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# **THE TRAGEDY OF THE CHAIN PIER**

**By CHARLOTTE M. BRAEME**

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## **CHAPTER I.**

Most visitors to Brighton prefer the new pier; it is altogether a more magnificent affair. It is in the fashionable town, for fashion will go westward; it is larger, more commodious, more frequented. Go to the West Pier when you will, there is always something to see; beautiful women, pretty girls, fashionable belles promenade incessantly. There are times when it is crowded, and there is even a difficulty in making room for all who come. No wonder the elite of Brighton like the West Pier; it is one of the most enjoyable spots in England; every luxury and comfort is there; a good library, plenty of newspapers, elegant little shops, excellent refreshment rooms, fine music; and then the lovely blue, dimpling sea, the little boats with their white sails,

like white-winged birds on the water, the grand stretch of the waves, the blue sky overhead, and the town, with its fine, tall houses shining in the sunlight, the line of white cliff and the beach where the children are at play. You go down to the wonderful jetty, which, to me, was one of the most mysterious and romantic of places. There the water is of the deepest, choicest emerald green, and it washes the wonderful net-work of poles with a soft, lapping sound beautiful to hear. You can stand there with only a rail between you and the green, deep water, watching the fisher-boats out on the deep; watching, perhaps, the steamer with its load of passengers, or looking over the wide sunlit waves, dreaming—dreams born of the sea—out of the world; alone in the kingdom of fancy; there is always something weird in the presence of deep, silent, moving waters.

There is always plenty of life, gayety and fashion on the West Pier. It is a famous place, not for love-making but for flirtation; a famous place for studying human nature; a famous place for passing a pleasant hour. You may often meet great celebrities on the West Pier; faces familiar at the House of Lords, familiar at Court, familiar at the opera, are to be seen there during the season; beautiful faces that have grown pale and worn with the excitement of a London campaign, and here, as they are bent thoughtfully over the green waters, the bracing air brings sweet roses, the lines fade, the eyes brighten; there is no such beautifier as a sea breeze, no bloom so radiant and charming as that brought by the wind from the sea.

On the West Pier you will find all the beauty, rank and fashion of Brighton; you will see costumes a ravir, dresses that are artistic and elegant; you will see faces beautiful and well-known; you will hear a charming ripple of conversation; you will witness many pleasant and piquant adventures; but if you want to dream; if you want to give up your whole heart and soul to the poetry of the sea; if you want to listen to its voice and hear no other; if you want to shut yourself away from the world; if you want to hear the music of the winds, their whispers, their lullabies, their mad dashes, their frantic rages, you must go to the Old Chain Pier. As a rule you will find few there, but you may know they are a special few; you will see the grave, quiet face of the thinker, who has chosen that spot because he does not want to be disturbed by the frou-frou of ladies' dresses, or the music of their happy voices; he wants to be alone with the sea and the wind.

It often happens that you find a pair of very happy lovers there—they go to the side and lean over the railing as though their sole object in life was to watch the rippling sea. Do not believe them, for you will hear the murmur of two voices, and the theme is always "love." If you go near them they look shyly at you, and in a few minutes move gently away. Ah, happy lovers, make hay while the sun shines; it does not shine always, even over the Chain Pier.

If you want to watch the waves, to hear their rolling music, if you want to see the seagulls whirl in the blue ether, if you want to think, to read, to be alone, to fill your mind with beautiful thoughts, go to the Chain Pier at Brighton.

There is a jetty—an old-fashioned, weird place, where the green water rushes swiftly and washes round the green wood, where there is always a beautiful sound of the rising and falling of the sea; where you may sit on one of the old-fashioned seats, seeing nothing but water and sky around you, until you can fancy yourself out in the wide ocean; until you can wrap your thoughts and your senses in the very mists of romance. Time was when the Chain Pier at Brighton was one of the wonders of England, and even now, with its picturesque chains and arches, I like it better than any other.

I may as well tell the truth while I write of it. I know that if the dead can rise from their graves I shall re-visit the Chain Pier at Brighton. I spent one hour there—that was the hour of my life—one madly happy, bewildering hour! I remember the plank of wood on which my feet rested; I remember the railing, over which I heard the green, deep water, with the white-sailed boat in the distance—sails like the white wings of angels beckoning me away; the blue sky with the few fleecy white clouds—the wash of the waters against the woodwork of the pier; and I remember the face that looked down into mine—all Heaven lay in it for me; the deep water, the blue sky, the handsome face, the measured rhythms of the sea, the calm tones of the clear waves—are all mixed in one dream. I cry out in anguish at times that Heaven may send me such another, but it can never be! If the dead can return, I shall stand once more where I stood then. I will not tell my story now, but rather tell of the tragedy with which the Chain Pier at Brighton is associated for evermore in my mind.

I had gone down to Brighton for my health, and I was staying at the most comfortable and luxurious of hotels, "The Norfolk." It was the end of September, and the only peculiarity of the month that I remember was this: the nights grew dark very soon—they were not cold; the darkness was rather that of soft thick gloom that spread over land and sea. No one need ever feel dull in Brighton. If I could have liked billiards, or cared for the theater, or enjoyed the brilliant shops on the crowded pier, with its fine music, I might have been happy enough; but I was miserable with this aching pain of regret and the chill desolation of a terrible loss. I tried the Aquarium. If fishes could soothe the heart of man, solace might be found there; but to my morbid fancy they looked at me with wide open eyes of wonder—they knew the secrets of the sea—the faint stir of life in the beautiful anemones had lost its interest. I could not smile at the King Crabs; the reading tables and the music had no interest for me; outwardly I was walking through the magnificent halls of the Aquarium—inwardly my heart was beating to the mournful rhythms of the sea. The clock had not struck seven when I came out, and there lying before me was the Chain Pier.

I went there as naturally as the needle goes to the magnet. The moon shone with a fitful light—at

times it was bright as day—flooded the sea with silver and showed the chain and the arches of the pier as plainly as the sun could have done—showed the running of the waves—they were busy that evening and came in fast—spreading out in great sheets of white foam, and when the moonlight did touch the foam it was beautiful to see.

But my lady moon was coquettish—every now and then she hid her face behind a drifting cloud, then the soft, thick gloom fell again, and the pier lay like a huge shadow—the very place, I thought, in which a tortured heart could grow calm; there was only the wind and the sea, nothing more. I would go to the spot where we two should stand together never more. I fancied, as I paid for admission at the gate, that the face of the person who received it expressed some surprise. It must have seemed a strange taste; but—ah, me!—there had bloomed for me for one short hour the flowers of paradise.

The thick, soft gloom was deeper on the pier. I remember that, as I walked down, I heard from the church clocks the hour of eight. All along the coast there was a line of light; the town was brilliantly lighted, and when I looked across the waters the West Pier was in all its radiance; the sound of the music floated over the waves to me, the light of the colored lamps shone far and wide. I could see the moving mass of people; here I was almost alone. I saw a gentleman smoking a cigar, I saw the inevitable lovers, I saw an old man with an iron face, I saw two young men, almost boys—what had brought them there I could not think.

I reached the pier-head, where the huge lamp had been lighted and shone like a great brilliant jewel. I sat down; there was no greater pleasure for me than an evening spent there. At first all was quite still; the gentleman smoking his cigar walked up and down; the two youths, who had evidently mistaken the nature of the pier, and considered themselves greatly injured by the absence of music and company, went away; the old man sat still for some time, then he left.

I was alone then with the smoker, who troubled himself very little about me. The coquettish moon threw a wide, laughing gleam around, then vanished. A whole pile of thick, dark clouds came up from the west and hid her fair face—by them the thick, soft gloom had deepened into darkness. I was far from expecting anything tragical as I sat there, cold and desolate, lonely. As it was, the Chain Pier was more like home to me than any other spot on earth, because of the one hour I had spent there.

The wind began to freshen and blow coldly where I sat. I had no motive in changing my seat, except to escape the sharpness of the breeze. I crossed to the other side, where the white line of cliffs lay—away from the brilliant lights of the west pier, hidden behind the wooden structure erected to shelter those on the pier. I gave myself up to my dreams.

I cannot tell how it was, but to-night many ghostly stories that I had read about piers came to my mind. For instance, now, how easy it would be for any man to steal up to me through the thick, soft, shadowy mist, and murder me before I had time even to utter a cry, I might be thrown over into the sea.

Then I said to myself, what a foolish thought! I was close to many people, such a murder was quite impossible. Yet I was foolish enough to turn my head and try to peer through the darkness to see if any one was near.

The tall, slender figure of a woman dressed in a dark cloak was slowly walking up the middle of the pier. She could not see me, but I saw her—plainly, distinctly. I noticed the grace of her movements, her grand carriage. She was closely veiled, so that I could not see her face. But, unless I was much mistaken, she carried a bundle of something held tightly under her arm.

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## CHAPTER II.

If this had been an ordinary woman, I should not have noticed her, beyond the passing regard of the moment; it was the grace of her walk that attracted my attention, and I felt sure that as she passed my by I heard the sound of bitter passionate sobbing.

The old story over again, I thought—sorrow and pain, longing and love! But for the sound of that sob as she passed me I should not have watched her—I should not have known what afterward I would have given my life not to know.

She walked right on to the very head of the pier, and stood there for a few minutes. I knew, by instinct, that she was crying bitterly; then I was struck by the manner in which she looked round; it was evident to me that she wished to be quite alone. At times the waves playing round the wooden pillars made some unusual sound; she turned quickly, as though she suspected some one was near her. Once a gentleman strolled leisurely down the pier, stood for a few minutes watching the sea in silence, then went away; while he was there she stood still and motionless as a statue; then she looked round with a stealthy gaze—a gaze so unlike the free, grand grace of her movements that I was struck by it. She could not see me because I was in the deep shadow, but I could see every gesture of hers. I saw her raise her face to the darkling skies, and I felt that some despairing prayer was on her lip, and the reason why I could see her so plainly was this, that she stood just where the rays of the lamps fell brightly.

It was a dramatic scene: the dark, heaving sea, with the fitful gleam of the moonlight; the silent

pier, with the one huge light; the tall, dark figure standing there so motionless. Why did she look round with that hurried stealthy glance, as though so desirous of being alone? Presently she seemed to realize that she stood where the light fell brightest, and she turned away. She walked to the side of the pier farthest from me, where she stood opposite to the bright lights of the western pier. She did not remain there long, but crossed again, and this time she chose that part of the pier where I was sitting.

Far back in the deep shade in the corner she did not see me; she did not suspect that any one was near. I saw her give a hasty look down the pier, but her glance never fell on the corner where I sat. She went to the railings—one or two of them were broken and had not been repaired; in a more frequented place it might, perhaps, have been dangerous. She did not seem to notice it. She stood for some minutes in silence; then I heard again bitter weeping, passionate sobs, long-drawn sighs. I heard a smothered cry of "Oh, Heaven; oh, Heaven have pity!" and then a sickly gleam of light came from the sky, and by its light I saw that she took the bundle from under her arm. I could not see what it was or what it held, but she bent her head over it, she kissed it, sobbed over it with passionate sobs, then raised it above the railings and let it fall slowly into the water.

There was a slight splash; no other sound. As she raised the bundle I saw distinctly that it was something wrapped in a gray and black shawl.

I swear before Heaven that no thought of wrong came to my mind; I never dreamed of it. I had watched her first because the rare grace of her tall figure and of her walk came to me as a surprise, then because she was evidently in such bitter sorrow, then because she seemed so desirous of being alone, but never did one thought cross my mind that there was a shadow of blame—or wrong; I should have been far more on the alert had I thought so. I was always of a dreamy, sentimental, half-awake kind of mind; I thought of nothing more than a woman, desperate, perhaps, with an unhappy love, throwing the love-letters and presents of a faithless lover into the sea—nothing more. I repeat this most emphatically, as I should not like any suspicion of indolence or indifference to rest upon me.

A slight splash—not of anything heavy—no other sound; no cry, no word—a moment's pause in the running of the waves, then they went on again as gayly as ever, washing the wooden pillars, and wreathing them with fresh seaweed. The tall figure, with the head bent over the rail, might have been a statue for all the life or stir there was within her.

