

The Life of a Murderer

From *The Shipwrecked Stranger*

By Hannah Maria Jones

“A Murderer! God help me. Yes! Time was when I shrunk affrighted from the very sound—when the name was spoken in whispers. Little thought I then I should ever bear the name, or die ignominiously upon the scaffold.

“I was doomed in early life to lose both my parents. I was reared with more kindness than philosophy, by an aunt, for all said I was a spoilt child. I was an unruly boy, but never wanted affection. I was sent to a charity school, but mischief had more charms for me than learning; and the apple orchard in reality to that stamped in the reading lesson in my spelling book. Rebuke followed rebuke: chastisements without number were lavished upon me. I was the dunce of the school. Inspired by a sudden whim, I determined one night as I lay in my little cot to be so no longer—I would learn. For two years did I carry out this resolution, with a heat and impetuosity that characterized all my little proceedings; at the expiration of this time I was acknowledged to be the first scholar in the school. My time was up, and the parish apprenticed me to a carpenter: my master was a stern, cruel man: I worked hard, lived hard, and was treated badly. For some error that I committed, I was brutally punished and confined in a cellar below ground: for six and thirty hours was I confined there, and not a particle of nourishment passed my lips: I was famishing, and thought he had shut me there to die. Through that long dismal night, oh! the agony and fright that I suffered! I have often wondered since it did not turn my brain! Hideous visions, which nought but a crazed imagination could depict, arose before me: I shrieked with agony: and the drops of perspiration stood upon my brow, like beads. Young as I was, so bitter was that night, I dashed myself upon the ground and prayed for death. Morning came, and I was liberated; they said how pale and ill I looked. He cursed me for a sulky hound, and swore to kill me or my temper. I thought a few more nights in his dismal cellar would do both. That night I determined to run away. I had no money, and my aunt’s house was a good twenty miles off. There was a small box in my room, in which my master kept his loose coin: at this time its contents were but a few shillings. The temptation was a strong one. I walked to and fro. God only knows the bitter struggle of good and bad within my breast. The latter triumphed; alas! that it did; for to that hour all my subsequent crimes, degradation, and death can be traced! I took one— one shilling! I crept softly down the stairs, and even went back again to replace the stolen property; but the fear of want (for I had bitterly experienced the pangs of hunger) prevailed, and I became a thief. With hushed breath and noiseless step, I crept stealthily away. On, on, I flew— but a thief. Had the coin been red hot, and scared and burnt me as I went, I could have borne it better than that rankling thought. Fifteen miles had I walked: I feared to go near house or human being, though my hunger and thirst was excessive. I felt as if my brow (Cain-like), had the crime written upon it. At length, wearied and fatigued—foot-sore and sick at heart, I crept into the hedge, and I suppose fell into a doze, for when I awoke, my cruel master, and the parish constable stood over me. I was terrified beyond measure. I threw myself at my master’s feet, confessed the whole, sobbed out my contrition, and implored him for mercy’s sake, to spare and forgive me. I have never forgotten his reply to this, or the laugh that accompanied it—it was spiteful, fiendish, beyond compare.

“ ‘Oh, oh, you took to thieving then, did you, my runaway apprentice. Well done! Mercy! oh, yes, after justice has been done, my lad—after justice. Constable, I charge this boy with robbery, and deliver him to your custody.’

“I begged he would kill me—anything but send me to prison. The very officer joined his entreaties to mine. ‘You cannot mean this,’ he said, ‘damn the boy, thrash him—punish him in any way you like, but don’t ruin him for life.’ ‘I give him into your custody, refuse to take him at your peril; he’s a d—d young winning, thievish hypocrite, and it’s a mercy it’s no hanging matter now, for by God, if ’twas, not one word would I say to save him from swinging.’ ‘I can’t refuse to take him,’ said the constable, ‘or I would, that’s flat. I only say, and think it, and thanks be for it, that you may do as you like, but I would rather have my right hand chopped off, than the consequences of this sin resting on my soul, and troubling my conscience.’ ‘D—n your conscience,’ said my master. ‘With all my heart,’ said the constable, ‘some people seem to have no consciences to curse.’ ‘Yours is a clear one, no doubt,’ he answered with a sneer. ‘Come along,’ he said to me, and he dug his nails so deeply into my arm that my shirt was stained with blood, and I cried out, the pain it caused me was so great. ‘Loose the lad,’ said the constable, sternly, ‘he is my prisoner, and I’ll charge you with an assault, if you lay another finger upon him—let him alone.’ He turned to me, and I thought I saw a tear trembling on his eyelid as he spoke, for he was the father of a family, and bore a good name in the place, and said, ‘Come, my poor boy.’ He took me gently by the hand, and soothed me with kind words as he led me along, but when he left me it was within the dreary walls of the cage, or watch-house. I threw myself upon the heap of straw and slept.

