

## *Pretty Meggy Heywood*

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### A Tale of Circumstantial Evidence

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On a somber and sunless morning, in the month of February, 17--, the population of the town of Lewes seemed to be moved by an unusual agitation pervading them. They might be seen hurrying along in groups of twos, threes, and more, all apparently making head for one particular spot, as by mutual and common consent they had engaged to meet there, or had been summoned there by some imperative or very extraordinary circumstance.

In effect, it was to witness an execution, which took place in front of the gatehouse of the old castle. The country jail had not been built, nor for many years after that dismal occurrence.

Hoar frost lay on the ground, snow hung darkly in the air, like a tenebrous veil drawn over the face of the sky. Anything more dreary, chilly, and shudderingly in keeping the proceedings of the morning, cannot be imagined. The assemblage, which began with aggregate crowds, grew into a multitude—a dense, pushing throng, packed and massed at last into one vast human *tumuli*, as if it formed but one expectant, anxious creature; and one could scarcely tell what kind of emotion moved its breast—whether the morbid appetite to behold so revolting a spectacle; whether pity or anger, or a stern determination to see retributive justice dealt out, actuated that enormous heart. It was certainly not indifference, as the very density of the crowd forcibly testified.

The gibbet was erected in front of the gatehouse. The sheriff's javelin men lined the short distance that led from the gatehouse to the platform of the grim and ghastly doomsman. The hour is at hand. A murmur ran through the assembly—a thrill of uncontrollable horror—a shock, keen, electric, and universal, was felt to actuate the mass. The door opened—the prisoner, walking beside the chaplain, and followed by the *hangman* and other officials followed—and the shudder of horror which ran through the assembled thousands was easily accounted for.

The condemned was —a Woman!

A woman young and fair—comely, even to have verged upon the beautiful. Even although her face was as white as snow, although her eyes were purple, and her lips livid; even crushed, haggard, and wan as she looked—she could not be despoiled of the evidence of an unusually attractive face. The brown hair was snooded up. She wore a garment of coarse white linen; whether it was the custom to do so, or whether it was to express her innocence—for she had protested this with impassioned vehemence up to the last moment, and was repeating it in a firm, unfaltering voice to the venerable man who was at her side, and who continued to administer to her the last consolations of religion, as she walked, step, by step, to the scaffold.

For his part, the clergyman was even more deeply agitated than himself. Her composure was apparent enough, but it was of a dreadful order, and might have been that of despair, as well as of resignation. *His* agitation arose from two sources—the one was that, in the anomalous probability of things, though the evidence against her had been most damning, she *might* be innocent. And what a terrible responsibility was that to lie on the shoulders of her judges and

executioners? On the other hand, if she was really guilty, with hardness of heart and utter depravity did she not betray in persisting in that lie, even at the foot of the scaffold she was about to mount?

The sight was inexpressibly dismal. The cool, gloomy morning, the lowering atmosphere, the chill ghastliness of the tragical spectacle about to be afforded the lookers on—formed one of those haunting nightmare exhibitions that hang about one for hours, for days, even after the atrocious “carnival of the gallows” is over.

It was evident that the crowd felt an interest in her. A murmur rose, and deepened, and broadened, as she advanced; and perhaps it would have grown into a yell of execration, had she not at the instant lifted up her meekly-bowed head, and with her large blue-beaming eyes looked upon the thousand eyes devouring her, with so firm, so collected, but not defiant, a manner, that awed or cowed, as it were, fascinated into submission. The murmur died away, and the silence of the grave followed.

She mounted the scaffold step by step, slowly but firmly. The grim official was by her side, and pursuing the manipulation of his infernal trade. She knelt, she prayed, she rose, and then she cast one long, keen, anxious glance around the crowd, probably to exchange a last look with someone or other who would look upon her more pityingly and tenderly than did the stony eyes she met. She was rewarded; for on a mound there stood a young man weeping bitterly, unnerved to prostration—her lover probably—who extended his clasped hands toward her.

He, too, was rewarded; for a sweet, rapturous, grateful smile, a smile of affection and thanks, broke upon her thin, pale lips. She kissed her hands, waved them towards him, and then surrendered herself to the rude hands of the so-called minister of justice.

She advanced a step. She lifted up her head as if to claim attention. Breathless grew the heaving crowd; she was about to confess her guilt! Clear, calm, distinct, like the tone of a silver trumpet came her words:—

“I am innocent—Innocent—I declare it in the name of God, and with my last breath!”

She was a woman, or rather a girl-woman, for her age was not twenty. She was going to be hung for a dreadful and appalling *murder* that had been committed in the town some few months back—a murder committed under circumstances of great atrocity, and she was to be hung for the deed, brought home against her. But her last words had come upon them like a thunder-clap.