Quite a quarter of an hour passed, and she did not stir. I began to wonder if she were dead; her head was bent the whole time, watching the waves as they ran hurrying past. Then the lady moon relented, and showed her fair face again; a flood of silver fell over the sea—each wave seemed to catch some of it, and break with a thousand ripples of light—the white cliffs caught it—it fell on the old pier, and the tall black figure stood out in bold relief against the moonlit sky.

I was almost startled when she turned round, and I saw her face quite plainly. The same light that revealed her pretty little face and figure, threw a deeper shade over me. She looked anxiously up and down, yet by a singular fatality never looked at the corner of the wooden building where I sat. I have often wondered since that I did not cry out when I saw that face—so wonderfully beautiful, but so marble white, so sad, so intent, so earnest, the beautiful eyes wild with pain, the beautiful mouth quivering. I can see it now, and I shall see it until I die.

There was a low, broad brow, and golden-brown hair clustered on it—hair that was like a crown; the face was oval-shaped, exquisitely beautiful, with a short upper lip, a full, lovely under one, and a perfectly modeled chin. But it was the face of a woman almost mad with despair.

"Oh, Heaven! if I dare—if I dare!" she cried. She flung up her hands with the gesture of one who has no hope; she looked over at the sea, once more at the pier, then slowly turned away, and again quite plainly I heard the words, "Oh, Heaven! if I dare—if I dare!"

She then walked slowly away, and I lost sight of her under the silent arches; but I could not forget her. What a face!—what beauty, what passion, what pain, what love and despair, what goodness and power! What a face! When should I ever forget it?

Impelled by curiosity, I went to the railings, and I stood where she stood. I looked down. How deep and fathomless it seemed, this running sea! What was it she had dropped there? In my mind's eye I saw a most pathetic little bundle made of love-letters; I pictured them tied with a pretty faded ribbon; there would be dried flowers, each one a memento of some happy occasion. I could fancy the dried roses, the withered forget-me-nots, the violets, with some faint odor lingering still around them. Then there would be a valentine, perhaps two or three; a photograph, and probably an engagement ring. She had flung them away into the depths of the sea, and only Heaven knows what hopes and love she had flung with them! I could understand now what that cry meant—"If I dare—if I dare!"

It meant that if she dare she would fling herself into the sea after them! How many hopes had been flung, like hers, into those black depths!

Then I came to the conclusion that I was, to say the least of it, a simpleton to waste so much time and thought about another person's affairs.

I remember that, as I walked slowly down the pier, I met several people, and that I felt a glow of pleasure at the thought that some people had the good sense to prefer the Chain Pier. And then I

went home.

A game at billiards, a long chat in the smoke-room, ought to have distracted my mind from the little incident I had witnessed, but it did not. My bed-room faced the sea, and I drew up the blind so that I might look at it once more. The beautiful sea has many weird aspects, none stranger than when it lies heaving sullenly under the light of the moon. Fascinated, charmed, I stood to watch it. The moon had changed her mind; she meant to shine now; the clouds had all vanished; the sky was dark and blue; the stars were shining; but the wind had quickened, and the waves rolled in briskly, with white, silvery foam marking their progress.

The Chain Pier stood out quite clear and distinct in the moonlight; very fair and shapely it looked. Then I went to sleep and dreamed of the white, beautiful, desperate face—of the woman who had, I believed, thrown her love-letters into the sea. The wind grew rougher and the sea grew angry during the night; when at times I woke from my sleep I could hear them. Ah! long before this the love-letters had been destroyed—had been torn by the swift waves; the faded flowers and all the pretty love-tokens were done to death in the brisk waters. I wondered if, in thought, that beautiful, desperate woman would go back to that spot on the Chain Pier.

The morning following dawned bright and calm; there was a golden sunlight and a blue sea; why the color of the water should change so greatly, I could not think, but change it did. I have seen it clear as an emerald, and I have seen it blue as the lakes and seas of Italy. This morning it wore a blue dress, and a thousand, brilliants danced on its broad, sweet bosom. Already there were a number of people on the promenade; both piers looked beautiful, and were full of life and activity. It must have been some kind of holiday, although I forget for what the flags were flying, and there was a holiday look about the town. I thought I would walk for ten minutes before my breakfast. I went toward the Chain Pier, drawn by the irresistible attraction of the face I had seen there last evening.

It struck me that there was an unusual number of people about the Chain Pier; quite a crowd had collected at the gate. People were talking to each other in an excited fashion. I saw one or two policemen, and I came to the conclusion that some accident or other had happened on the pier. I went up to the crowd—two or three boatmen stood leaning over the rail.

"What is the matter?" I asked.

"Matter, sir?" replied one; "there is matter enough. There must have been murder, or something very much like it, done on that pier last night."

"Murder?" I cried, with a beating heart; "do not use such a horrible word."

"It is a horrible thing, sir, but it has been done," replied the boatman.

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### CHAPTER III.

Why the word "murder" struck me with such a horror I cannot tell. I stood looking at the old boatman like one struck with dismay. I was on the point of saying that it was quite impossible, for I had been on the Chain Pier last night, and had seen nothing of the kind. Some prudent impulse restrained me.

"I would not go so far as to say it was murder," interrupted a sturdy boatman. "I have been about here a great many years, and I have seen some queer things. I should hardly call this murder."

"It was a life taken away, whether you call it murder or not," said the old man.

"May be; but I am not sure. I have seen many mad with misery, but murder is a rare thing."

"What is it?" I asked.

"A child, sir—only a little child," said the sturdy boatman. "The body of a little child found drowned off the pier here."

Now, why should I start and tremble and grow sick at heart? What had it to do with me? I knew nothing of any murdered child, yet great drops formed on my brow, and my very heart trembled.

"A little child found drowned," I repeated; "but how do you know it was murdered? It may have fallen into the water."

"It was not old enough for that, sir," said the elder boatman; "it is but a fair little mite—a baby girl; they say not more than three months old."

Ah! why did the beautiful, desperate face I had seen the night before flash before my eyes then?

The boatman went on:

"It is plain to my eyes that it is a murder, although the child is but a tender babe; all the greater murder for that; a bigger child might have helped itself; this one could not."

"Tell me about it," I said.

Ah! if my heart would but stop beating, or if the beautiful, desperate face would but fade from my

memory.

"It was James Clayton who found it," continued the old man. "He was at work in the jetty this morning when he caught sight of something moving up and down with the waves. At first he thought it looked like an old rag, and he took no notice of it; then something about it attracted his attention more and more. He went nearer, and found that it was a gray and black shawl, that had caught on some large hooks which had been driven into the wooden pillars for some purpose or other—a woman's shawl, sure as could be; some lady, he thought, had dropped it over the pier, and it had caught on these hooks below the water. Jim was pleased. He thought, if worth anything, he might get a trifle reward for it; if not, he might take it home to his old mother.

"He took his boat to the spot, but, sir, to Jim's surprise, he found it was not only a shawl, but a bundle. He thought he had found a treasure, and hastened to get it quickly off the hooks. It had been caught more tightly by accident than it could have been placed there by human hands. It was tight on the hooks, and he had to tear the shawl to get it off. He lost no time opening it, and there was a little, fair child, drowned and dead.

"It was not a pleasant sight, sir, on a bright morning, when the sunshine was dancing over the waves. Jim said his heart turned quite faint when he saw the little white body—such a fair little mite, sir, it was enough to make the very angels weep! Some woman, sir—Heaven forbid that it was the mother—some woman had dressed it in pretty white clothes. It had a white gown, with lace, and a soft white woolen cap on the little golden head. A sorry sight, sir—a sorry sight! Jim said that when he thought of that little tender body swinging to and fro with the waves all the night, he could not keep the tears from his eyes.

"It was meant to sink, you see, sir," continued the man, with rough energy; "it was never meant to be caught. But the great God, He is above all, and He knows the little one was not to sink to the bottom, like lead. It is true, sir, and murder will out."

"But is nothing known?" I asked. "Surely such a thing could never be done without some one seeing or knowing something about it."

"I am afraid, sir, no one knows but the one who did it. Some woman, sir, had dressed the little thing—a man would never have thought of the soft woolen cap. And I can tell you another thing, sir—a man would never have killed a child like that; not that I am upholding men—some of them are brutes enough—but I do not think any man would throw a little babe into the water. When a woman is bad, she is bad, and there is nothing vile enough for her."

I thought of the beautiful and desperate face. Heaven grant that she might have nothing to do with this! And yet—the black and gray shawl!

"Whereabouts was it?" I asked.

He pointed with his hand to the very spot where she had stood.

"Just there," he said. "It was there the little bundle was thrown, and there, just below the line of the jetty, it was caught by the hooks."

The identical spot where she had stood. Oh, beautiful, despairing face, what was hidden underneath your mask of stone?

"You should go on the pier, sir, and see for yourself," said the old man. "The superintendent of the police is there now; but they will never find out who did that. Women are deep when they are wicked, and the one who did this was wicked enough."

There was a slight suggestion on the part of the little group as to the morning being a dry one. We parted on very satisfactory terms.

I went on the pier, and under the wooden shelter where I had sat last night I saw a group—the superintendent of the police with one of the officers, the manager of the pier, the keepers of the different stalls, a few strangers, and Jim, the boatman, who had found the little bundle dripping wet. Oh, Heaven, the pathos of it! On the wooden seat lay the little bundle, so white, so fair, like a small, pale rose-bud, and by it, in a wet heap, lay the black and gray shawl. I knew it in one moment; there was not another word to be said; that was the same shawl I had seen in the woman's hands when she dropped the little bundle into the sea—the self-same. I had seen it plainly by the bright, fitful gleam of the moon. The superintendent said something to me, and I went forward to look at the little child—so small, so fair, so tender—how could any woman, with a woman's heart, drop that warm, soft little nursling into the cold, deep sea? It was a woman who killed Joel—a woman who slew Holofernes—but the woman who drowned this little, tiny child was more cruel by far than they.

"What a sweet little face!" said the superintendent; "it looks just as though it were made of wax."

I bent forward. Ah! if I had doubted before, I could doubt no longer. The little face, even in its waxen pallor, was like the beautiful one I had seen in its white despair last night. Just the same cluster of hair, the same beautiful mouth and molded chin. Mother and child, I knew and felt sure. The little white garments were dripping, and some kind, motherly woman in the crowd came forward and dried the little face.

"Poor little thing!" she said; "how I should like to take those wet things off, and make it warm by a good fire!"

"It will never be warm again in this world," said one of the boatmen. "There is but little chance when a child has lain all night in the sea."

"All night in the sea!" said the pitiful woman; "and my children lay so warm and comfortable in their little soft beds. All night in the sea! Poor little motherless thing!"

She seemed to take it quite for granted that the child must be motherless; in her loving, motherly heart she could not think of such a crime as a mother destroying her own child. I saw that all the men who stood round the body were struck with this.

"What will be done with it?" she asked.

"It will go to the dead-house at the work-house," said the superintendent, "and the parish will bury it."

Then I stood forward.

"No!" I cried; "if the authorities will permit, I will take upon myself the expense of burying that little child—it shall not have a pauper's funeral; it shall be buried in the beautiful green cemetery in the Lewes Road, and it shall have a white marble cross at the head of its grave."

"You are very good, sir," said the superintendent, and the pitiful woman cried out:

"Heaven bless you, sir! I would do the same thing myself if I could afford it."

"There must be an inquest," said some one in the crowd; "we ought to know whether the child was dead before it was thrown into the water."

"I hope to Heaven it was!" cried the woman.

And I said to myself that, if that were the case, it would not be murder—not murder, but some mad, miserable mother's way out of some dreadful difficulty.

Surely on the beautiful, despairing face I had not seen the brand of murder. If the little one had been dead, that would lessen the degree of wickedness so greatly.

The woman who had dried and kissed the tiny waxen face bent over it now.

"I am sure," she said, "that the child was alive when it touched the water."

"How do you know?" asked the superintendent, curiously.

"Look at the face, sir, and you will see."

"I see nothing," he replied.

"I do," she said. "I see just what you would see on the face of a baby suddenly plunged into cold water. I see the signs of faint, baby surprise. Look at the baby brows and the little hand spread wide open. It was living when it touched the water, I am sure of that."

"A doctor will soon settle that question," said the superintendent.