Sleep! with thoughts of death, and hideous forms and faces flitting to and fro! At morning dawn I was awakened; the gaoler entered my cell—it was the constable who had taken me. He bid me silence; and taking instruments fitting for the purpose, he sawed away, and two iron bars fell quickly to the ground. He stopped then, and said these words, ‘If you was a boy of mine, and any ill came of this prosecution, I would have the villain’s heart’s blood; as ’tis, my poor lad, I pity you from my soul, and have risked my all to save you, for if they knew I aided in your escape I should lose my character, my place, and every means of livelihood. I have a young family dependent upon me, and cannot afford to do this; yet will I strain a nerve, and risk something to save you.’ He pointed to the windows—‘This act will be imputed to you. It will be your own fault if they ever catch you again; and if they do not, there are plenty of names beside your own you can adopt.’

“He opened the ponderous door. A horse and cart stood in waiting. He lifted me in, laid me at the bottom, covered me with a sack, and lashed the horse into a gallop. He checked it as we approached my native town, and jumping down, pulled me out, and thrusting some money into my hand, bid me run then for dear life. Panting and breathless, I reached my old home, and throwing myself at my aunt’s feet, revealed all. ‘God help us, child,’ she said, ‘they shall have both or none.’ For three days I lay there secure and undiscovered; but at last I was found out. I was dragged before a magistrate and searched. The money I had given me was found upon me. They questioned who gave me such a sum; and my master said he had missed the like amount—the liar! What could I say—I could not betray my friend; and my varying countenance, they all said, during the examination, betokened guilt. So thought the recorder, I presume, for from his merciless lips came the merciless words, ‘The sentence of the court is that you be confined in his majesty’s gaol for twelve calendar months, and be twice privately whipped!’ Oh, that it had ended here. The wretch had my poor old aunt at the bar, and preferred a charge against her for aiding and abetting in the escape of a felon. Charged *her* with a crime, whose kind, gentle heart

never harboured wicked thought! She was too noble to ask pardon of such a wretch, and too much a christian to tell a lie. They sentenced her to be imprisoned for three months. God forgive them! She never came out alive. So great was the trouble that it snapped the fragile cords of life, and she had passed from this world into eternity ere her sentence was half completed. My young heart harboured thoughts of revenge, for I thought her a murdered woman.

“I came out, sadly altered for the worse. The consciousness of sin was gone, and I fancied I had suffered a martyrdom, instead of paying a just penalty for a sin. My former friends shrunk from me as though I had contracted a loathsome, infectious disease. Some few pitied the young villain, but more denounced. There was an old playmate of mine, who had been reared within a few doors from my aunt’s cottage; she was a gentle, kind girl. One day I overtook her; I was, I well recollect, footsore and hungered: I laid my hand upon her arm—my tremulous voice, my tearful eyes betrayed how full my heart was, as I said ‘And will you not speak to me Jane—not one parting ward for him you may never see again?’ ‘They have threatened to beat me,’ she replied timidly, ‘if they ever knew I passed word with you again: but oh, Jim! I never went upon my knees, night or morning, but I prayed for you—prayed He would change your heart, and make you good and pure as I once knew you, and ever thought you, *even now*, for you are not guilty, Jim, are you?—you cannot be!’ I buried my face in my hands, and wept bitterly. ‘Did you, dear Jim, break from the watch-house?’ ‘No.’ ‘Have you been the naughty boy he said?’ ‘No.’ ‘You did not break your poor aunt’s heart?’ I was choking, and could not answer. ‘You are no thief, Jim?’ she continued, ‘you did not rob your master?’ I arose, and with uplifted hand, said, ‘As I am a living sinner, never but of one shilling, so help me Heaven!’ She dropped her hand, seemingly in despair, and moved away. ‘Be not merciless,’ I implored, ‘have you no pity for a misguided boy?’ ‘Oh, yes,’ she answered, ‘my heart is full of pity for my dear unfortunate friend—but friendship for a thief, I have none!’ My last friend had left me.

