

## **Extract from Chapter Six - Vote for Murder**

*Saturday 9<sup>th</sup> August 1851 – This is my first diary entry since my frenzied attempt last night to reproduce those former entries concerning my dear friend, Mary Emily Cage. The writing of those entries focussed my mind on previous times in my life causing me to re-examine my past conduct, of which I am not at all proud. How selfish I was, thinking only of my life and carelessly disregarding the needs of my best friend. As Mary's life descended into a hell, not always of her own making, mine rose accordingly until I was happily married and had sufficient food and shelter for all my needs. How it must have hurt Mary that her life was in turmoil while mine was always comfortable. How did I neglect her so and not consider how she might compare our fortunes and suffer more by it?*

*I visited Mary in her cell today. Before I left home, Alfred bid me sit down. Looking straight into my eyes, he watched me with tender concern, stroking my hand as he spoke. He said I must be in possession of all the facts before meeting Mary as I may not wish to re-acquaint myself with her when I knew to what depths she had sunk. I told him it did not matter what the facts were, I would not desert her now, nor would I take her own account any less seriously than the official accounts of her misdemeanour. Alfred said he was afraid of this but continued without preamble stating that Mary had been found guilty of murder by poison and would die within a week. There was nothing that could prevent her execution, so any renewal of our friendship would inevitably be of short and painful duration. I reminded Alfred that I had abandoned Mary once and must do all I could to make up for this past disloyalty. He kissed me tenderly and told me he had arranged a visit and would take me there right away, but warned me that the conditions inside the prison were not what I was used to and that I should not be shocked at anything I saw.*

*Clutching Alfred's arm, I walked the twenty minutes to the gaol with my husband, my rock, by my side. We did not talk but every so often he stopped and smiled at me, his hand firmly grasping mine. Poor Mary – how sad she never knew the love and care of a good man. Eventually we arrived at the gaol; a vast, brick building surrounded by a high wall. Atop the roof, tall chimneys stood stark against the skyline. Our entryway, through a large wooden gate, was positioned where the straight side wall met the curved wall to the front of the structure. Alfred escorted me through the gates and up the long pathway to the front of the building. He nodded to the guards at the front door and was granted easy access, as a man in his position should be.*

*I did not know what to expect of the prison for in all the years we were married, I never went near the place. From the outside, the grounds were pleasant. The door through which we entered was located to the side and a large, mullioned arch-window stood centrally about it occupying several floors. The sun shone brightly and I thought perhaps it would not be as bad as Alfred described but that thought only lasted until I gained access to the inside. Alfred escorted me through the dark reception hall and through the first of many heavy, metal gates, each with a prison warder within easy sight. We weaved through corridors away from the men's cells as Alfred did not wish to expose me to the worst of the prison, then we descended down dank, shallow stairs and through whitewashed corridors beneath the ground floor. Each side of the corridor contained a succession of single cells. Alfred explained that these were the condemned cells and it was unusual for a prisoner not to share a cell, however, this was a privilege granted to prisoners condemned to death. Many of the cells were empty. Alfred propelled me past two cells occupied by men and I did not have the opportunity to even glimpse inside despite the lack of private space, then we went through a further door and Alfred gestured to a cell on the left.*

*Fully exposed to the prying eyes of anyone who might pass by through floor to ceiling bars, the small cell was whitewashed brick with a clay tiled floor. A barred window was set high atop the end wall and illuminated a hard wooden bed pushed firm against the back wall upon which a small figure was sitting, clutching a book. Her lips moved silently as if she was reading aloud; but the book was, in fact, closed.*

*"Mary," I whispered, for it was she and she looked up and smiled the most radiant smile and walked to the barred walls of the cell, reaching towards me. She said my name over and over and grasped my hand and I sobbed so hard I could not speak for some ten minutes. Alfred called the guard, took the keys to the cell and allowed me access. The guard picked up his chair and set it down for me beside Mary's bed and we talked for the first time in twenty years. Before I had the chance to ask her anything at all she said she had something she must say to me. Alfred sent word in advance of*