Then the little one was carried by rough but not ungentle hands to the dead-house on the hill. I went with it. I overheard the superintendent tell the master of the work-house that I was a rich man—an invalid—and that I passed a great deal of my time at Brighton. In a lowered voice he added that I was very eccentric, and that happening to be on the Chain Pier that morning, I had insisted upon paying the expenses of the little funeral.

"A kind, Christian gentlemen," the master said. "I am glad to hear it."

I shall never forget the pitiful sight of that tiny white form laid on the table alone—quite alone—I could not forget it. The matron had found a little white dress to wrap it in, and with kindly thought had laid some white chrysanthemums on the little, innocent breast. Whenever I see a chrysanthemum now it brings back to my mind the whole scene—the bare, white walls, the clean wooden floor, the black tressels, and the table whereon the fair, tender little body lay—all alone.

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## CHAPTER IV.

Our little life in this world seems of little count. Throw a stone into the sea—it makes a splash that lasts for one second, then it is all over; the waves roll on just as though it had not been dropped.

The death of this one little child, whom no one knew and for whom no one cared, was of less than no account; it made a small paragraph in the newspapers—it had caused some little commotion on the pier—just a little hurry at the work-house, and then it was forgotten. What was such a little waif and stray—such a small, fair, tender little creature to the gay crowd?

"A child found drowned by the Chain Pier." Kind-hearted, motherly women shrugged their shoulders with a sigh. The finding or the death of such hapless little ones is, alas! not rare. I do not think of the hundreds who carelessly heard the words that morning there was one who stopped to think of the possible suffering of the child. It is a wide step from the warmth of a

mother's arms to the chill of the deep-sea water. The gay tide of fashion ebbed and flowed just the same; the band played on the Chain Pier the morning following; the sunbeams danced on the water—there was nothing to remind one of the little life so suddenly and terribly closed.

There was not much more to tell. There was an inquest, but it was not of much use. Every one knew that the child had been drowned; the doctor thought it had been drugged before it was drowned; there was very little to be said about it. Jim, the boatman, proved the finding of it. The coroner said a few civil words when he heard that one of the visitors of the town, out of sheer pity, had offered to defray the expenses of the little funeral.

The little unknown babe, who had spent the night in the deep sea, was buried in the cemetery on the Lewes Road. I bought a grave for her under the spreading boughs of a tree; she had a white pall and a quantity of white flowers. The matron from the work-house went, and it was not at all like a pauper's funeral. The sun was shining, and the balmy air was filled with the song of birds; but then the sun does shine, and the birds will sing, for paupers!

I ordered a small white marble cross; it stands underneath the trees at the head of the little green grove. When the head mason asked me what name was to be put upon it, I was puzzled. Only Heaven knew whether the helpless little child had a claim to any name, and, if so, what that name was. I bethought myself of one name; it meant bitterness of deep waters.

"I will call it 'Marah,'" I said, and the name stands there on the marble cross:

"Marah, aged three weeks. Found drowned in the sea, September, 18—."

Only one small grave among so many, but a grave over which no mother has shed a tear. Then, after a few days more, I forgot almost all about it; yet at that time I was so lonely, so utterly desolate, that I felt some kind of tie bound me to the little grave, and made me love the spot. It was soon all forgotten, but I never forgot the beautiful, despairing face I had seen on the pier that night—the face that seemed to have passed me with the quickness of a swift wind, yet which was impressed on my brain forever.

I have been writing to you, dear reader, behind a veil; let me draw it aside. My name is John Ford—by no means a romantic name—but I come of a good family. I am one of the world's unfortunates. I had neither brother nor sister; my father and mother died while I was quite young; they left me a large fortune, but no relations—no one to love me. My guardian was a stern, grave elderly man; my youth was lonely, my manhood more lonely still. I found a fair and dainty love, but she proved false; she left me for one who had more gold and a title to give her. When I lost her, all my happiness died; the only consolation I found was going about from place to place trying to do good where I could. This little incident on the Chain Pier aroused me more than anything had done for some time.

I had one comfort in life—a friend whom I loved dearer than a brother, Lancelot Fleming; and lately he had come into possession of a very nice estate called Dutton Manor, a fine old mansion, standing in the midst of an extensive park, and with it an income of three thousand per annum. Lance Fleming had been brought up to the bar, but he never cared much for his profession, and was much pleased when he succeeded to his cousin's estate.

He had invited me several times to visit Dutton Manor, but something or other had always intervened to prevent it. Lance came to see me; we traveled together; we were the very opposite of each other. He was frank, gay, cheerful, always laughing, always with some grand jest on the tapis—a laughing, sunny, blue-eyed fellow, who was like a sunbeam in every house he entered; he was always either whistling or singing, and his bright, cheery voice trolled out such snatches of sweet song that it was a pleasure to hear him.

I am naturally melancholy, and have a tendency to look always on the dark side of things. You can imagine how I loved Lance Fleming; the love that other men give to wives, children, parents and relatives I lavished on him. I loved his fair, handsome face, his laughing blue eyes, his sunny smile, his cheery voice; I loved his warm-hearted, genial manner. In fact, I loved the whole man, just as he was, with a love passing that of women—loved him as I shall love no other.

Naturally enough, Lance was a great favorite with the ladies; every woman who saw him loved him more or less. He was quite irresistible when, in addition to his handsome face and sweet temper, came the charm of being master of a grand old manor-house, with three thousand per annum. No wonder that he was popular. The only thing which troubled me about Lance was his marriage; I always feared it. With his gay, passionate temperament, his universal admiration and chivalrous manner of treating the fair sex, it was certain that he would, sooner or later, fall in love and marry. From what I knew of him, from the innate conviction of my own love, I felt sure that his marriage would be the hinge on which his whole life would turn. I was very anxious about it, and talked to him a great deal about it when we were together.

"If you marry the right woman, Lance," I said to him, "you will be one of the happiest and most successful men in the world; but if you should make a mistake, you will be one of the most miserable."

"I shall make no mistake, John. I know that somewhere or other the most adorable woman in the whole world is waiting for me. I shall be sure to find her, and fall in love with her, marry her, and live happy forever afterward."

"But you will be careful, Lance?" I said.



"As careful as a man can be; but, John, as you are so anxious, you had better choose for me."

"No," I replied. "I made so great a mistake when I had to choose for myself that I shall never attempt it again."

Circumstances happened that drew me over to America. I had a large interest in some land there, and not caring about the trouble of it, I went over to sell it. I succeeded in selling it to great profit, and as I liked America I remained there three years. I sailed for America in the month of October, two or three weeks after the incident of the Chain Pier, and I returned to England after an absence of three years and seven months. I found myself at home again when the lovely month of May was at its fairest. During all that time only one incident of any note happened to me, or, rather, happened that interested me. Lance Fleming was married.

He wrote whole volumes to me before his marriage, and he wrote whole volumes afterwards. Of course, she was perfection—nay, just a little beyond perfection, I think. She was beautiful, clever, accomplished, and such a darling—of course, I might be sure of that. One thing only was wanted to make him perfectly happy—it was that I should see his lady-love. Her name was Frances Wynn, and he assured me that it was the most poetical name in the world. Page after page of rhapsody did he write and I read, until at last I believed him, that he had found the one perfect woman in the world.

Lance wrote oftener still when I told him that I was coming home. I must go at once to Dutton Manor. I should find Dutton Manor an earthly Paradise, he said, and he was doubly delighted that I should be there in May, for in May it wore its fairest aspect.

"A wife makes home heaven, John," he never tired of writing. "I wonder often why Heaven has blessed me so greatly. My wife is—well, I worship her—she is a proud woman, calm, fair, and lovely as a saint. You will never know how much I love her until you have seen her. She fills the old manor-house with sunshine and music. I love to hear the gentle sound of her voice, sweet and low as the sound of a lute—the frou-frou of her dress as she moves about. I am even more in love with her than when I married her, and I should not have thought that possible. Make haste home, John, my dear old friend; even my happy home is incomplete without you. Come and share its brightness with me."

He wrote innumerable directions for my journey. The nearest railway station to Dutton Manor was at Vale Royal, a pretty little town about three miles from the house. If I would let him know by what train I should reach Vale Royal, he would be at the station to meet me. And he said—Heaven bless his dear, loving heart—that he was looking forward to it with untold happiness.

"When I think of seeing Frances and you together," he said, "I feel like a school-boy out for a holiday. I will count the hours, John, until you come."

I had to go to London on business, and while there it was impossible to resist the temptation of running on to Brighton. I loved the place so well, and I had not seen it for so long. I wanted to stand once more on the Chain Pier, and think of my lost heaven. How vividly it all came back to me—that terrible tragedy, although more than three years had passed since it happened. There was the corner where I had sat in the thick, soft shadows; there was the railing against which she leaned when she threw the little bundle in the water.

I remembered the fitful light, the wash of the waves round the pier, the beautiful, desperate face, and the voice that had wailed: "If I dare! oh, my God, if I dare!"

I went to see the little grave. The thick green grass which covered it was studded with white daisies, the golden letters on the white cross seemed to burn in the sunlight; "Marah. Found drowned." I had been to the other end of the world, but no one had been to shed a tear over the little grave.

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## CHAPTER V.

The face of an old friend is good to see after a long absence. Tears filled my eyes when the sunny blue ones looked into them, and the handsome face, quivering with emotion, smiled into mine. I was glad to feel once more the clasp of that honest hand.

"Ah, Lance," I cried, "I would travel twice as far for one hour with you!"

I shall never forget that pretty station at Vale Royal. A beautiful brawling river ran close by, spanned by an old-fashioned rustic bridge; three huge chestnut trees, now in full flower, seemed to shade the whole place.

"A pretty spot," said proud, happy Lance; "but wait till you see Dutton! I tell Frances that I am quite sure it is the original garden of Paradise!"

"Let us pray that no serpent may enter therein," I said.

"There is no fear, John," he replied; "my Frances would be an antidote against all the serpents in the world. We shall have a glorious drive home! How do you like my carriage?"

It was perfect, so were the horses, so was the groom in his neat livery, so was the dogcart

waiting for the luggage, so was the magnificent retriever that ran with the carriage. What a drive it was! Of all seasons, in all climes, give me an English spring. The hedges were covered with white and pink hawthorn; the apple trees were all in bloom; the air was redolent of mariets. The white lambs were in the meadows; the leaves were springing on the trees; the birds singing.

"It is like a new life, John," said the happy young fellow by my side; then, quite unable to keep his thoughts or his words long away from her, he continued: "Frances will be so pleased to see you; we have talked of nothing else for a week."

"I am afraid that she will be disappointed when she sees me, Lance."

"No, indeed," he replied, heartily. "You look better than you did when you went to America, John—you look younger, less haggard, less worn. Perhaps you have found some comfort?"

"Not of the kind you mean, Lance," I answered, "and I never shall."

"Ah," he said, musingly, "what mischief one bad woman can make! And she was a bad woman, this false love of yours, John."

"If she had been a good one, she would have been true," I replied.

"I think," said Lance, musingly, "that in all this world there is nothing so horrible as a bad—a really bad or wicked woman! They seem to me much worse than men, just as a good woman is better than a man could ever be—is little less than an angel."

"Do you know," he continued, his voice trembling with emotion, "I did not understand how good a woman could be! My wife, Frances, is quite an angel. When I see her in the morning, her fair face so fresh and pure, kneeling down to say her prayers, I feel quite unworthy of her; when I see the rapt, earnest expression of her face, as we sit side by side in church, I long to be like her! She is one of the gentlest and sweetest of women; there is no one like her!"

"I am heartily glad that you are so happy, my dearest Lance," I said.

He continued: "I know that my talking does not bore you; you are too true a friend; it eases my heart, for it is always full of her. You do not know how good she is! Why, John, the soul of a good woman is clear and transparent, like a deep, clear lake; and in it one sees such beautiful things. When my Frances speaks to a little child there comes into her voice a beautiful tenderness—a ring of such clear music, that I say to myself it is more like the voice of an angel than of a woman; it is just the same when she speaks to any one in sorrow or sickness. The strange thing to me is this: that though she is so good herself, so pure and innocent, she has such profound compassion for the fallen and the miserable. At Vale Royal, only a few months ago, there was one of those unfortunate cases. A poor servant-girl—a very pretty and nice girl, too, she was—was turned out of her mistress' house in the cold of a winter's night; her boxes and wages were put in the street, and she was told to go to the work-house. She almost went mad with despair and shame. Frances would go to the rescue, and I honestly believe that through my wife's charity and goodness that unhappy girl will be restored to her place in the world, or that, at least, she will not go, as she would otherwise have done, to the bad. I thought that a most beautiful trait in her character."

