of confessing to the police, and of giving myself up. If I had not belonged to a respectable family, I should have done it. From generation to generation there had been no stain on our good name. It would be death to my father, and disgrace to all my family, if I owned what I had done, and suffered for it on the public scaffold. I prayed to be guided; and I had a revelation, toward morning, of what to do.

"I was commanded, in a vision, to open the Bible, and vow on it to set my guilty self apart among my innocent fellow-creatures from that day forth; to live among them a separate and silent life, to dedicate the use of my speech to the language of prayer only, offered up in the solitude of my own chamber when no human ear could hear me. Alone, in the morning, I saw the vision, and vowed the vow. No human ear _has_ heard me from that time. No human ear _will_ hear me, to the day of my death."

"Thursday.--The people came to speak to me, as usual. They found me dumb."

"What had happened to me in the past, when my head had been hurt, and my speech affected by it, gave a likelier look to my dumbness than it might have borne in the case of another person. They took me back again to the hospital. The doctors were divided in opinion. Some said the shock of what had taken place in the house, coming on the back of the other shock, might, for all they knew, have done the mischief. And others said, 'She got her speech again after the accident; there has been no new injury since that time; the woman is shamming dumb, for some purpose of her own.' I let them dispute it as they liked. All human talk was nothing now to me. I had set myself apart among my fellow-creatures; I had begun my separate and silent life."

"Through all this time the sense of a coming punishment hanging over me never left my mind. I had nothing to dread from human justice. The judgment of an Avenging Providence--there was what I was waiting for."

"Friday--They held the inquest. He had been known for years past as an inveterate drunkard, he had been seen overnight going home in liquor; he had been found locked up in his room, with the key inside the door, and the latch of the window bolted also. No fire-place was in this garret; nothing was disturbed or altered: nobody by human possibility could have got in. The doctor reported that he had died of congestion of the lungs; and the jury gave their verdict accordingly."

12.

"Saturday.--Marked forever in my calendar as the memorable day on which the judgment descended on me. Toward three o'clock in the afternoon--in the broad sunlight, under the cloudless sky, with hundreds of innocent human creatures all around me--I, Hester Dethridge, saw, for the first time, the Appearance which is appointed to haunt me for the rest of my life."

"I had had a terrible night. My mind felt much as it had felt on the evening when I had gone to the play. I went out to see what the air and the sunshine and the cool green of trees and grass would do for me. The nearest place in which I could find what I wanted was the Regent's Park. I went into one of the quiet walks in the middle of the park, where the horses and carriages are not allowed to go, and where old people can sun themselves, and children play, without danger."

"I sat me down to rest on a bench. Among the children near me was a beautiful little boy, playing with a brand-new toy--a horse and wagon. While I was watching him busily plucking up the blades of grass and loading his wagon with them, I felt for the first time--what I have often and often felt since--a creeping chill come slowly over my flesh, and then a suspicion of something hidden near me, which would steal out and show itself if I looked that way."

"There was a big tree hard by. I looked toward the tree, and waited to see the something hidden appear from behind it."

"The Thing stole out, dark and shadowy in the pleasant sunlight. At first I saw only the dim figure of a woman. After a little it began to get plainer, brightening from within outward--brightening, brightening, brightening, till it set before me the vision of MY OWN SELF, repeated as if I was standing before a glass--the double of myself, looking at me with my own eyes. I saw it move over the grass. I saw it stop behind the beautiful little boy. I saw it stand and listen, as I had stood and listened at the dawn of morning, for the chiming of the bell before the clock struck the hour. When it heard the stroke it pointed down to the boy with my own hand; and it said to me, with my own voice, 'Kill him.'"

"A time passed. I don't know whether it was a minute or an hour. The heavens and the earth disappeared from before me. I saw nothing but the double of myself, with the pointing hand. I felt nothing but the longing to kill the boy."

"Then, as it seemed, the heavens and the earth rushed back upon me. I saw the people near staring in surprise at me, and wondering if I was in my right mind."

"I got, by main force, to my feet; I looked, by main force, away from the beautiful boy; I escaped, by main force, from the sight of the Thing, back into the streets. I can only describe the overpowering strength of the temptation that tried me in one way. It was like tearing the life out of me to tear myself from killing the boy. And what it was on this occasion it has been ever since. No remedy against it but in that torturing effort, and no quenching the after-agony but by solitude and prayer."

"The sense of a coming punishment had hung over me. And the punishment had come. I had waited for the judgment of an Avenging Providence. And the judgment was pronounced. With pious David I could now say, Thy fierce wrath goeth over me; thy terrors have cut me off."

Arrived at that point in the narrative, Geoffrey looked up from the manuscript for the first time. Some sound outside the room had disturbed him. Was it a sound in the passage?

He listened. There was an interval of silence. He looked back again at the Confession, turning over the last leaves to count how much was left of it before it came to an end.

After relating the circumstances under which the writer had returned to domestic service, the narrative was resumed no more. Its few remaining pages were occupied by a fragmentary journal. The brief entries referred to the various occasions on which Hester Dethridge had again and again seen the terrible apparition of herself, and had

again and again resisted the homicidal frenzy roused in her by the hideous creation of her own distempered brain. In the effort which that resistance cost her lay the secret of her obstinate determination to insist on being freed from her work at certain times, and to make it a condition with any mistress who employed her that she should be privileged to sleep in a room of her own at night. Having counted the pages thus filled, Geoffrey turned back to the place at which he had left off, to read the manuscript through to the end.

As his eyes rested on the first line the noise in the passage--intermitted for a moment only--disturbed him again.

This time there was no doubt of what the sound implied. He heard her hurried footsteps; he heard her dreadful cry. Hester Dethridge had woken in her chair in the parlour, and had discovered that the Confession was no longer in her own hands.

He put the manuscript into the breast-pocket of his coat. On _this_ occasion his reading had been of some use to him. Needless to go on further with it. Needless to return to the Newgate Calendar. The problem was solved.

As he rose to his feet his heavy face brightened slowly with a terrible smile. While the woman's Confession was in his pocket the woman herself was in his power. "If she wants it back," he said, "she must get it on my terms." With that resolution, he opened the door, and met Hester Dethridge, face to face, in the passage.