In five minutes, the fair, comely creature was dangling in the air, a collapsed, strangled, degraded corpse, and strong men swooned at the sight. Strong men turned white, and sick at heart, though not all—not all. There was one—a young genteel-looking man, dressed with some elegance, though it was of a foppish order—whose face, though pale to lividness, and working nervously, still bore upon it no expression of pity. It was, on the contrary, of an exulting character—the smile on the lip, the gleam in the eyes; and as his look wandered from the victim before him, that swayed to and fro—a hideous, abhorrent, and damning sight—to the sobbing youth who stood

far removed from him, his smile became absolutely fiendish, as he muttered to himself, “We are quits now, my proud, pretty madam!”

A third individual may also be indicated—a hirsute, brawny, thick-set, powerful man, clad in the coarsest garb of the poor, yet bearing little or none of those industrial traces which mark the working man. A bold blustering, semi-savage air, stamped by dissipation, with its indelible traces, set him apart as one not to be on too familiar terms with.—He gazed with a blood-shot eye on the ghastly tragedy performed before him, from beneath the rim of his broad felt hat, which was pulled down over his brows. Not a muscle quivered, not a nerve stirred in his iron frame, as the poor girl was “turned off”; but, as he departed with the dispersing of the crowd, he stuck his tongue in his cheek, and muttered with a sneer, and in slang only known to himself, “Queer, cuffins, by—! Beak, harman-jack, and all!” and then disappeared.

Strange to say, also, there were women who looked on without bleaching—who looked on without shrinking—who beheld that ghastly death with some fearful sense of satisfaction! Envy and spite, and even the stern propriety of justice, might actuate this, but it certainly was not the less a fact.

At the same moment a singular phenomenon occurred. As the last shudder ran through the corpse, the sun burst forth with a rich meteoric effulgence, and bathed the poor victim’s head with a glory that was almost unearthly. The crowd melted away, cowed, abashed, ashamed, as if it had been engaged in some infamous act. Something like remorse, began to work among them; and they departed, with bated breath, speaking of the ill-fated Meggy Heywood, just gone to death in so cruel a manner, and of poor Charley Dean, her sweetheart, who had been carried away in strong convulsions, and who would be sure to die of a broken heart.

Then followed a long lapse of time—gossip died away—pretty Meggy Heywood all but forgotten, and Charley Dean, a sad and moody Man, had quitted the place, and had not since been heard of.

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We must now retrace our steps a little in order to show how this dreadful catastrophe had come about, and brought the beautiful, though lowly maiden, to the awful death of the murderer.

In an old-fashioned house, in a kind of lane, turning out of an old-fashioned street in the town of Lewes, there dwelt—keeping a small shop, and thriving and well-to-do enough in a small way—an aged widow, known to the townsfolk as Dame Keymer, and living with her—her housekeeper, in fact—her god-daughter, Meggy Heywood, a remarkably handsome young woman, whose comeliness brought her as many suitors as envious rivals. Of a sweet and genial temper, she conducted herself with a propriety and modesty, against which the breath of slander never ventured to direct its shafts, though she was sought after by the humbler town gallants, and not by a few of the “better class” of the youths of Lewes.

Merry and lighthearted, she treated these flatterers in a way that was, in every respect, creditable. Mirthful without levity, Meggy Heywood knew how to reply to, or repudiate, any advances; and

if one more presumptuous than another ventured to presume upon a frank familiarity, she possessed the art of making him “keep his distance,” and of “knowing his place,” in a very uncommon degree.

But for all this, it was not fated that Meggy should escape the inevitable shaft of love. Some suitor, it was clear, she *must* accept, not only because, like every other pretty girl, she had (possibly) no valid objection to a sweetheart; but because, having once decided upon accepting one, it would relieve her from much annoyance she was subjected to, and the fact once known that she had made her choice, would be sufficient signal for others to hold off. Once appropriated, she would have a protector, and her choice was accordingly made.

Not all at once, though, Meggy was neither rash nor willful. If she had any secret leaning, any latent sentiment towards one over another—any hidden preference—she did not exhibit it at once. Among the number who made advances, under honorable pretenses, was a young spark, son of an opulent tradesman in the town who on the strength of his better dress, rumored means, extravagant habits, and other characteristics of a fast young dandy, at last became her torment, her bane. Dame Keymer herself could not keep her patience at seeing Mr. Francis Palmer entering her little shop, morning, noon, and eve, and under the pretense of purchasing some trifle or other, seeking every opportunity of ingratiating himself with pretty Meggy. It would become townstalk, a scandal, the gossip of the whole neighborhood. What could *he* want with Meggy, forsooth? “Was *he*, with a rich, hard-hearted sort of a father, who was looking up to the aristocracy of Lewes, in order to find a match for his son—was *he* (Master Francis) likely to marry *her*—Meggy—the prettiest low born lass, though she might be, in a day’s walk? Nonsense! Pooh! She wouldn’t have it—and an end must be put to it,” and so on.