*my intended visit, which allowed Mary the opportunity to think about our impending meeting and she had planned what she would say. Without further preamble she told me she was sincerely sorry for her past conduct, her dissolute life and, above all, her resentment of me. I said there was nothing to apologise for and that I should say sorry to her for my lack of consideration. She disagreed and said that I should not.*

*Mary had not aged as one would expect of a person having experienced such a difficult life. She was still small and relatively slight; no more than five foot, if that, with only a slight thickening of the body through age. Her face was quite un-lined. Her black hair was now peppered with grey but her eyes were kinder and less hard than I remembered. She was dressed in the black garb of prison and her hair was pinned back though not at all neatly and rebellious tendrils escaped through the pins, so the effect was softened. In her hand she grasped a bible as if her life depended upon it.*

*Even as I uttered the words I realised what an absurd question I was asking, but still felt moved to enquire how Mary fared. It seemed only polite to ask. She said she fared well under the circumstances; that the prison chaplain was a frequent visitor during her incarceration, and had provided her with much comfort. She was not afraid to face the next life and was fully reconciled to her fate. She told me she had been a most grievous sinner and regretted her actions completely. She wished God would grant her mercy and hoped that she would die forgiven. She asked for details of my life, which I gave with a degree of reluctance as I have fared so much better than she.*

*Mary confessed she stayed away from my wedding for spite, resenting that I never bought Alfred to meet her and I apologised for making her feel she was not good enough to meet him. But she said the fault was hers alone. I told her about my four children and her eyes filled with tears when she discovered my eldest girl, Mary Elizabeth, was named in her honour. She asked after my father and I smiled, remembering how he had enjoyed ten happy years in Ipswich in close proximity to our home before passing away leaving the proceeds of the sale of his house to Alfred and me. We talked about Alfred's progression within the prison system and I explained how he came to occupy his current senior position in Ipswich Gaol. Whilst not wishing to cause any further resentment, I felt moved to honesty and revealed that our good fortune allowed us to purchase a larger house in Christchurch Street where my original lodgings were when I was a teacher. She did not seem to mind though, and said she was pleased my life was comfortable and would not wish it otherwise just because hers was not.*

*I asked if there was anything I could do for her to bring some comfort in these last weeks and she said that there was. She had three sons and four daughters left living, who would dwell in the shadow of her misdemeanour forever and she was sorry and ashamed for the notoriety her conduct brought. She would ask for their forgiveness but also wanted God's forgiveness and to attain that she felt it necessary to give as true an account as possible as part of her redemption. She was adamant that this account could never be made public for the sake of her children. Mary asked if I might listen to her story and write it down as she could not read or write and that even after so long a time, she could trust me with her story as she could trust no other. She said that it may be difficult for me to hear her words, especially those narratives involving me, but that a true account must contain both bad and good. I did not have to think too long and said of course I would do this for her no matter how harrowing the detail. So it is settled. I come tomorrow and will sit with her and write what she tells me. I left the damp confines of Mary's cell, and, at my request, Alfred took me to the prison chapel. I knelt at the front pew praying fervently for Mary's soul, while Alfred conducted some business in the nearby reception hall. Presently, I heard footsteps and the prison chaplain joined me in prayer. When we finished I stood, and he engaged me in conversation, so I asked him about Mary and told him of our friendship. He said Mary was a most guilty sinner but that she had confessed to her loose conduct and depraved way of life and wholeheartedly wished to atone for her misdemeanours in the eyes of the lord. The chaplain said he told her that she must confess to all her sins including the murder of her husband to be truly repentant, but that she would not. If she did not confess before she died, God would not forgive her. He asked me to help her understand the importance of a full confession and I said I would do anything for her as I had failed her too many times before.*

*Then we left the gaol and I write this at home now. The next entry in this journal will be Mary's story in Mary's own words.*