“Years flew by; I married, and had one child. I struggled with her to live honestly, but struggled to live in vain. We had walked many miles that day, with little or no refreshment, for the want of which my wife’s milk had dried, and the child was foodless. He sucked her dry breast, and then, apparently in utter helplessness, looked into our faces and uttered the moaning cry of starvation. My God! my sufferings were naught compared to what I felt for my dear, patient, suffering wife, and my innocent, unhappy child. It almost drove me mad. I went to the overseer of the parish. I told him we were in the last stage of starvation—that my wife and child were dying by inches. He made me out an order for flour and potatoes. I asked him what I were to do with them, having no place to cook or prepare them. I wanted money to purchase medicine: potatoes were no food for a dying woman. He told me to leave his house—called me insolent, and threatened to commit me to prison. At that moment all the bad passions that ever raged in human breast, were struggling for the mastery in mine. I shook my clenched fist in the air, and my teeth gnashed together with rage. He drew back affrighted; and well he might, for had he known how near a dreadful death he stood, that haughty tone of his would have been humbled. I went back to my poor wife—she looked into my face—Great God! what a long tale of sorrow, suffering and privation was exhibited in that one gaze, and all borne without a murmur. Oh! I read in her pale face and sunken eye, the fatal inroads want had made upon her otherwise strong constitution, and cursed myself, in the bitterness of my agony, as the author of it all. I knew she was ill, but she was so patient—so resigned, I never had idea how much so. She never saw day again. When morning broke—oh, misery dire and dread! the partner of my bosom was cold and lifeless as the ground on which she lay the only one in this dark world that ever had kind wish or thought for me, was dead! I had not tears—I rather thanked God he had removed my loved one

from this place of torment, to a brighter sphere. The last link that bound me to nature, and kept the man from springing from his nature into a devil, was broken and dead. My orphan child yet lived, but I, its father, had become an inveterate drinker—the vilest of drunkards. I leagued myself with bad men, and became famous for villainy. To drown thought—to stifle all reproaches of conscience—all memory of the past—all dread of the future. I had recourse to drink—drink—drink! Some friend placed my poor child in the workhouse, and I was left to my fate. I had become, in reality now, a thief and robber. So notorious did I become, that a reward was offered for my apprehension, and I was eventually taken, and though convicted only of a trivial crime, (the greater ones could not be proved against me), I was sentenced to fourteen years transportation. I was sent to Van Dieman's Land. Now that I was debarred from the use of those cursed intoxicating drinks, I could think—and bitter agonizing thoughts perplexed me. My poor son was present to my imagination night and day; as though I had murdered him, was he before me. My time was almost up, and I determined for his sake, if possible, to reach England again.

“We were working in gangs, and in one of our expeditions to band a raft of logs, floating on the water, I, struggling with a load, more than my most strenuous exertions could support, stumbled and fell. Someone kindly assisted me to my feet again. I gazed in his face—Heavens above! it was my son; *he* that I had left a mere chill in England fourteen years ago. So much agony, and so much joy was in the meeting, that I reeled and staggered like a drunken man. Happiness at meeting my son again, but bitter sorrow at meeting him there. He first found a tongue. ‘Father, dear, listen,’ he said, ‘you think me guilty of sin, I read it in your face—but I swear,’ and he raised his hands towards heaven as he spoke, ‘I wear this degrading garb, but am as innocent of the crime imputed to me, and that doomed me to this fate, as a child unborn. Father, I have been falsely accused, and most unjustly punished. They swore to lies, and by lies was I convicted. I was accused of highway robbery, when, at the time stated, I was miles away, and had witnesses to prove it. But yet they condemned me. Oh! had they eyes to read the human countenance, they would have seen innocence in mine, and guilt in his by whose evidence I was condemned.’