"So it was," I replied, liking my dear old friend all the better for his great love for his wife.

"She is always the same," he continued, "full of charity and tenderness for the poor. You could not think how much they love her. All around Vale Royal she is worshiped. I am a very fortunate man, John."

"You are indeed," I replied.

He went on:

"I always had my ideal. I have known many. None ever reached my standard but Frances, and she is my ideal come to life—the reality found, fair, sweet, and true, a blonde, queenly woman. I should think that very few men meet and marry their ideal as I have met and married mine. Ah, there is the avenue that leads to the old manor-house! Who could have thought that I should ever be master of a manor-house, John? Neither that nor the handsome income belonging to it would be of any use without Frances. It is Frances who makes the world to me."

The avenue was a superb one. It consisted of tall chestnut trees standing four deep. I have seen nothing finer. Just now the flowers were all in bloom, the bees and butterflies had been all drawn there by their odor; the birds were flitting in and out, making grand discoveries in the great boughs; the ground was a carpet of flowers, white daisies and golden buttercups mixed with wild hyacinths and graceful blue-bells. We drove for some few minutes over this carpet, and then the old gray manor-house stood before us, the prettiest picture ever seen on a summer's day. The whole front of the house was covered with flowers, and the ivy grew green and thick; it climbed to the very top of the towers.

"Famous ivy," said Lance. "People come to Dutton to look at the ivy."

"I do not wonder at it," I said.

I was somewhat surprised at the style of the house. I had not expected anything so grand, so beautiful.

"We shall have time for a cigar and a stroll before dinner," said Lance, as he threw the reins to

the groom; "but you must see Frances first, John—you must see her."

But one of the servants told us that Mrs. Fleming was in the drawing-room, engaged with Lady Ledbitter. Lance's face fell.

"You do not seem to care for Lady Ledbitter," I said to him.

"In truth I do not; she is a county magnate, and a local horror I call her. She leads all the ladies of the country; they are frightened to death of her; they frown when she frowns, smile when she smiles. I begged of Frances not to fall under her sway, but I have begged in vain, no doubt. If she has been there for half an hour Frances will have given in."

He turned on me suddenly, so suddenly, indeed, that he almost startled me.

"Do you know," he said, "those kind of women, fair and calm, whose thoughts seem to be always turned inward? My wife is one of those; when one talks to her she listens with her eyes down, and seems as though she had left another world of thought just for your sake. Her manner always piques one to go on talking for the sake of making her smile. I can just imagine how she looks now, while Lady Ledbitter talks to her. Well, come to your own room, John, and we will stroll round the grounds until her ladyship has retreated."

What a beautiful old house it was! One could tell so easily that a lady of taste and refinement presided over it. The fine old oak was not covered, but contrasting with it were thick, crimson rugs, hangings of crimson velvet, and it was relieved by any amount of flowers; beautiful pictures were hung with exquisite taste; white statues stood out in grand relief against the dark walls.

"Your wife is a woman of taste, that is quite evident, Lance," I said.

My own room—a spacious chamber called the Blue Chamber—a large, old-fashioned room with three windows, each window seat as large as a small room; the hangings were of blue and white; there were a few jardinières with costly, odorous flowers; easy chairs, a comfortable couch. Little stands had been placed with easy chairs in the window seats; the room looked as though bluebells had been strewed with a liberal hand on white ground.

"How beautiful!" I cried; "I shall never want to leave this room again, Lance."

"I wish you would stay and never leave us; I am happy enough in having Frances; if I had you as well, my happiness would be complete. You have all you want, John; I will send your portmanteau."

When Lance had gone I looked round my room and fell in love with it. It had the charm of old fashion, of elegance, of space, of height, and from the windows there was a magnificent view of the park and the gardens.

"Lance must indeed be a happy man." I thought to myself.

He came to me when I was dressed and we went out for a stroll through the gardens.

"We shall hear the dinner-bell," said Lance. "We will not go too far."

We saw the stately equipage of Lady Ledbitter driven down the avenue.

"Thank Heaven!" said Lance. "Now Frances is free. She will have gone to her room. That good Lady Ledbitter has robbed us of a pleasant hour."

I was surprised and delighted at the magnificence of the grounds. I had never dreamed that Dutton manor-house was so extensive or so beautiful.

"The great artist, Lilius, is coming here next week," said Lance. "I want him to paint my wife's portrait. She will make a superb picture, and when completed, that picture shall have the place of honor here in the drawing-room. You will enjoy meeting him; he is a most intelligent, amiable man."

That good Lance; it seemed to me quite impossible that he could speak even these words without bringing in Frances; but how bright and happy he looked! I envied him.

"Do as I have done, John," he said "Marry. Believe me, no man knows what happiness means until he does marry."

"You must find me a wife just like your own," I said, and the words came back to me afterward with a fervent prayer of "Heaven forbid!—may Heaven forbid!"

"I shall never marry now, Lance," I said. "The only woman I could ever love is dead to me."

He looked at me very earnestly.

"I wish you would forget all about her, John. She was not worthy of you."

"Perhaps not," I replied; "but that does not interfere with the love."

"Why should you give all that loving heart of yours to one woman, John?" he said. "If one fails, try another."

"If your Frances died, should you love another woman?" I asked.

"That is quite another thing," he said, and I saw in his heart he resented the fact that I should place the woman who had been faithless to me on an equality with his wife. Poor Lance!

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## CHAPTER VI.

As we drew near the house on our return, the first dinner-bell was ringing.

"We have twenty minutes yet," said Lance; "you will just have time to say a few words to Frances; she is sure to be in the drawing-room."

We went there. When the door was opened I saw a magnificent room—long, lofty and bright, so cheerful and light—with such beautiful furniture, and such superb hangings of white and gold. I was struck as I had never been by any room before. The long French windows, opening like glass doors, looked over a superb flower-garden, where flowers of every hue were now in blossom.

The room was full of sunlight; it faced the west, and the sun was setting. For a few moments my eyes were dazzled; then as the golden haze cleared, I saw a tall figure at the other end of the room, a beautiful figure, dressed in a long robe of blue, with a crown of golden brown hair; when she turned suddenly to us, I saw that she carried some sprays of white hawthorn in her hand. At first my attention was concentrated on the golden hair, the blue dress, the white flowers; then slowly, as though following some irresistible magnetic attraction, my eyes were raised to her face, and remained fixed there. I have wondered a thousand times since how it was that no cry escaped my lips—how it was that none of the cold, sick horror that filled my whole heart and soul did not find vent in words. How was it? To this moment I cannot tell. Great Heaven! what did I see? In this beloved and worshiped wife—in this fair and queenly woman—in this tender and charitable lady, who was so good to the fallen and miserable—in this woman, idolized by the man I loved best upon earth, I saw the murderess—the woman who had dropped the little bundle over the railing into the sea.

It was she as surely as heaven shone above us. I recognized the beautiful face, the light golden hair, the tall, graceful figure. The face was not white, set desperate now, but bright, with a soft, sweet radiance I have seen on the face of no other woman living. For an instant my whole heart was paralyzed with horror. I felt my blood grow cold and gather round my heart, leaving my face and hands cold. She came forward to greet me with the same graceful, undulating grace which had struck me before. For a moment I was back on the Chain Pier, with the wild waste of waters around me, and the rapid rush of the waves in my ear. Then a beautiful face was smiling into mine—a white hand, on which rich jewels shone, was held out to me, a voice sweeter than any music I had ever heard, said:

"You are welcome to Dutton, Mr. Ford. My husband will be completely happy now."

Great Heaven! how could this woman be a murderess—the beautiful face, the clear, limpid eyes—how could it be? No sweeter mouth ever smiled, and the light that lay on her face was the light of Heaven itself. How could it be?

She seemed to wonder a little at my coldness, for she added:

"I cannot tell you how pleased I am to see you, and Lance has thought of nothing else during the last week."

I wonder that I didn't cry out, "You are the woman who drowned the little child off the Chain Pier." It was only the sight of Lance's face that deterred me. I had some vague, indistinct notion of what those words would be to him.

"What is the matter, John?" asked Lance, impatiently. "The sight of my wife's face seems to have struck you dumb."

"It must be with admiration, then," I said, making a desperate effort to recover myself. "I could almost think I had seen Mrs. Fleming's face before."

She looked at me frankly, and she laughed frankly.

"I have a good memory for faces," she said; "and I do not remember to have seen yours."

There was no shadow of fear or of any effect at concealment; she did not change color or shrink from me.

Lance laughed aloud.

"I wonder no longer at your being a bachelor," he said; "if the sight of a beautiful face produces such a strange effect on you. You must deal gently with him, Frances," he said to his wife; "his nerves are weak—he cannot bear much at a time."

"I promise to be very gentle," she said; and the music of that low, caressing voice thrilled my very heart. "I think," she continued, "that Mr. Ford looks very tired, Lance, pale and worn. We must take great care of him."

"That we will," was the hearty reply.

Great Heaven! was it a murderess standing there, with that sweet look of compassion on her beautiful face? Could this woman, who looked pitifully on me, a grown man, drown a little child in the deep sea? Were those lips, uttering kindly words of welcome, the same that had cried in mad despair, "Oh, Heaven! if I dare—if I dare?" I could have killed myself for the base suspicion. Yet it was most surely she!

I stooped to pick up the white hawthorn she had dropped. She took it from me with the sweetest smile, and Lance stood by, looking on with an air of proud proprietorship that would have been amusing if it had not been so unutterably pitiful.

While my brain and mind were still chaos—a whirl of thought and emotion—the second dinner-bell rang. I offered her my arm, but I could not refrain from a shudder as her white hand touched it. When I saw that hand last it was most assuredly dropping the little burden into the sea. Lance looked at us most ruefully, so that she laughed and said:

"Come with us, Lance."

She laid her other hand on his arm, and we all three walked into the dining-room together.

I could not eat any dinner—I could only sit and watch the beautiful face. It was the face of a good woman—there was nothing cruel, nothing subtle in it. I must be mistaken. I felt as though I should go mad. She was a perfect hostess—most attentive—most graceful. I shall never forget her kindness to me any more than I shall forget the comeliness of her face or the gleam of her golden hair.

She thought I was not well. She did not know that it was fear which had blanched my face and made me tremble; she could not tell that it was horror which curdled my blood. Without any fuss—she was so anxiously considerate for me—without seeming to make any ceremony, she was so gracefully kind; she would not let me sit in the draughts; with her own hands she selected some purple grapes for me. This could never be the woman who had drowned a little child.

When dinner was over and we were in the drawing-room again, she drew a chair near the fire for me.

"You will laugh at the notion of a fire in May," she said; "but I find the early summer evenings chilly, and I cannot bear the cold."

I wondered if she thought of the chill of the water in which she had plunged the little child. I looked at her; there was not even a fleeting shadow on her face. Then she lingered for half a minute by my side.

As she drew near to me, I felt again that it was utterly impossible that my suspicions could be correct, and that I must be mistaken.

"I hope," she said, "you will not think what I am going to say strange. I know that it is the custom for some wives to be jealous of their husband's friends—some might be jealous of you. I want to tell you that I am not one of that kind. I love my husband so utterly, so entirely, that all whom he loves are dear to me. You are a brother, friend, everything to him—will you be the same to me?"

A beautiful woman asking, with those sweet, sensitive lips, for my friendship, looking at me with those calm, tender eyes, asking me to like her for her husband's sake—the sweetest, the most gracious, the most graceful picture I had ever seen. Yet, oh, Heaven! a murderess, if ever there was one! She wondered why I did not respond to her advances. I read the wonder in her face.

"You do not care for hasty friends," she said. "Well, Lance and I are one; if you like him, you must like me, and time will show."

"You are more than good to me," I stammered, thinking in my heart if she had been but half as good to the little helpless child she flung into the sea.

