

A LIFE SENTENCE.

CHAPTER I.

“Do you find the prisoner guilty or not guilty?”

“We find the prisoner guilty, my lord.”

A curious little thrill of emotion—half sigh, half sob—ran through the crowded court. Even the most callous, the most world-hardened, of human beings cannot hear unmoved the verdict which condemns a fellow-creature to a shameful death. The spectators of Andrew Westwood's trial for the murder of Sydney Vane had expected, had predicted, the result; yet it came with the force of a shock to their excited nerves. The trial had lasted for two whole days already, and the level rays of sunshine that streamed through the west windows of the court-house showed that the afternoon of a third day was drawing to a close. The attention of the patient sitters with whom the seats were closely packed had been strained to the uttermost; the faces of many were white and weary, or flushed with excitement and fatigue. The short absence of the jurymen had only strung their nerves to a higher pitch; and the slight murmur that passed through the heavy air when the verdict was made known showed the tension which had been reached.

The prisoner was well known in the locality, and so also had been his victim. This fact accounted for the crowding of the court by friends and acquaintances of the man murdered and his murderer, and for the breathless interest with which every step of the legal process had been followed. Apart from this, the case had excited much attention all over England; the papers had been filled with its details, and a good deal of discussion on the laws of circumstantial evidence had arisen during its course. Not that there could be any reasonable doubt as to