“I asked his accuser's name; he said I could not know him, it was Baker, he lived at M—, in Kent. It was the same man that ruined me when young—had made me what I was! At this moment our keeper noticed we were conversing, he approached, and bid us, with a curse, ‘get to work’. Night and day was his tale before me; sleeping and waking it was ever present. I heard our keeper whispering to another one day. He pointed to my son— “The doctor says that boy's in a deep decline—and I think he bears every sign of it; for that flushed face, too bright for health; that harassing, distressing cough; that hard drawn breath, as surely tells, as the sun-dial reveals the hour.’

“The man's words wrought such an effect upon me, that I threw myself at his feet, and begged of him, as though my boy's life lay in his hands, that he would recall those dreadful words. What more I said, or what he replied, I know not, for overpowered with excessive agony, I fainted at his feet. The shock I had received, threw me into a fever. I was delirious, frightfully so. My madness gave me strength; and in imagination I acted the bitter part in life I had fulfilled over and over again.

“I grew better, at length, daily; my son occasionally visited me, and then I watched the dreadful progress the blighting, incurable disease had made. At times when I noticed the bloom upon his cheeks, forgetting all, in a parent's deep love and pride, I would picture to myself, and tell him, what a fine, smart fellow he would be, and what happy days we would yet pass together

in the old world. 'Or in a better,' he would add solemnly, though I little thought to what his words had reference then.

"Day by day he grew weaker. One morning a keeper came and, bidding me prepare for the worst, told me my boy was dead. Not a tear, sigh or groan escaped me. I bent over his lifeless body, and swore to have vengeance—bitter, bloody, terrible vengeance on his murderer. I nursed this thought as though it was the climax of all earthly bliss. Ha! kept it in my heart's core, to the exclusion of every other thought.

"A ship came into our port which had been dismasted in a storm, and many of its crew were drowned. My time was up, they gladly accepted my offer, and I worked my passage home to England. I set foot upon my native shore again with a heart full of dreadful thoughts. Actuated by these, I hastened, with all speed, towards the place where my old master (he who destroyed me, and murdered my poor son) resided.

"I have heard of men being possessed of a devil; I felt as if there was one gnawing at my heart, and urging me on to deeds of darkness and of blood. I went into a public-house; there were plenty there now, for the village had grown into a town. A party of men, who by their dress were of the lower order, were speaking of my enemy. One with glaring eyes and fearful words was telling the others how the old villain had distrained upon a neighbour of his, who had been long suffering; and from the effects of want of employment, and ill health, had been unable to pay his demands; and through an old servant of his persecutor, had been turned into the street, to die like a dog. The man's furious pretentious found an echo in my troubled breast. Another chiming in, said, 'He's as hard-hearted an old scoundrel as ever cursed mankind with his infernal life. Don't you recollect, mates, how he served poor Jim. He called it justice, but in my opinion, if ever a man in the world committed murder, he swore away the life of that poor boy.' He was referring to my son.

"Mastering the agitation which unnerved me, by a violent effort, I turned to him, and said calmly, 'Were there any attempts made to prove his innocence?' 'Oh, yes,' answered the man, 'a cove named Curtis, Bob Curtis, swore he slept at his house the night in question, which was a good ten miles from the place where the old man said he was stopped and robbed; but Bob had been convicted once or twice of petty larcenies, so *his* oath wasn't taken; moreover, the old man swore point blank he was the man that robbed him. People mustn't speak about such things; but more than one, to my certain knowledge, thought the prosecution a persecution. I know *I* did for one, though I ain't over anxious any of you should say I said so.'

"I paid my reckoning and went out into the air. How opposite to the fierce passions that burnt and consumed me, was the placid scene that met my eye. The moon was at the full, and the spire of the old church, as it glittered in the solemn lustrous light, looked in good truth like a cross of grace! The very tombs in the quiet yard—those living records of the dead and withered past—looked more than usually awful in the silvery light. How many a tale of misery and crime—of sin and pain—lay hushed and silent there. Withered age, long suffering, and children early nipped, ere yet they had hardly entered into life. Sin and virtue, age and youth, the good and bad, the rich and poor, the morose and mirthful, the saint and sinner, the oppressor and the oppressed, the miser and the spendthrift, with all the various shades and form which human life presents, lay huddled side by side; all enmity stilled, all heart-burning hushed, in that one quiet bed. See yon pompous stone; that receptacle holds the ashes of one who in life was a powerful man; the manhood and the power, time's heavy hand has been at work upon, and all that remains is a heap of brown unwholesome bones.