I have never seen a woman more charming—of more exquisite grace—of more perfect accomplishment—greater fascination of manner. She sang to us, and her voice was full of such sweet pathos it almost brought the tears in my eyes. I could not reconcile what I saw now with what I had seen on the Chain Pier, though outwardly the same woman I had seen on the Chain Pier and this graceful, gracious lady could not possibly be one. As the evening passed on, and I saw her bright, cheerful ways, her devotion to her husband, her candid, frank open manner, I came to the conclusion that I must be the victim either of a mania or of some terrible mistake. Was it possible, though, that I could have been? Had I not had the face clearly, distinctly, before me for the past three years?

One thing struck me during the evening. Watching her most narrowly, I could not see in her any under-current of feeling; she seemed to think what she said, and to say just what she thought; there were no musings, no reveries, no fits of abstraction, such as one would think would go always with sin or crime. Her attention was given always to what was passing; she was not in the least like a person with anything weighing on her mind. We were talking, Lance and I, of an old friend of ours, who had gone to Nice, and that led to a digression on the different watering places of England. Lance mentioned several, the climate of which he declared was unsurpassed—those mysterious places of which one reads in the papers, where violets grow in December, and the sun shines all the year round. I cannot remember who first named Brighton, but I do remember that she neither changed color nor shrank.

"Now for a test," I said to myself. I looked at her straight in the face, so that no expression of hers could escape me—no shadow pass over her eyes unknown to me.

"Do you know Brighton at all?" I asked her. I could see to the very depths of those limpid eyes. No shadow came; the beautiful, attentive face did not change in the least. She smiled as she replied:

"I do not. I know Bournemouth and Eastbourne very well; I like Bournemouth best."

We had hardly touched upon the subject, and she had glided from it, yet with such seeming unconsciousness. I laughed, yet, I felt that my lips were stiff and the sound of my voice strange.

"Every one knows Brighton," I said. "It is not often one meets an English lady who does not know it."

She looked at me with the most charming and frank directness.

"I spent a few hours there once," she said. "From the little I saw of it I took it for a city of palaces."

"It is a beautiful place," I said.

She rose with languid grace and went to the table.

"I think I will ring for some tea," she said. "I am chill and cold in spite of the fire. Mr. Ford, will you join me?"

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## CHAPTER VII.

My feelings when I reached my room that night were not to be envied. I was as firmly convinced of the identity of the woman as I was of the shining of the sun. There could not be any mistake; I had seen her face quite plainly in the moonlight, and it had been too deeply impressed on my mind for me to forget it, or to mistake it for another. Indeed, the horror of the discovery was still upon me; my nerves were trembling; my blood was cold. How could it be that my old friend Lance had made so terrible a mistake? How could I bear to know that the wife whom he worshiped was a murderess? What else she had been, I did not care even to think; whose child it was, or why she had drowned it, I could not, dare not think.

I could not sleep or rest; my mind and brain were at variance with themselves. Frances Fleming seemed to me a fair, kind-hearted, loving, woman, graceful as fair; the woman I had seen on the Chain Pier was a wild, desperate creature, capable of anything. I could not rest; the soft bed of eiderdown, the sheets of pure linen perfumed with lavender, the pillows, soft as though filled with down from the wings of a bird, could bring no rest to me.

If this woman were anything but what she seemed to be, if she were indeed a murderess, how dare she deceive Lance Fleming? Was it right, just or fair that he should give the love of his honest heart, the devotion of his life, to a woman who ought to have been branded? I wished a thousand times over that I had never seen the Chain Pier, or that I had never come to Dutton Manor House; yet it might be that I was the humble instrument intended by Providence to bring to light a great crime. It seemed strange that of all nights in the year I should have chosen that one; it seemed strange that after keeping the woman's face living in my memory for so long I should so suddenly meet it in life. There was something more than mere coincidence in this; yet it seemed a horrible thing to do, to come under the roof of my dearest friend and ruin his happiness forever.

Then the question came—was it not better for him to know the truth than to live in a fool's paradise—to take to his heart a murderess—to live befooled and die deceived? My heart rose in hot indignation against the woman who had blighted his life, who would bring home to him such shame and anguish as must tear his heart and drive him mad.

I could not suppose, for one moment, that I was the only one in the world who knew her secret—there must be others, and, meeting her suddenly, one of these might betray her secret, might do her greater harm and more mischief than I could do. After hours of weary thought, I came to this conclusion, that I must find out first of all whether my suspicions were correct or not. That was evidently my first duty. I must know whether there was any truth in my suspicions or not. I hated myself for the task that lay before me, to watch a woman, to seek to entrap her, to play the detective, to seek to discover the secret of one who had so frankly and cordially offered me friendship.

Yet it was equally hateful to know that a bad and wicked woman, branded with sin, stained with murder, had deceived an honest, loyal man like Lance Fleming. Look which way I would, it was a most cruel dilemma—pity, indignation, wonder, fear, reluctance, all tore at my heart. Was Frances Fleming the good, pure, tender-hearted woman she seemed to be, or was she the woman branded with a secret brand? I must find out for Lance's sake. There were times when intense pity softened my heart, almost moved me to tears; then the recollection of the tiny white baby lying all night in the sea, swaying to and fro with the waves, steeled me. I could see again the pure little waxen face, as the kindly woman kissed it on the pier. I could see the little green grave

with the shining cross—"Marah, found drowned," and here beside me, talking to me, tending me with gentle solicitude, was the very woman, I feared, who had drowned the child. There were times—I remember one particularly—when she held out a bunch of fine hothouse grapes to me, that I could have cried out—"It is the hand of a murderess; take it away," but I restrained myself.

I declare that, during a whole fortnight, I watched her incessantly; I scrutinized every look, every gesture; I criticised every word, and in neither one nor the other did I find the least shadow of blame. She seemed to me pure in heart, thought and word. At times, when she read or sang to us, there was a light such as one fancies the angels wear. Then I found also what Lance said of her charity to the poor was perfectly true—they worshipped her. No saint was a greater saint to them than the woman whom I believed I had seen drown a little child.

It seemed as though she could hardly do enough for them; the minute she heard that any one was sick or sorry she went to their aid. I have known this beautiful woman, whose husband adored her, give up a ball or a party to sit with some poor woman whose child was ill, or was ill herself. And I must speak, too, of her devotion—to see the earnest, tender piety on her beautiful face was marvelous.

"Look, John," Lance would whisper to me; "my wife looks like an angel."

I was obliged to own that she did. But what was the soul like that animated the beautiful body?

When we were talking—and we spent many hours together in the garden—I was struck with the beauty and nobility of her ideas. She took the right side of everything; her wisdom was full of tenderness; she never once gave utterance to a thought or sentence but that I was both pleased and struck with it. But for this haunting suspicion I should have pronounced her a perfect woman, for I could see no fault in her. I had been a fortnight at Dutton Manor, and but for this it would have been a very happy fortnight. Lance and I had fallen into old loving terms of intimacy, and Frances made a most lovable and harmonious third. A whole fortnight I had studied her, criticised her, and was more bewildered than ever—more sure of two things: The first was that it was next to impossible that she had ever been anything different to what she was now; the second, that she must be the woman I had seen on the pier. What, under those circumstances, was any man to do?

No single incident had happened to interrupt the tranquil course of life, but from day to day I grew more wretched with the weight of my miserable secret.

One afternoon, I remember that the lilacs were all in bloom, and Lance sat with his beautiful wife where a great group of trees stood. When I reached them they were speaking of the sea.

"I always long for the sea in summertime," said Lance; "when the sun is hot and the air full of dust, and no trees give shade, and the grass seems burned, I long for the sea. Love of water seems almost mania with me, from the deep blue ocean, with its foaming billows, to the smallest pool hidden in a wood. It is strange, Frances, with your beauty-loving soul, that you dislike the sea."

She had gathered a spray of the beautiful lilac and held it to her lips. Was it the shade of the flower, or did the color leave her face? If so, it was the first time I had seen it change.

"Do you really dislike the sea, Mrs. Fleming?" I asked.

"Yes," she replied, laconically.

"Why?" I asked again.

"I cannot tell," she answered. "It must be on the old principle—"

"I do not like thee, Doctor Fell,  
The reason why—I cannot tell!  
But only this I know full well,  
I do not like thee, Doctor Fell!"

"Those lines hardly apply to the sea," I said. "I thought love for the sea was inborn with every man and woman in England."

"It is not with me," she said.

She spoke quite gently. There was not the least hurry or confusion, but I was quite sure the color had faded from her face. Was it possible that I had found a hole the strong armor at last?

Lance turned a laughing face to me.

"My wife is as strong in her dislikes as in her likes," he said. "She never will go to the sea. Last year I spent a whole month in trying to persuade her; this year I have begun in good time, and I intend to give it three months' good trial, but I am afraid it will be quite in vain."

"Why do you dislike the sea?" I repeated. "You must have a reason."

"I think," she replied, "it makes me melancholy and low spirited."

"Well it might!" I thought, for the rush and fall of the waves must be like a vast requiem to her.

"That is not the effect the sea has upon most people," I said.

"No, I suppose not; it has upon me," she answered. Then smiling at me as she went on: "You seem to think it is my fault, Mr. Ford, that I do not love the sea."

"It is your misfortune," I replied, and our eyes met.

I meant nothing by the words, but a shifting, curious look came into her face, and for the first time since I had been there her eyes fell before mine.

"I suppose it is," she said, quietly; but from the moment we were never quite the same again. She watched me curiously, and I knew it.

"Like or dislike, Frances, give way this time," said Lance, "and John will go with us."

"Do you really wish it?" she asked.

"I should like it; I think it would do us all good. And, after all, yours is but a fancy, Frances."

"If we go at all," she said, "let us go to the great Northern sea, not to the South, where it is smiling and treacherous."

"Those southern seas hide much," I said; and again she looked at me with a curious, intent gaze—a far-off gaze, as though she were trying to make something out.

"What do they hide, John?" asked Lance, indifferently.

"Sharp rocks and shifting sands," I answered.

"So do the Northern seas," he replied.

A soft, sweet voice said: "Every one has his own taste. I love the country; you love the sea. I find more beauty in this bunch of lilac than I should in all the seaweed that was ever thrown on the beach; to me there is more poetry and more loveliness in the ripple of the leaves, the changeful hues of the trees and flowers, the corn in the fields, the fruit in the orchards, than in the perpetual monotony of the sea."

"That is not fair, Frances," cried Lance. "Say what you will, but never call the sea monotonous—it is never that; it always gives on the impression of power and majesty."

"And of mystery," I interrupted.

"Of mystery," she repeated, and the words seemed forced from her in spite of herself.

"Yes, of mystery!" I said. "Think what is buried in the sea! Think of the vessels that have sunk laden with human beings! No one will know one-third of the mysteries of the sea until the day when she gives up the dead."

The spray of lilac fell to the ground. She rose quickly and made no attempt to regain it.

"It is growing chilly," she said; "I will go into the house."

"A strange thing that my wife does not like the sea," said Lance.

But it was not strange to my mind—not strange at all.

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## CHAPTER VIII.

My suspicion, from that time, I felt was a truth. I knew that there were characters so complex that no human being could understand them. Here was a beautiful surface—Heaven only knew what lay underneath. There was no outward brand of murder on the white brow, or red stain on the soft, white hand. But day by day the certainty grew in my mind. Another thing struck me very much. We were sitting one day quite alone on the grass near a pretty little pool of water, called "Dutton Pool." In some parts it was very shallow, in some very deep. Lance had gone somewhere on business, and had left us to entertain each other. I had often noticed that one of Mrs. Fleming's favorite ornaments was a golden locket with one fine diamond in the center; she wore it suspended by a small chain from her neck. As she sat talking to me she was playing with the chain, when it suddenly became unfastened and the locket fell from it. In less than a second it was hidden in the long grass. She looked for it in silence for some minutes, then she said, gently:

"I have dropped my locket, Mr. Ford; is it near you? I cannot find it."

"Is it one you prize very much?" I asked.

"I should not like to lose it," she replied, and her face paled as searching in the long grass she saw nothing of it.

I found it in a few minutes, but it was lying open; the fall had loosened the spring. I could not help seeing the contents as I gave it to her—a round ring of pale golden hair.

"A baby's curl?" I said, as I returned it to her.

Her whole face went blood-red in one minute.



"The only thing I have belonging to my little sister," she said. "She died when I was a child."

"You must prize it," I said; but I could not keep the dryness of suspicion from my voice.

