

The Legacy of Cain

By

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1. The Governor Explains	4
2. The Murderess Asks Questions	5
3. The Child Appears.....	8
4. The Minister Says Yes	10
5. Miss Chance Asserts Herself.....	15
6. The Doctor Doubts.....	20
7. The Murderess Consults The Authorities.....	23
8. The Minister Says Good-By	27
9. The Governor Receives A Visit.....	30
10. Miss Chance Reappears	35
11. Helena's Diary	40
12. Eunice's Diary	45
13. Eunice's Diary	50
14. Helena's Diary	58
15. Helena's Diary	65
16. Helena's Diary	70
17. Helena's Diary	74
18. Eunice's Diary	78
19. Eunice's Diary	82
20. Eunice's Diary	87
21. Helena's Diary	90
22. Eunice's Diary	94
23. Eunice's Diary	97
24. Eunice's Diary	100
25. Helena's Diary	104
26. Helena's Diary	107
27. Eunice's Diary	111
28. Helena's Diary	117
29. Helena's Diary	120
30. Eunice's Diary	124
31. Eunice's Diary	131
32. The Middle-Aged Lady	137
33. The Minister's Misfortune	142
34. The Lively Old Maid.....	147
35. The Future Looks Gloomy	151
36. The Wandering Mind	156
37. The Shameless Sister.....	161
38. The Girls' Ages.....	170
39. The Adopted Child.....	175
40. The Bruised Heart.....	177
41. The Whispering Voice	183

42. The Quaint Philosopher	188
43. The Masterful Masseuse.....	192
44. The Resurrection Of The Past	196
45. The Fatal Portrait	199
46. The Cumbersome Ladies.....	206
47. The Journey To The Farm.....	209
48. The Decision Of Eunice	214
49. The Governor On His Guard.....	218
50. The News From The Farm.....	221
51. The Triumph Of Mrs. Tenbruggen.....	223
52. Helena's Diary Resumed	229
53. Helena's Diary Resumed	233
54. Helena's Diary Resumed	236
55. Helena's Diary Resumed	240
56. Helena's Diary Resumed	244
57. Helena's Diary Resumed	248
58. Danger.....	254
59. Defense	258
60. Discovery.....	262
61. Atrocity	267
62. The Sentence Pronounced	271
63. The Obstacle Removed	274
64. The Truth Triumphant	280
Postscript	285

1. The Governor Explains

At the request of a person who has claims on me that I must not disown, I consent to look back through a long interval of years and to describe events which took place within the walls of an English prison during the earlier period of my appointment as Governor.

Viewing my task by the light which later experience casts on it, I think I shall act wisely by exercising some control over the freedom of my pen.

I propose to pass over in silence the name of the town in which is situated the prison once confided to my care. I shall observe a similar discretion in alluding to individuals--some dead, some living, at the present time.

Being obliged to write of a woman who deservedly suffered the extreme penalty of the law, I think she will be sufficiently identified if I call her The Prisoner. Of the four persons present on the evening before her execution three may be distinguished one from the other by allusion to their vocations in life. I here introduce them as The Chaplain, The Minister, and The Doctor. The fourth was a young woman. She has no claim on my consideration; and, when she is mentioned, her name may appear. If these reserves excite suspicion, I declare beforehand that they influence in no way the sense of responsibility which commands an honest man to speak the truth.

2. 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.

3. The Child Appears

During my friend's absence, my attention was claimed by a sad incident--not unforeseen.

It is, I suppose, generally known that near relatives are admitted to take their leave of criminals condemned to death. In the case of the Prisoner now waiting for execution, no person applied to the authorities for permission to see her. I myself inquired if she had any relations living, and if she would like to see them. She answered: "None that I care to see, or that care to see me--except the nearest relation of all."

In those last words the miserable creature alluded to her only child, a little girl (an infant, I should say), who had passed her first year's birthday by a few months. The farewell interview was to take place on the mother's last evening on earth; and the child was now brought into my rooms, in charge of her nurse.