“Death! thou mystery of mysteries, which every one must learn, yet no man, with all his mighty reasoning, in life, can imagine or fathom. One would have thought such a scene as this would have softened all the grosser, and called forth all the finer feelings of my debased nature. But, no; they only made the devil burn the more fierce! I went down to them, examined them minutely; traced letter after letter with my finger, in hope of discovering his name, the register of the death of a relative gone before him. I chuckled and rubbed my hands with demoniac joy at the thought of discovering a vacancy that I would soon fill up; of going there after he was dead, of treading down with my foot that mound under which his carcass lay rotting and festering! That is a fearful night for the memory to look back upon—a fearful one indeed! I thought of the difference in our situations. He had become a rich and powerful man—and look at me! I went to his house the next morning, under plea of requesting relief. I bound a handkerchief round my head to disguise myself; there was no need of that, time and care had disguised me enough. He asked me what I wanted, in a stern and unfeeling tone. I answered in a tone as harsh and haughty as his own, ‘bread’. He told me ‘I must earn it, such lazy villains as I was, if we had our deserts, would be in prison’. I answered him, until in his rage he called me an insolent dog, and struck me. One spring like a tiger, thirsting for blood, upon his prey, my hand was upon his throat. All my bitter thoughts came into action now. I pressed; his face grew purple; his tongue hung from his mouth, and his eyes seemed starting from their sockets; the clammy sweat of death bedewed his forehead. One minute more, and he would have known the secret of death, but the door was burst open, and the domestics, alarmed by the uproar, entered the room. To release my victim, draw a large Spanish knife from my pocket, and to bare its fearful blade, was the work of a moment. Alarmed by my fierce-glaring eyes, and the deadly weapon I carried, they drew back, and gave me free egress.

“Oh, how I laughed! He had suffered the pangs of death, but would suffer death itself the next time! I lingered about the neighbourhood for many months; still firmly bent upon carrying my damnable plot into execution. One day I was in a large unfrequented wood, a narrow path ran at my feet, and walking along with an enfeebled gait, and tottering steps, came that devoted old man, alone! With a shout of delight I strode before him, seized him by the collar, and dragged him into the recesses of the wood.

“I then released him. ‘Listen,’ said I, and I detailed to him who I was, and that I had purposely travelled hundreds of miles to execute justice upon the murderer of my son. With a face blanched with fear—with lips quivering from excessive agony, and pale and bloodless, he fell upon his knees, and, in tones that would have moved an iron heart to pity, begged I would not hurl him to the grave unprepared, and his past sins unrepented of, but that I would have mercy, and not bathe my hands in the blood of an old man! Would to God I had listened to his prayer!

“I drew forth the fatal knife—bared its hideous blade, and brandished it in the air! The old man shrieked with agony. My God! I can dwell upon this dread scene no longer. One fierce curse—one deadly thrust—one loud cry of despair and agony—a gush of thick life-blood—the deed was done—he lay at my feet, dead!

“Now, the hideous phantasy had left me, I would have given the world, ah, even my own life, to have healed that gaping wound, and to have put breath into those motionless nostrils. It was too late, alas! Cain’s curse was upon me—I was a murderer!

“I was arrested, tried, condemned; in two days I shall suffer the dread death that is executed upon him who sheddeth the blood of a fellow man. God pardon me—my heart is full of grief—overflowing with repentance. Have mercy Heaven, upon him who was merciless. My kind friend, farewell. The blessing of a grateful heart, and of a dying, but repentant sinner, attend!

you. Farewell, until the verges into eternity! Then, I humbly hope, we shall meet in the promised land of bliss. Once again, farewell; and, oh, pray in your passage through life, tell the erring to take the path of rectitude, and forsake the path of death; and to the drunkard, speak—thousands beside myself have been untimely hurried into eternity by its instrumentality; tell them it is the high road to ruin, misery, crime and death. Farewell. The life of a murderer is finished, and in a few brief hours will be closed in frightful reality.”