"Mrs. Fleming," I asked, suddenly, "are you like Lance and myself, without relations?"

"Almost," she replied, briefly.

"Strange that three people should be almost alone in the world but for each other!" I said.

"I was left an orphan when I was four years old," she said. "Only Heaven knows how I have cried out upon my parents for leaving me. I never had one happy hour. Can you imagine a whole childhood passed without one happy hour?"

"Hardly," I said.

With white, nervous fingers she fastened the gold chain round her neck again.

"Not one happy hour," she said. "I was left under the care of my grandmother, a proud, cold, cruel woman, who never said a kind word to me, and who grudged me every slice of bread and butter I ate."

She looked at me, still holding the golden locket in her white fingers.

"If I had been like other girls," she said "if I had parents to love me, brothers and sisters, friends or relatives, I should have been different. Believe me, Mr. Ford, there are white slaves in England whose slavery is worse than that of an African child. I was one of them. I think of my youth with a sick shudder; I think of my childhood with horror, and I almost thank Heaven that the tyrant is dead who blighted my life."

Now the real woman was breaking through the mask; her face flushed; her eyes shone.

"I often talk to Lance about it," she said, "this terrible childhood of mine. I was punished for the least offence. I never heard a word of pity or affection. I never saw a look of anything but hate on my grandmother's face. No one was ever pitiful to me; fierce words, fierce blows, complaints of the burden I was; that was all my mother's mother ever gave to me. I need not say that I hated her, and learned to loathe the life I fain would have laid down. Do I tire you, Mr. Ford?"

"On the contrary, I am deeply interested," I replied.

She went on:

"My grandmother was not poor; she was greedy. She had a good income which died with her, and she strongly objected to spend it on me. She paid for my education on the condition that when I could get my own living by teaching I should repay her. Thank Heaven, I did so!"

"Then you were a governess?" I said.

"Yes; I began to get my own living at fifteen. I was tall for my age, and quite capable," she said; "but fifteen is very young, Mr. Ford, for a girl to be thrown on to the world."

"You must have been a very beautiful girl," I said.

"Yes, so much the worse for me." She seemed to repent of the words as soon as they were uttered.

"I mean," she added, quickly, "that my grandmother hated me the more for it."

There was silence between us for some minutes, then she added:

"You may imagine, after such an unloved life, how I love Lance."

"He is the best fellow in the world," I said, "and the woman who could deceive him ought to be shot."

"What woman would deceive him?" she asked. "Indeed, for matter of that, what woman could? I am his wife!"

"It happens very often," I said, trying to speak carelessly, "that good and loyal men like Lance are the most easily deceived."

"It should not be so," she said. She was startled again, I saw it in her face.

That same afternoon we drove into Vale Royal. Mrs. Fleming had several poor people whom she wished to see, and some shopping to do.

"You should take your locket to a jeweler's," I said, "and have the spring secured."

"What locket is that?" asked Lance, looking up eagerly from his paper.

"Mine," she replied—"this." She held it out for his inspection. "I nearly lost it this morning," she said; "it fell from my neck."

"Is it the one that holds your sister's hair?" he asked.

"Yes," she replied, opening it and holding it out for him to see.

What nerve she had, if this was what I imagined, the hair of the little dead child. Loving Lance rose from his chair and kissed her.

"You would not like to lose that, my darling, would you?" he said, "Excepting me, that is all you have in the world."

They seemed to forget all about me; she clung to him, and he kissed her face until I thought he would never give over.

"How lovely you were when I found you, Frances," he said. "Do you remember the evening—you were bending over the crysanthemums?"

"I shall forget my own life and my own soul before I forget that," she replied.

And I said to myself: "Even if my suspicion be perfectly true, have I any right to mar such love as that?" I noticed that during all the conversation about the locket, she never once looked at me.

We went to Vale Royal, and there never was man so bewildered as I. Lance proposed that we should go visiting with Mrs. Fleming.

"Get your purse ready, John," he said—"this visit will require a small fortune."

"I find the poor value kind words as much as money," said the beautiful woman.

"Then they must be very disinterested," he said, laughingly—"I should prefer money."

"You are only jesting," she said.

It was a pretty sight to see her go into those poor, little, dirty houses. There was no pride, no patronage, no condescension—she was simply sweetly natural; she listened to their complaints, gave them comfort and relieved their wants. As I watched her I could not help thinking to myself that if I were a fashionable or titled lady, this would be my favorite relaxation—visiting and relieving the poor. I never saw so much happiness purchased by a few pounds. We came to a little cottage that stood by itself in a garden.

"Are you growing tired?" she asked of her husband.

"I never tire with you," he replied.

"And you, Mr. Ford?" she said.

She never overlooked or forgot me, but studied my comfort on every occasion. I could have told her that I was watching what was to me a perfect problem—the kindly, gentle, pitying deeds of a woman, who had, I believed, murdered her own child.

"I am not tired, Mrs. Fleming, I am interested," I said.

The little cottage which stood in the midst of a wild patch of garden was inhabited by a day-laborer. He was away at work; his wife sat at home nursing a little babe, a small, fair, tiny child, evidently not more than three weeks old, dying, too, if one could judge from the face.

She bent over it—the beautiful, graceful woman who was Lance's wife. Ah, Heaven! the change that came over her, the passion of mother love that came into her face; she was transformed.

"Let me hold the little one for you," she said, "while you rest for a few minutes;" and the poor, young mother gratefully accepted the offer.

What a picture she made in the gloomy room of the little cottage, her beautiful face and shining hair, her dress sweeping the ground, and the tiny child lying in her arms.

"Does it suffer much?" she asked, in her sweet, compassionate voice.

"It did, ma'am," replied the mother, "but I have given it something to keep it quiet."

"Do you mean to say that you have drugged it?" asked Mrs. Fleming.

"Only a little cordial, ma'am, nothing more; it keeps it sleeping; and when it sleeps it does not suffer."

She shook her beautiful head.

"It is a bad practice," she said; "more babes are killed by drugs than die a natural death."

I was determined she should look at me; I stepped forward and touched the child's face.

"Do you not think it is merciful at times to give a child like this drugs when it has to die; to lessen the pain of death—to keep it from crying out?"

Ah, me, that startled fear that leaped into her eyes, the sudden quiver on the beautiful face.

"I do not know," she said; "I do not understand such things."

"What can it matter," I said, "whether a little child like this dies conscious or not? It cannot pray—it must go straight to Heaven! Do you not think anyone who loved it, and had to see it die, would think it greatest kindness to drug it?"

My eyes held hers; I would not lose their glance; she could not take them away. I saw the fear leap into them, then die away; she was saying to herself, what could I know?

But I knew. I remembered what the doctor said in Brighton when the inquest was held on the tiny white body, "that it had been mercifully drugged before it was drowned."

"I cannot tell," she replied, with a gentle shake of the head. "I only know that unfortunately the poor people use these kind of cordials too readily. I should not like to decide whether in a case like this it is true kindness or not."

"What a pretty child, Mr. Ford; what a pity that it must die!"

Could it be that she who bent with such loving care over this little stranger, who touched its tiny face with her delicate lips, who held it cradled in her soft arms, was the same desperate woman who had thrown her child into the sea?

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## CHAPTER IX.

Mrs. Fleming was not at her ease with me. I found her several times watching me with a curious, intent gaze, seeking, as it were, to pierce my thoughts, to dive into my motives, but always puzzled—even as I was puzzled over her. That round of visiting made me more loath than ever to believe that I was right. Such gentle thought and care, such consideration, such real charity, I had never seen before. I was not surprised when Lance told me that she was considered quite an angel by the poor. I fell ill with anxiety. I never knew what to say or think.

I did what many others in dire perplexity do, I went to one older, wiser and better than myself, a white-haired old minister, whom I had known for many years, and in whom I had implicit trust. I mentioned no names, but I told him the story.

He was a kind-hearted, compassionate man, but he decided that the husband should be told.

Such a woman, he said, must have unnatural qualities; could not possibly be one fitted for any man to trust. She might be insane. She might be subject to mania—a thousand things might occur which made it, he thought, quite imperative that such a secret should not be withheld from her husband.

Others had had a share in it, and there was no doubt but that it would eventually become known; better hear it from the lips of a friend than from the lips of a foe.

"Perhaps," he advised, "it might be as well for you to speak to her first; it would give her a fair chance."

If it were not true, she could deny it, although if she proved to be innocent, and I had made a mistake, I deserved what I should no doubt get; if she were guilty and owned it, she would have some warning at least. That seemed to me the best plan, if I could speak to her; break it to her in some way or other.

A few more days passed. If any doubt was left in my mind, what happened one morning at breakfast would have satisfied me. Lance had taken up the paper. I was reading some letters, and Mrs. Fleming making tea.

Lance looked suddenly from his paper.

"I used to think drink was the greatest curse in England," he said.

"Have you changed your opinion?" I asked.

"I have. I think now the crying sin of the country is child-murder."

As he uttered the words his wife was just in the act of pouring some cream into my cup; it did not surprise me that the pretty silver jug and the cream all fell together. Lance laughed aloud.

"Why, Frances," he cried; "I have never seen you do such a clumsy thing before."

She was deadly pale, her hand shaking.

"I have frightened myself," she said, "and no wonder with such a noise."

A servant came, who made everything right.

Then Lance continued, "You interrupted me, Frances. I was just saying that child-murder is one of the greatest blots on the civilization of the present day."

"It is such a horrible thing to speak of," she said, feebly.

"It wants some speaking about," said Lance. "I never take up a paper without reading one or two cases. I wonder that the Government does not take it up and issue some decree or other. It is a blot on the face of the land."

"I do not suppose that any decree of Government would change it," I said; "the evil lies too deeply for that; the law should be made equal; as it is, the whole blame, shame and punishment fall on

the woman, while the man goes free; there will be no change for the better while that is the case. I have not patience to think of the irregularity of the law."

"You are right, John," said my old friend. "Still, cruelty in a woman is so horrible, and the woman must be as cruel as a demon who deserts or slays her own child. If I had my own way, I would hang every one who does it; there would soon be an end of it then."

There was a low startled cry, and the paper fell to the ground. Mrs. Fleming rose from her chair with a ghastly face.

"Frances!" cried her husband, "what is the matter?"

"You will talk of such horrible things," she replied, vehemently, "and you know that I cannot bear them."

"Sweetheart," he whispered, as he kissed her, "I will be more careful. I know a sensitive heart like yours cannot bear the knowledge of such things. You must forgive me, Frances, but to me there is something far more loathing in the woman who kills a child than in the woman who slays a man. Do not look so pale and grieved, my darling! John, we must be more careful what we say."

"I must beg you to remember that you began the subject, Lance."

"I am ashamed of making such a fuss," she continued, "but there are some subjects too horrible even to dwell upon or speak of, and that is one. I am going into the garden, Lance; perhaps you and Mr. Ford would like your cigars there? I am going to prune a favorite rose tree that is growing wild."

"Do you understand pruning, Mrs. Fleming?" I asked.

"Such small things as rose trees," she said.

"We will follow you, Frances," said her husband. "My case is empty; I must get some more cigars."

I fancied that she was unwilling to leave us together. She lingered a few minutes, then went out. Then simple, honest Lance turned to me with his face full of animation.

"John, did you ever see such a tender-hearted woman in all your life? She is almost too sensitive."

My suspicions were certainties now, and my mind was more than ever tossed and whirled in tortured doubt and dread. I shall never forget one evening that came soon afterwards. We went to dine with a friend of Lance's, a Squire Peyton, who lived not far away, and he was the possessor of some very fine pictures, of which he was very proud. He took us through his pretty arranged gallery.

"This is my last purchase," he said.

We all three stopped to look at a large square picture representing the mother of the little Moses placing his cradle of rushes amongst the tall reeds in the water.

I saw Mrs. Fleming look at it with eyes that were wet with tears.

"Does it sadden you?" asked Lance. "It need not; the little one looks young and tender to be left alone, but the water is silent and the mother is near. She never left him. What a pretty story of mother-love it is."

The beautiful face paled, the lips trembled slightly.

"It is a beautiful picture," she said, "to come from that land of darkness; it makes something of the poetry of the Nile."

Watching her, I said to myself, "That woman has not deadened her conscience; she has tried and failed. There is more good than evil in her."