I had seldom seen a brighter or prettier little girl. She was just able to walk alone, and to enjoy the first delight of moving from one place to another. Quite of her own accord she came to me, attracted I daresay by the glitter of my watch-chain. Helping her to climb on my knee, I showed the wonders of the watch, and held it to her ear. At that past time, death had taken my good wife from me; my two boys were away at Harrow School; my domestic life was the life of a lonely man. Whether I was reminded of the bygone days when my sons were infants on my knee, listening to the ticking of my watch--or whether the friendless position of the poor little creature, who had lost one parent and was soon to lose the other by a violent death, moved me in depths of pity not easily reached in my later experience--I am not able to say. This only I know: my heart ached for the child while she was laughing and listening; and something fell from me on the watch which I don't deny might have been a tear. A few of the toys, mostly broken now, which my two children used to play with are still in my possession; kept, like my poor wife's favorite jewels, for old remembrance' sake. These I took from their repository when the attraction of my watch showed signs of failing. The child pounced on them with her chubby hands, and screamed with pleasure. And the hangman was waiting for her mother--and, more horrid still, the mother deserved it!

My duty required me to let the Prisoner know that her little daughter had arrived. Did that heart of iron melt at last? It might have been so, or it might not; the message sent back kept her secret. All that it said to me was: "Let the child wait till I send for her."

The Minister had consented to help us. On his arrival at the prison, I received him privately in my study.

I had only to look at his face--pitiably pale and agitated--to see that he was a sensitive man, not always able to control his nerves on occasions which tried his moral courage. A kind, I might almost say a noble face, and a voice unaffectedly persuasive, at once prepossessed me in his favor. The few words of welcome that I spoke were intended to compose him. They failed to produce the impression on which I had counted.

"My experience," he said, "has included many melancholy duties, and has tried my composure in terrible scenes; but I have never yet found myself in the presence of an unrepentant criminal, sentenced to death--and that criminal a woman and a mother. I own, sir, that I am shaken by the prospect before me."

I suggested that he should wait a while, in the hope that time and quiet might help him. He thanked me, and refused.

"If I have any knowledge of myself," he said, "terrors of anticipation lose their hold when I am face to face with a serious call on me. The longer I remain here, the less worthy I shall appear of the trust that has been placed in me--the trust which, please God, I mean to deserve."

My own observation of human nature told me that this was wisely said. I led the way at once to the cell.

4. The Minister Says Yes

The Prisoner was seated on her bed, quietly talking with the woman appointed to watch her. When she rose to receive us, I saw the Minister start. The face that confronted him would, in my opinion, have taken any man by surprise, if he had first happened to see it within the walls of a prison.

Visitors to the picture-galleries of Italy, growing weary of Holy Families in endless succession, observe that the idea of the Madonna, among the rank and file of Italian Painters, is limited to one changeless and familiar type. I can hardly hope to be believed when I say that the personal appearance of the murderess recalled that type. She presented the delicate light hair, the quiet eyes, the finely-shaped lower features and the correctly oval form of face, repeated in hundreds on hundreds of the conventional works of Art to which I have ventured to allude. To those who doubt me, I can only declare that what I have here written is undisguised and absolute truth. Let me add that daily observation of all classes of criminals, extending over many years, has considerably diminished my faith in physiognomy as a safe guide to the discovery of character. Nervous trepidation looks like guilt. Guilt, firmly sustained by insensibility, looks like innocence. One of the vilest wretches ever placed under my charge won the sympathies (while he was waiting for his trial) of every person who saw him, including even the persons employed in the prison. Only the other day, ladies and gentlemen coming to visit me passed a body of men at work on the road. Judges of physiognomy among them were horrified at the criminal atrocity betrayed in every face that they noticed. They condoled with me on the near neighborhood of so many convicts to my official place of residence. I looked out of the window and saw a group of honest laborers (whose only crime was poverty) employed by the parish!

Having instructed the female warder to leave the room--but to take care that she waited within call--I looked again at the Minister.

Confronted by the serious responsibility that he had undertaken, he justified what he had said to me. Still pale, still distressed, he was now nevertheless master of himself. I turned to the door to leave him alone with the Prisoner. She called me back.

"Before this gentleman tries to convert me," she said, "I want you to wait here and be a witness."

Finding that we were both willing to comply with this request, she addressed herself directly to the Minister. "Suppose I promise to listen to your exhortations," she began, "what do you promise to do for me in return?"

The voice in which she spoke to him was steady and clear; a marked contrast to the tremulous earnestness with which he answered her.

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