CHAPTER NINE

The Mannings in Prison

Round what other punishment does the like interest gather? . . . persons who have rendered themselves liable to transportation for life . . . are never followed into their cells, and tracked from day to day, and night to night; they are never reproduced in their false letters, flippant conversations.

—Charles Dickens, letter to the Daily News, 28 February 1846

In September Punch published a satire on the Murder of Mr. Cock Robin describing the capture and imprisonment of suspects for that infamous crime, as they might have been reported in successive editions of a sensational journal given the lugubrious name “St. Sepulchre’s Bell.” The fourth edition of the imaginary tabloid includes an account of “the meals which [the murderer] took on the road from the place of his capture and afterwards at Newgate, of the numbers of hours of sleep which he had, of the shop at which he bought the last pair of trousers which he ever wore.”

If the author of this lampoon intended to outdo the excesses of crime journalism, his efforts actually paled before the contemporary reality of newspaper reports devoted to the Mannings. Any Londoner who could read knew how Marie Manning had been arrested by telegraph and Fred had been taken in his bed in Jersey, and now the daily theme of the penny-a-liners was the life of the Mannings in Horsemonger Lane Gaol, their reactions to each other and to news of the case, and what they did to occupy their time until the police van came
around again to haul them off to the next hearing at the Southwark police court.

It was reported that Marie Manning, after learning of her husband's capture, lost the composure and firmness she had displayed while he remained at large. During much of the Saturday after his arrest she was seen pacing the ward where she was confined "evidently in a state of great mental excitement." In the course of the day a police inspector came to see her to ask for a receipt for an advance of twenty pounds, which Secker had allowed her to prepare her defense out of the money found in her possession by Superintendent Moxey. Shaking the inspector's hand in a "hearty and fervent manner," she said, "I thank you and the worthy Magistrate for this assistance; I am much obliged." She then wrote the receipt on a slip of paper. Her style of writing, however, proved one of the early disappointments of her observers among the press; it was "certainly not in keeping with her reported accomplishments." When Marie was informed of Fred's arrival at Horsemonger Lane Gaol, she remarked that it was very annoying that they were to be brought up together at the next examination at the police court. She frequently asked the prison guards what the newspapers were saying about the case, and their reports did not seem to relieve her anxiety. When she heard that Manning, at his arrest, had accused her of committing the crime by shooting O'Connor at the bottom of the staircase, she declared, "The villain, it was him that did it, not me."

Marie's agitation seemed to be short-lived; indeed, observers were soon surprised by the "coolness and general levity of her conduct." She often voiced concern about Manning and would say, "Ah, poor boy, he ought not to have been taken." Some had the impression that she had lost interest in the case and that all her thoughts were devoted to dress. Marie had, in fact, obtained Secker's permission for some satin dresses and bonnets found in her luggage to be given back to her; but the journalists, dissatisfied with this modest show of vanity, widely propagated a story that she was employing much of her time making a new dress for her first joint police court appearance with her husband. She was also said to have been very busy in adding a
double fall to her bonnet so as to screen herself from the eyes of the courtroom audience. The restrictions of the prison regimen did not weigh on her spirits; she ate heartily, and her sleep was undisturbed. Often she would express her satisfaction with what the prison authorities had done for her, saying, “I have plenty of room, air and food, and am not without society.” Marie’s odd attachment to Superintendent Moxey also surfaced again for, upon being told that that officer had left London to attend to duties in Scotland, she seemed rather disappointed and observed: “I wished particularly to have thanked him for his gentlemanly conduct. But I intend to go again to Scotland as soon as I have got over this difficulty, and I will call and see him.” Conversing freely with her guards, Marie told them about her early life and the comfort and happiness that had been hers in the service of the Duchess of Sutherland and other families. She radiated assurance that she would succeed in dispelling all suspicion of her being involved in the murder. On Sunday, 2 September, she attended religious services in the chapel at Horsemonger Lane Gaol both in the morning and in the afternoon; her husband was not present on either occasion.