All night long there sounded in my ears those words, "A life for a life!" And I wondered what would, what could, be the punishment of a mother who took the life of her own child?

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## CHAPTER X.

This state of things could not last. A shade of fear or mistrust came in her manner to me. I must repeat, even at the risk of being wearisome, that I think no man was ever in such a painful position. Had it not been for my fore-knowledge, I should have loved Mrs. Fleming for her beauty, her goodness and her devotion to my dear old friend. I could not bear to tell him the truth, nor could I bear that he should be so basely and terribly deceived—that he should be living with and loving one whom I knew to be a murderer. So I waited for an opportunity of appealing to herself, and it came sooner than I had expected.

One afternoon Lance had to leave us on business; he said he might be absent some few hours—he was going to Vale Royal. He asked me if I would take Mrs. Fleming out; she had complained of headache, and he thought a walk down by the river might be good for her. I promised to do so,

and then I knew the time for speaking to her had come.

I cannot tell how it was that our walk was delayed until the gloaming, and then we went at once to the river, for no other reason that I can see, except that Lance had wished us to go there.

But to my dying day I can never forget the scene. The sky was roseate with crimson clouds, and golden with gold; the river ran swiftly, brimming full to the banks; the glow of the sunlight lay on the hills around, on the green fields, on the distant woods, on the bank where we stood, on the tall, noble trees, on the wild flowers and blossoms. Better almost than anything else I remember a great patch of scarlet poppies that grew in the long green grass; even now, although this took place a long time ago, the sight of crimson poppy makes my heart ache. The withered trunk of a fallen tree lay across the river's bank; one end of it was washed by the stream. Mrs. Fleming sat down upon it and the scarlet poppies were at her feet.

"We can see nothing so pretty as the sunset over the river, Mr. Ford," she said; "let us watch it."

We sat for some few minutes in silence; the rosy glow from the sky and the river seemed to fall on her face as she turned it to the water.

The time had come; I knew that, yet only Heaven knows how I shrank from the task! I would rather have died, yet my sense of justice urged me on. Was it fair that Lance Fleming should lavish the whole love of his life on a murderess?

"What are you thinking so intently about, Mr. Ford?" she asked me.

"Shall I tell you?" I asked.

"Yes, by all means," she replied. "I am sure the subject is very grave, you look so unhappy."

Now the time was come! That beautiful face would never look into mine again. I steeled my heart by thinking of the tiny baby face I had seen on the wooden bench of the pier—so like hers—the little drowned face!

"I will tell you of what I am thinking, Mrs. Fleming," I said; "but I must tell it to you as a story."

"Do," she said, in a gentle voice, and she gathered the scarlet poppies as she spoke.

"There were two friends once upon a time," I began, "who loved each other with a love deeper and truer than the love of brothers."

She nodded her head with a charming smile; I saw an expression of great relief pass over her face.

"I understand," she said; "as you and Lance love each other, there is something most beautiful in the love of men."

"These two spent much time together; their interests were identical, they shared at that time the same hopes and fears. They were parted for a time, one was busy with his own affairs, the other, an invalid, went to Brighton for his health."

How the smile died away; the sun did not set more surely or more slowly than that sweet smile of interest died from her lips, but no fear replaced it at first.

"The friend who was an invalid went to Brighton, as I have said, for his health, and either fate or Providence took him one night to the Chain Pier."

I did not look at her; I dared not. My eyes wandered over the running river, where the crimson clouds were reflected like blood; but I heard a gasping sound as of breath hardly drawn. I went on:

"The Chain Pier that evening lay in the midst of soft, thick gloom; there was no sound on it save the low washing of the waves and the shrill voice of the wind as it played amongst the wooden piles. He sat silent, absorbed in thought, when suddenly a woman came down the pier—a tall, beautiful woman, who walked to the end and stood leaning there."

I saw the scarlet poppies fall from the nerveless hands on the green grass, but the figure by my side seemed to have suddenly turned to stone. I dare not look at her. The scene was far greater agony to me, I almost believe, than to her. I went on:

"The woman stood there for some short time in silence; then she became restless, and looked all around to see if anyone were near.

"Then she walked to the side of the pier. She did not see the dark form in the corner; she raised something in her arms and dropped it into the sea."

There was a sound, but it was like nothing human—it was neither sigh nor moan, but more pitiful than either; the poppies lay still on the grass, and a great hush seemed to have fallen over the river.

"Into the sea," I repeated, "and the man, as it fell, saw a shawl of black and gray."

She tried to spring up, and I knew that her impulse was to rush to the river. I held her arms, and she remained motionless; the very air around us seemed to beat with passionate pulse of pain.

"There was a faint splash in the water," I went on; "it was all over in less than a second, and then the swift waves rolled on as before. The woman stood motionless. When she turned to leave the spot the moon shone full on her face—ghastly, desperate and beautiful—he saw it as plainly as I see the river here. He heard her as plainly as I hear the river here. She cried aloud as she went away, 'Oh, my God, if I dare—if I dare!' Can you tell what happened? Listen how wonderful are the ways of God, who hates murder and punishes it. She flung the burden into the sea, feeling sure it would sink; but it caught—the black and gray shawl caught—on some hooks that had been driven into the outer woodwork of the pier; it caught and hung there, the shawl moving to and fro with every breath of wind and every wave."

Without a word or a cry she fell with her face in the grass. Oh, Heaven, be pitiful to all who are stricken and guilty! I went on quickly:

"A boatman found it, and the bundle contained a little drowned child—a fair waxen babe, beautiful even though it had lain in the salt, bitter waters of the green sea all night. Now comes the horror, Mrs. Fleming. When the man, who saw the scene went after some years to visit the friend whom he loved so dearly, he recognized in that friend's wife the woman who threw the child into the sea!"

Again came the sound that was like nothing human.

"What was that man to do?" I asked. "He could not be silent; the friend who loved and trusted him must have been most basely deceived—he could not hide a murder; yet the woman was so lovely, so lovable; she was seemingly so good, so charitable, so devoted to her husband, that he was puzzled, tortured; at last he resolved upon telling her. I have told you."

Then silence, deep and awful, fell over us; it lasted until I saw that I must break it. She lay motionless on the ground, her face buried in the grass.

"What should you have done in that man's place, Mrs. Fleming?" I asked.

Then she raised her face; it was whiter, more despairing, more ghastly than I had seen it on the pier.

"I knew it must come," she wailed. "Oh, Heaven, how often have I dreaded this—I knew from the first."

"Then it was you?" I said.

"It was me," she replied. "I need not try to hide it any longer, why should I? Every leaf on every tree, every raindrop that has fallen, every wind that has whispered has told it aloud ever since. If I hide it from you someone else will start up and tell. If I deny it, then the very stones in the street will cry it out. Yes, it was me—wretched, miserable me—the most miserable, the most guilty woman alive—it was me."

My heart went out to her in fullness of pity—poor, unhappy woman! sobbing her heart out; weeping, as surely no one ever wept before. I wished that Heaven had made anyone else her judge than me. Then she sat up facing me, and I wondered what the judge must think when the sentence of death passes his lips. I knew that this was the sentence of death for this woman.

"You never knew what passed after, did you?" I asked.

"No—not at all," was the half sullen reply—"not at all."

"Did you never purchase a Brighton paper, or look into a London paper to see?"

"No," she replied.

"Then I will tell you," I said, and I told her all that had passed. How the people had stood round the little baby, and the men cursed the cruel hands that had drowned the little babe.

"Did they curse my hands?" she asked, and I saw her looking at them in wonder.

"Yes; the men said hard words, but the women were pitiful and kind; one kissed the little face, dried it, and kissed it with tears in her eyes. Was it your own child?"

There was a long pause, a long silence, a terrible few minutes, and then she answered:

"Yes, it was my child!"

Her voice was full of despair; she folded her hands and laid them on her lap.

"I knew it must come," she said. "Now, let me try to think what I must do. I meet now that which I have dreaded so long. Oh, Lance! my love, Lance! my love, Lance! You will not tell him?" she cried, turning to me with impassioned appeal. "You will not!—you could not break his heart and mine!—you could not kill me! Oh, for Heaven's sake, say you will not tell him?"

Then I found her on her knees at my feet, sobbing passionate cries—I must not tell him, it would kill him, She must go away, if I said she must; she would go from the heart and the home where she had nestled in safety so long; she would die; she would do anything, if only I would not tell him. He had loved and trusted her so—she loved him so dearly. I must not tell. If I liked, she would go to the river and throw herself in. She would give her life freely, gladly—if only I would not tell him.

So I sat holding, as it were, the passionate, aching heart in my hand.

"You must calm yourself," I said. "Let us talk reasonably. We cannot talk while you are like this."

She beat her white hands together, and I could not still her cries; they were all for "Lance!"—"her love, Lance!"

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## CHAPTER XI.

"You must listen to me," I said; "I want you to see how truly this is the work of Providence, and not of mere chance."

I told her how I often had been attracted to the pier; I told her all that was said by the crowd around; of the man who carried the little dead child to the work-house; of the tiny little body that lay in its white dress in the bare, large, desolate room, and of the flowers that the kindly matron had covered it with.

I told her how I had taken compassion on the forlorn little creature, had purchased its grave, and of the white stone with "Marah" upon it.

"Marah, found drowned." And then, poor soul—poor, hapless soul, she clung to my hands and covered them with kisses and tears.

"Did you—did you do that?" she moaned. "How good you are, but you will not tell him. I was mad when I did that, mad as women often are, with sorrow, shame and despair. I will suffer anything if you will only promise not to tell Lance."

"Do you think it is fair," I asked, "that he should be so cruelly deceived?—that he should lavish the whole love of his heart upon a murderess?"

I shall not forget her. She sprang from the ground where she had been kneeling and stood erect before me.

"No, thank Heaven! I am not that," she said; "I am everything else that is base and vile, but not that."

"You were that, indeed," I replied. "The child you flung into the sea was living, not dead."

"It was not living," she cried—"it was dead an hour before I reached there."

"The doctors said—for there was an inquest on the tiny body—they said the child had been drugged before it was drowned, but that it had died from drowning."

"Oh, no, a thousand times!" she cried. "Oh, believe me, I did not wilfully murder my own child—I did not, indeed! Let me tell you. You are a just and merciful man, John Ford; let me tell you—you must hear my story; you shall give me my sentence—I will leave it in your hands. I will tell you all."

"You had better tell Lance, not me," I cried. "What can I do?"

"No; you listen; you judge. It may be that when you have heard all, you will take pity on me; you may spare me—you may say to yourself that I have been more sinned against than sinning—you may think that I have suffered enough, and that I may live out the rest of my life with Lance. Let me tell you, and you shall judge me."

She fell over on her knees again, rocking backwards and forwards.

"Ah, why," she cried—"why is the world so unfair?—why, when there is sin and sorrow, why does the punishment fall all on the woman, and the man go free? I am here in disgrace and humiliation, in shame and sorrow—in fear of losing my home, my husband, it may even be my life—while he, who was a thousand times more guilty than I was, is welcomed, flattered, courted! It is cruel and unjust.

"I have told you," she said, "how hard my childhood was, how lonely and desolate and miserable I was with my girl's heart full of love and no one to love.

"When I was eighteen I went to live with a very wealthy family in London, the name—I will not hide one detail from you—the name was Cleveland; they had one little girl, and I was her governess. I went with them to their place in the country, and there a visitor came to them, a handsome young nobleman, Lord Dacius by name.

"It was a beautiful sunlit county. I had little to do, plenty of leisure, and he could do as he would with his time. We had met and had fallen in love with each other. I did not love him, I idolized him; remember in your judgment that no one had ever loved me. No one had ever kissed my face and said kind words to me; and I, oh! wretched, miserable me, I was in Heaven. To be loved for the first time, and by one so handsome, so charming, so fascinating! A few weeks passed like a dream. I met him in the early morning, I met him in the gloaming. He swore a hundred times each day that he would marry me when he came of age. We must wait until then. I never dreamed of harm or wrong, I believed in him implicitly, as I loved him. I believe every word that

came from his lips. May Heaven spare me! I need tell you no more. A girl of eighteen madly, passionately in love; a girl as ignorant as any girl could be, and a handsome, experienced man of the world.