And thus it was that Meggy *did* put an end to it, for she accepted the suit of a worthy and industrious young artisan of her own station in life; and while Charley Dean, who worked at one of the factories on the Ouse, was transported out of his senses with joy, Mr. Francis Palmer on the other hand was livid with rage and jealousy, and swore that, some way or other, he would have his revenge. And Mr. Francis Palmer was just the very man to do so, for under his fair-spoken manners there lurked a malignant spirit, which was not to be turned aside from a purpose once formed.

Days, happy days—weeks, happy weeks, passed by, and the young lovers were happy. Charley was a prudent and money-saving man, and was known to be looking out for a small business, in the same artisan line he following at his factory, on his own account. Dame Keymer was pleased, which was a great point gained, and hinted once, that she should have a small legacy to bequeath to her god-daughter someday—a piece of news that soon spread abroad among the neighbors, who speedily generated a report that Dame Keymer was rich, and that Meggy, on her marriage day, would come into the inheritance of some fabulous fortune.

Meggy Heywood was very happy, and thought of little else than her own bliss. Mr. Palmer did not cease to persecute her, but she put him aside with a quiet gravity that made him furious. As for Charley; he was happy, too—devoted, tender, and truthful. He beheld in Meggy the aim and end of all his wishes, and vowed, internally, that if a loving, faithful heart, and industrious hand, and an inventive brain could reward her, these should not be wanting. All, in fact, was going on

cheerfully, pleasantly, delightfully; when suddenly, as by an earthquake, or eclipse, the whole was darkened, absorbed, and lost forever—forever—in the hideous calamity, the unutterable horror, that obscured and entombed every hope, never to be awakened more!

One morning, Dame Keymer was found with her throat cut from ear to ear!—her little money chest, which she kept in her bedroom, broken open, and her little hoard vanished. Meggy was first to give the alarm, and the utmost consternation prevailed.

The night had been wild and stormy; a furious tempest had broken over the town, and boomed all night. The wind went howling through the streets, beating the chimneys, banging loose shutters and doors, and drowning all other sounds, if sounds there were, while in the pauses of the storm, as if the blast was gathering its forces together for another wrathful outburst, people in their startled slumbers fancied they heard one of those awful cries which, at times, startle the ear of night, and which can be none other than that of “Murder!” or of “Fire!”

An examination of the premise now took place—strict and zealous, though perhaps, not conducted on the scientific principles of analogy and deduction which characterizes the “detective” of the present day. Doors and windows are securely fastened; and, so far, it was apparent that no one from without could be the perpetrator—at least, it was apparently so. The only living creature in the house besides the cat, was Meggy Heywood, and certain sanguine marks found upon her bedchamber door led to the conclusion that she was the murderess! And within the next hour she was safely lodged in the gatehouse of the old castle, on the charge, until further examination, should bring the proof home to her.

As a matter of course the whole resolved itself into one of those cases which depend entirely and solely upon the evidence of circumstances; but which evidences have so repeatedly proved themselves fallacious, false, and contradictory even, that the wonder is that men will venture to arrive at a conclusion terminating in “Guilty,” with so many past examples of judicial murder before their eyes.

Circumstantial evidence went woefully against poor Meggy Heywood; and yet, there was everything—almost—lacking to give this corroboration. What was the motive?—and where was the plunder? What was her gain by this fearful deed? Everyone who knew Meggy, knew she loved the old woman, and that the Dame looked on her as her only child. On examining the boxes, not a coin, not a trinket, could be traced connecting her with the deed. Still, the proceeds could have been handled without, and suspicion pointed to Charley Dean as an associate. He, however, was soon exculpated—nothing was found on him, or at his home; and as he was working through the same night, at the foundry, in the modeling room with other men, an unquestionable alibi freed him from every suspicion of the murder at all events.

Suspicious that lack confirmation only seem to grow into greater certainties, from the anxiety that arises in people’s minds to have a doubt resolved. People began to grow angry with Meggy, because she would not confess. Folk looked doubtfully upon Charley, because he protested his belief in her innocence, day and night, and because he never ceased to visit her in her imprisonment whenever he could gain admission. But, at last, the day of trial came, and great was the commotion in the town.

Let the readers imagine all the formalities and preliminaries over Meggy in the “dock”—the prosecution opened—every title of evidence adduced, and all still circumstantial! Yet this only wanted confirmation.