The impression that Marie had turned her mind away from the case was misleading. In prison, as in court, she seems to have taken a more active role than did her husband in instructing her solicitor as to lines of inquiry. At her behest Mr. Solomon applied to Magistrate Secker for the restoration of a letter that his client had received from Patrick O’Connor in July 1847. Marie had stated that the letter was of great consequence to her since it was sent to her while she was in the service of Lady Blantyre at Stafford House and related to her purchase of railway stock and other securities out of the considerable sums of money she then owned. On 3 October Inspector Yates, as a result of the application, called on Mrs. Manning at Horsemonger Lane Gaol for the purpose of obtaining better identification of the letter. She told him that the letter was one she had received from O’Connor shortly after they became acquainted and that it contained her request for the purchase of some Eastern Railway shares and foreign stock. Yates told her that her parcels had been closely examined and that no such letter
could be found. Marie maintained that the letter was taken from her by Superintendent Moxey and that if it was produced it would prove how she came into the possession of the property that had been found on her. Yates reported the conversation to Secker, who ordered him to give Mrs. Manning copies of any letters that could be found.

Fred Manning's prison moods, like his wife's, were closely watched by the press. He had an air of dejection, of profound despondency combined at times with considerable nervousness. Late on his first day at Horsemonger Lane Gaol he asked to be furnished with ink and paper and on its being supplied to him he wrote and addressed a letter to Marie. The terms of his communication never came to light, and it was suspected that the governor of the jail had intercepted its delivery. Having nothing to show for the one effort to which he had roused himself, Fred relapsed into depression and panic. Opinions were divided as to whether his sorry state was due to the effects of dissipation while he was in Jersey or to the turmoil of his mind.

After his first month in prison, Fred eventually found a way to shore up his spirits; it was reported that he had taken to writing poems, which he was regularly delivering to his solicitor, Mr. Binns, whose own courtroom prose was none too steady. One poem published in Manning's name was a dirge entitled "The Prison Bell," which attained some popularity. But the merciless Observer declared that there was not a "shadow of truth" in the attribution of the piece to Manning and that in fact "it was written by a convict in Pentonville Prison and possesses a far higher degree of merit than anything Manning could possibly compose." As an example of Manning's more pedestrian efforts, the Observer published four lines Fred had written for one of the turnkeys of Horsemonger Lane Gaol:

I heard the toll
of the great, solemn Newgate bell;
I said, a soul
is gone to Heaven or Hell.

The Morning Herald also reported that while at Horsemonger
Lane Manning “made some excellent drawings,” which he sold to the artist and publisher Robert Cruikshank, who himself drew the Mannings in court. The *Morning Herald* continued: “In fact the whole of Manning’s time has been occupied in writing and drawing. He seemed so confident of his success . . . that he told Mr. Keene the Governor that as soon as he was discharged from custody he should go to the West Indies, but should call upon him before he started, to thank him for his kindness.”

All this loving attention to the domestic life of jailbirds was more than the perpetually indignant *Punch* could pass by without comment. It pronounced the discovery by the penny-ailiners that Manning was occupying his time principally in writing poetry to be good news for the music publishers, “who were beginning to want a new sensation after the decline of the Merry Sunshine which the poet has ‘loved not wisely,’ but rather ‘too well.’” *Punch* was sure that a new song by Manning would be a great hit and would replace the present-day favorites of boarding-school classes. There was no doubt that “we shall soon have the Bermondsey Ballads in the hands and mouth of every sentimental Miss.” And, of course, *Punch* predicted, there would be an end to all further applications by Mr. Binns for defense funds “with such valuable property as the poetical manuscript of a suspected murderer in his possession.”

*Punch* had also obviously had its fill of the tidbits about the supposed preoccupation of Mrs. Manning, the genteel ladies’ maid and failed dressmaker, with her courtroom fashions. Its columnist ended by stating his expectation “to hear in a day or so that Mrs. Manning has taken to crochet work.”