"There was no hope, no chance. I fell; yet almost without knowing how I had fallen. You will spare me the rest, I know.

"When in my sore anguish and distress, I went to him, I thought he would marry me at once; I thought he would be longing only to make me happy again; to comfort me; to solace me; to make amends for all I had suffered. I went to him in London with my heart full of longing and love. I had left my situation, and my stern, cruel grandmother believed that I had found another. If I lived to be a thousand years old I should never forget my horror and surprise. He had worshipped me; he had sworn a thousand times over that he would marry me; he had loved me with the tenderest love.

"Now, when after waiting some hours, I saw him last, he frowned at me; there was no kiss, no caress, no welcome.

"'This is a nice piece of news,' he said. 'This comes of country visiting.'

"'But you love me?—you love me?' I cried.

"'I did, my dear,' he said, 'but, of course, that died with Summer. One does not speak of what is dead.'

"'Do you not mean to marry me?' I asked.

"'No, certainly not; and you know that I never did. It was a Summer's amusement.'

"'And what is it to me?' I asked.

"'Oh, you must make the best of it. Of course, I will not see you want, but you must not annoy me. And that old grandmother of yours, she must not be let loose upon me. You must do the best you can. I will give you a hundred pounds if you will promise not to come near me again.'

"I spoke no word to him; I did not reproach him; I did not utter his name; I did not say good-bye to him; I walked away. I leave his punishment to Heaven. Then I crushed the anguish within me and tried to look my life in the face. I would have killed myself rather than have gone home. My grandmother had forced me to be saving, and in the postoffice bank I had nearly thirty pounds. I had a watch and chain worth ten. I sold them, and I sold with them a small diamond ring that had been my mother's, and some other jewelry; altogether I realized fifty pounds. I went to the outskirts of London and took two small rooms.

"I remember that I made no effort to hide my disgrace; I did not pretend to be married or to be a widow, and the mistress of the house was not unkind to me. She liked me all the better for telling the truth. I say no word to you of my mental anguish—no words can describe it, but I loved the little one. She was only three weeks old when a letter was forwarded to me at the address I had given in London, saying that my grandmother was ill and wished me to go home at once. What was I to do with the baby? I can remember how the great drops of anguish stood on my face, how my hands trembled, how my very heart went cold with dread.

"The newspapers which I took daily, to read the advertisements for governesses, lay upon the table, and my eyes were caught by an advertisement from some woman living at Brighton, who undertook the bringing up of children. I resolved to go down that very day. I said nothing to my landlady of my intention. I merely told her that I was going to place the little one in very good hands, and that I would return for my luggage.

"I meant—so truly as Heaven hears me speak—I meant to do right by the little child. I meant to work hard to keep her in a nice home. Oh, I meant well!

"I was ashamed to go out in the streets with a little baby in my arms.

"'What shall I do if it cries?' I asked the kindly landlady. 'You can prevent it from crying,' she said; 'give it some cordial.' 'What cordial?' I asked, and she told me. 'Will it hurt the little one?' I asked again, and she laughed.

"'No,' she replied, 'certainly not. Half the mothers in London give it to their children. It sends them into a sound sleep, and they wake up none the worse for it. If you give the baby just a little it will sleep all the way to Brighton, and you will have no trouble.' I must say this much for myself, that I knew nothing whatever of children, that is, of such little children. I had never been where there was a baby so little as my own.

"I bought the cordial, and just before I started gave the baby some. I thought that I was very careful. I meant to be so. I would not for the whole world have given my baby one half-drop too much.

"It soon slept a calm, placid sleep, and I noticed that the little face grew paler. 'Your baby is dying,' said a woman, who was traveling in the third-class carriage with me. 'It is dying, I am sure.' I laughed and cried; it was so utterly impossible, I thought; it was well and smiling only one hour ago. I never remembered the cordial. Afterwards, when I came to make inquiries, I found that I had given her too much. I need not linger on details.



"You see, that if my little one died by my fault, it was most unconscious on my part; it was most innocently, most ignorantly done. I make no excuse. I tell you the plain truth as it stands. I caused my baby's death, but it was most innocently done; I would have given my own life to have brought hers back. You, my judge, can you imagine any fate more terrible than standing quite alone on the Brighton platform with a dead child in my arms?"

"I had very little money. I knew no soul in the place. I had no more idea what to do with a dead child than a baby would have had. I call it dead," she continued, "for I believe it to have been dead, no matter what any doctor says. It was cold—oh, my Heaven, how cold!—lifeless; no breath passed the little lips! the eyes were closed—the pretty hand stiff. I believed it dead. I wandered down to the beach and sat down on the stones.

"What was I to do with this sweet, cold body? I cried until I was almost blind; in the whole wide world there was no one so utterly desolate and wretched. I cried aloud to Heaven to help me—where should I bury my little child? I cannot tell how the idea first occurred to me. The waves came in with a soft, murmuring melody, a sweet, silvery hush, and I thought the deep, green sea would make a grave for my little one. It was mad and wicked I know now; I can see how horrible it was; it did not seem to be so then. I only thought of the sea then as my best friend, the place where I was to hide the beloved little body, the clear, green grave where she was to sleep until the Judgment Day. I waited until—it is a horrible thing to tell you! but I fell asleep—fast asleep, and of all the horrors in my story, the worst part is that, sitting by the sea, fast asleep myself, with my little, dead babe on my knee.

"When I awoke the tide was coming in full and soft, and swift-running waves, the sun had set, and a thick, soft gloom had fallen over everything, and then I knew the time had come for what I wanted to do."

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## CHAPTER XII.

"I went on to the Chain Pier. I had kissed the little face for the last time; I had wrapped the pretty white body in the black-and-gray shawl. I said all the prayers I could remember as I walked along the pier; it was the most solemn of burial services to me.

"I went to the side of the pier—I cannot understand how it was that I did not see you—I stood there some few minutes, and then I took the little bundle; I raised it gently and let it fall into the sea. But my baby was dead—I swear to that. Oh, Heaven! if I dared—if I dared fling myself in the same green, briny waves!

"I was mad with anguish. I went back to my lodging; the landlady asked me if I had left the baby in Brighton, and I answered 'Yes.' I do not know how the days went on—I could not tell you; I was never myself, nor do I remember much until some weeks afterward I went home to my grandmother, who died soon after I reached her. I need not tell you that afterwards I met Lance, and learned to love him with all my heart.

"Do not tell him; promise me, I beseech you, for mercy's sake, do not tell him!"

"What you have told me," I said, "certainly gives a different aspect to the whole affair. I will make no promise—I will think it over. I must have time to decide what is best."

"You will spare me," she went on. "You see I did no one any harm, wrong or injury. If I hurt another, then you might deprive me of my husband and my home; as it is, Lance loves me and I love him. You will not tell him?"

"I will think about it," I replied.

"But I cannot live in this suspense," she cried. "If you will tell him, tell him this day, this hour."

"He might forgive you," I said.

"No, he would not be angry, he would not reproach me, but he would never look upon my face again."

"Would it not be better for you to tell him yourself?" I suggested.

"Oh, no!" she cried, with a shudder. "No, I shall never tell him."

"I do not say that I shall," I said. "Give me a few days—only a few days—and I will decide in my mind all about it."

Then we saw Lance in the distance.

"There is my husband," she said. "Do I look very ill, Mr. Ford?"

"You do, indeed; you look ghastly," I said.

"I will go and meet him," she said.

The exercise and the fresh air brought some little color to her face before they met. Still he cried out that I had not taken care of her; that she was overtired.

"That is it," she replied. "I have been over-tired all day: I think my head aches; I have had a strange sensation of dizziness in it, I am tired—oh, Lance, I am so tired!"

"I shall not leave you again," said Lance to her, and I fancied he was not quite pleased with me, and thought I had neglected her. We all three went home together. Mrs. Fleming did not say much, but she kept up better than I thought she could have done. I heard her that same evening express a wish to be driven to Vale Royal on the day following; a young girl, whom she had been instrumental in saving from ruin, had been suddenly taken ill, and wanted to see her.

"My darling," Lance said, "you do not seem to me strong enough. Let me persuade you to rest tomorrow."

"I should like to see Rose Winter again before—before I"—then she stopped abruptly.

"Before you—what, Frances?" he asked.

"I mean," she said, "that I should like to see Rose before she grows worse."

"I think you ought to rest, but you shall do as you like, Frances; you always do. I will drive you over myself."

I saw them start on the following morning, and then I tried to think over in solitude what it would be best to do. Her story certainly altered facts very considerably. She was not a murderess, as I had believed her to be. If the death of the little hapless child was attributable to an overdose of the cordial, she had certainly not given it purposely. Could I judge her?

Yet, an honest, loyal man like Lance ought not to be so cruelly deceived. I felt sure myself that if she spoke to him—if she told him her story with the same pathos with which she had told it to me, he would forgive her—he must forgive her. I could not reconcile it with my conscience to keep silence, I could not, and I believed that the truth might be told with safety. So, after long thinking and deliberation, I came to the conclusion that Lance must know, and that she must tell him herself.

It was in the middle of a bright, sunshiny afternoon when they returned. When Lance brought his wife into the drawing-room he seemed very anxious over her.

"Frances does not seem well," he said to me. "Ring the bell, John, and order some hot tea; she is as cold as death."

Her eyes met mine, and in them I read the question—"What are you going to do?" I was struck by her dreadful pallor.

"Is your head bad again today?" I asked.

"Yes, it aches very much," she replied.

The hot tea came, and it seemed to revive her; but after a few minutes the dreadful shivering came over her again. She stood up.

"Lance," she said, "I will go to my room, and you must lead me; my head aches so that I am blind."

She left her pretty drawing-room, never to re-enter it. The next day at noon Lance came to me with a sad face.

"John, my wife is very ill, and I have just heard bad news."

"What is it, Lance?" I asked.

"Why, that the girl she went yesterday to see, Rose Winter, is ill with the most malignant type of small-pox."

I looked at him in horror.

"Do you think," I gasped, "that the—that Mrs. Fleming has caught it?"

"I am quite sure," he replied. "I have just sent for the doctor, and have telegraphed to the hospital for two nurses. And my old friend," he added, "I am afraid it is going to be a bad case."

It was a bad case. I never left him while the suspense lasted; but it was soon over. She suffered intensely, for the disease was of the most virulent type. It was soon over. Lance came to me one afternoon, and I read the verdict in his face.

"She will die," he said, hoarsely. "They cannot save her," and the day after that he came to me again with wistful eyes.

"John," he said, slowly, "my wife is dying, and she wants to see you. Will you see her?"

"Most certainly," I replied.

She smiled when she saw me, and beckoned me to her. Ah, poor soul! her judgment had indeed been taken from me. She whispered to me:

"Promise me that you will never tell him. I am dying! he need never know now. Will you promise me?"

I promised, and she died! I have kept my promise—Lance Fleming knows nothing of what I have told you.

Only Heaven knows how far she sinned or was sinned against. I never see the sunset, or hear the waves come rolling in, without thinking of the tragedy on the pier.

## THE END.

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[Transcriber's Note: Several typographical errors from the original edition have been corrected.

*white, slivery foam* has been changed to *white, silvery foam*.

*an entensive park* has been changed to *an extensive park*.

*the magnificent retriver* has been changed to *the magnificent retriever*.

*a ring of such clear, music* has been changed to *a ring of such clear music*.

*the breat boughs* has been changed to *the great boughs*.

*come to your own room, John and* has been changed to *come to your own room, John, and*.

*a supberb picture* has been changed to *a superb picture*.

*it was utterably impossible that my suspicious could be correct* has been changed to *it was utterly impossible that my suspicions could be correct*.

*seeming unconciouness* has been changed to *seeming unconsciousness*.

A missing quotation mark has been added at the end of the line *I do not like thee, Doctor Fell!*

An extraneous quotation mark has been removed from the sentence beginning *I meant nothing by the words*.

A missing quotation mark has been added to the sentence *I will go into the house.*

A missing quotation has been added to the sentence *I am not tired, Mrs. Fleming, I am interested," I said*.

In the sentence *He heard her as plainly as I here the river here* "here" has been changed to "hear".

An extra comma has been removed from the line *my old friend," he added,, "I am afraid.*]

\*\*\* END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE TRAGEDY OF THE CHAIN PIER \*\*\*

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