At last, Mr. Francis Palmer is called. He has it is stated, some importance evidence to communicate. It is a breathless moment, and he comes forward slowly, and makes his statement with reluctance. The sum of his evidence amounts to this:—

“That he entertained an affection for the young person in the dock, and being jealous of the preference she displayed towards a rival, he, although he could not defend the act, had, out of his instinctive jealousy carefully watched them both;—not having any clear reason, beyond that why he did so.” Here he paused a moment, in some embarrassment, and then, urged by the counsel for the prosecution, went on with his evidence.

“On the evening of the murder he had seen his rival and the prisoner at the bar walking towards the castle; and, as the darkening twilight favored him, he following them, from the corner, in which he ensconced himself, overheard a conversation which threw some light, however sinister, upon the case in question. Her lover spoke of their marrying soon—of a prospect he had of setting up for himself; adding that if he could muster fifty or sixty pounds, he could commence at once. The prisoner replied, that there would not be much difficulty about this matter, as her grandmother had some such sum by her, which it would not be difficult to obtain.”

The effect of this evidence, as it came slowly forth, began to tell, little by little, with the most fatal effect. Here was a motive to the consequence—a reason for the act—a condition answering the requirements of the case—a confirmation that closed up the last link.

But where was the money? None know. It could not be traced. The lovers had soon parted. Charley was at his work, and had not quitted it until the deed was done. These were the good old days of hanging. Somebody must be hanged. Meggy Heywood was found guilty. We do not follow the trail thro’ every phase and transition. Meggy was found guilty! The poor Dame was murdered—and Meggy Heywood was hanged!

*“Fiat justitia,” etc. etc.*

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Ten years had passed away. Meggy Heywood’s fate was only a dreadful story to tell around a winter’s fire. Charley Dean had gone away and been forgotten, and Mr. Francis Palmer was married, respectable, exemplary, thriving townsmen of the venerable borough of Lewes.

One day, a dusty, travelworn man might have been seen halting suddenly before the gatehouse; and while his lips quivered and tears filled his eyes, by his heaving breast and agitation it might be easily gathered that something of a very unusual nature had occurred to him in the shape of reminiscence of memory. He stood on a particular spot. He ejaculated a name—he covered his face with his hands and sobbed aloud.

“Meggy, Meggy!” he murmured; “all this weary, weary time to wait, and no clue yet!—nothing to prove your innocence yet!”

“What’s the cove maundering about?” said a hoarse, drunken voice at his ear. “I have seen a little game played out here myself, some ten years ago, or thereabouts; but, burn me, it makes me move—not a bit!”

The first comer lifted up his face, and looked full into the bearded, grimy, haggard, and debauched ruffian face. The flush of liquor was on his cheeks, its fire in his eyes, and he laughed a short, idiotic laugh as he met the startled look of the man.

“Aye, you may stare,” he said, with his air of reckless bravado, which, nevertheless could not hide a certain undercurrent of feeling which it is impossible to define; but it is the sort of recklessness which brings murderers back to the scene of their crime—that forces confession from hardened hearts, out of the very recklessness that has made life a daily hell to them.

“She was a woman, too—a girl a most—the fools!—the fools! And as innocent as the babe unborn!”

“Enough!” shouted Charley Dean, for it was he—worn, haggard, aged before his time. “Enough! I arrest you on the spot. Oh, you cannot escape me! Were you twice as burly and ten times as strong you would only be a child in my gripe!”

The struggle was brief, for the wretch would now escape. In vain! Soon came a crowd, soon came constables, soon it ran about the town that the real murderer of Dame Keymer was taken, and that Meggy Heywood was innocent!

And they had *hanged her!*

The man was taken into custody, and under the evulsion of circumstances, made a full confession of the crime. He, in conjunction with another—whose life had long since expiated his crimes—had heard the rumor of the poor Dame’s little hoard of wealth. By a skillfully planned and daringly carried out scheme, during the tempest of the night, they had crept, by a ladder laid transversely from an outhouse to the back of the widow’s window—had opened it—committed the murder and robbery—had escaped—the catch of the window falling within having prevented suspicion of any one’s entering. And Meggy Heywood was sacrificed!

The townsfolk sorrowed for many a day, for the heedless judgement their jury had recorded; but they could not bring back the dead.

Let us hope poor Meggy met a judge far more merciful than she met with on earth.

Of the future fate of Charley Dean we have nothing to record. As little have we to say of Mr. Francis Palmer. *He* did not sleep on a bed of roses, as his last hours testified.

The murderer—the *double* murderer—paid the penalty of his turpitude; and that concludes all we know of the matter.

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