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THE NEW MAGDALEN.

BY WILKIE COLLINS.

SECOND SCENE—Mablethorpe House.

EPILOGUE.—(Concluded.)

III.

From Mr. HORACE HOLMCROFT to Miss GRACE ROSEBERRY.

"MY DEAR MISS ROSEBERRY,—Pray excuse my long silence. I have waited for mail after mail, in the hope of being able to send you good news at last. It is useless to wait longer. My first forebodings have been realized: my painful duty compels me to write a letter which will surprise and shock you.

"Let me describe events in their order as they happened. In this way I may hope to gradually prepare your mind for what is to come.

"About three weeks after I wrote to you last, Julian Gray paid the penalty of his headlong rashness. I do not mean that he suffered any actual violence at the hands of the people among whom he had cast his lot. On the contrary, he succeeded, incredible as it may appear, in producing a favourable impression on the ruffians about him. As I understand it, they began by respecting his courage in venturing among them alone; and they ended in discovering that he was really interested in promoting their welfare. It is to the other peril, indicated in my last letter, that he has fallen a victim—the peril of disease. Not long after he began his labours in the district, fever broke out. We only heard that Julian had been struck down by the epidemic when it was too late to remove him from the lodging that he occupied in the neighbourhood. I made inquiries personally the moment the news reached us. The doctor in attendance refused to answer for his life.

"In this alarming state of things, poor Lady Janet, impulsive and unreasonable as usual, insisted on leaving Mablethorpe House and taking up her residence near her nephew.

"Finding it impossible to persuade her of the folly of removing from home and its comforts at her age, I felt it my duty to accompany her. We found accommodation (such as it was) in a river-side inn, used by ship-captains and commercial travellers. I took it on myself to provide the best medical assistance, Lady Janet's insane prejudices against doctors compelling her to leave this important part of the arrangements entirely in my hands.

"It is needless to weary you by entering into details on the subject of Julian's illness.

"The fever pursued the ordinary course, and was characterised by the usual intervals of delirium and exhaustion succeeding each other. Subsequent events, which it is, unfortunately, necessary to relate to you, leave me no choice but to dwell (as briefly as possible) on the painful subject of the delirium. In other cases, the wanderings of fever-stricken people present, I am told, a certain variety of range. In Julian's case they were limited to one topic. He talked incessantly of Mercy Merrick. His invariable petition to his medical attendants entreated them to send for her to nurse him. Day and night that one idea was in his mind, and that one name on his lips.

"The doctors naturally made inquiries as to this absent person. I was obliged (in confidence) to state the circumstance to them plainly.

"The eminent physician whom I had called in to superintend the treatment behaved admirably. Though he has risen from the lower order of the people, he has, strange to say, the instincts of a gentleman. He thoroughly understood our trying position, and felt all the importance of preventing such a person as Mercy Merrick from seizing the opportunity of intruding herself at the bedside. A soothing prescription (I have his own authority for saying it) was all that was required to meet the patient's case. The local doctor, on the other hand, a young man, (and evidently a red-hot Radical) proved to be obstinate, and, considering his position, insolent as well. 'I have nothing to do with the lady's character and with your opinion of it,' he said to me. 'I have only, to the best of my judgment, to point out to you the likeliest means of saving the patient's life. Our art is at the end of its resources. Send for Mercy Merrick, no matter who she is or what she is. There is just a chance—especially if she proves to be a sensible person and a good nurse—that he may astonish you all by recognising her. In that case only, his recovery is probable. If you persist in disregarding his entreaties, if you let the delirium go on for four and twenty hours more, he is a dead man.'

"Lady Janet was, most unluckily, present when this impudent opinion was delivered at the bedside.

"Need I tell you the sequel? Called upon to choose between the course indicated by a

physician, who is making his five thousand a year, and who is certain of the next medical baronetcy, and the advice volunteered by an obscure general practitioner at the East End of London, who is not making his five hundred a year—need I stop to inform you of her ladyship's decision? You know her; and you will only too well understand that her next proceeding was to pay a third visit to the Refuge.

"Two hours later—I give you my word of honour I am not exaggerating—Mercy Merrick was established at Julian's bedside.

"The excuse, of course, was that it was her duty not to let any private scruples of her own stand in the way, when a medical authority had declared that she might save the patient's life. You will not be surprised to hear that I withdrew from the scene. The physician followed my example—after having written his soothing prescription, and having been grossly insulted by the local practitioner's refusal to make use of it. I went back in the doctor's carriage. He spoke most feelingly and properly. Without giving any positive opinion, I could see that he had abandoned all hope of Julian's recovery. 'We are in the hands of Providence, Mr. Holmcroft'—those were his last words as he set me down at my mother's door.

"I have hardly the heart to go on. If I studied my own wishes, I should feel inclined to stop here.

"Let me at least hasten to the end. In two or three days' time I received my first intelligence of the patient and his nurse. Lady Janet informed me that he had recognised her. When I heard this, I felt prepared for what was to come. The next report announced that he was gaining strength, and the next that he was out of danger. Upon this, Lady Janet returned to Mablethorpe House. I called there a week ago—and heard that he had been removed to the seaside. I called yesterday—and received the latest information from her ladyship's own lips. My pen almost refuses to write it. Mercy Merrick has consented to marry him!

"An outrage on Society—that is how my mother and my sisters view it; that is how you will view it too. My mother has herself struck Julian's name off her invitation list. The servants have their orders if he presumes to call: 'Not at home.'

"I am unhappily only too certain that I am correct, in writing to you of this disgraceful marriage as of a settled thing. Lady Janet went the length of showing me the letters—one from Julian; the other from the woman herself. Fancy Mercy Merrick in correspondence with Lady Janet Roy!—addressing her as 'My dear Lady Janet,' and signing, 'Yours affectionately'!

"I had not the patience to read either of the letters through. Julian's tone is the tone of a Socialist; in my opinion, his bishop ought to be informed of it. As for her, she plays her part just as cleverly with her pen as she played it with her tongue. 'I cannot disguise from myself that I am wrong in yielding.'.... 'Sad forebodings fill my mind when I think of the future.'.... 'I feel as if the first contemptuous look that is cast at my husband will destroy my happiness, though it may not disturb him.'.... 'As long as I was parted from him I could control my own weakness; I could accept my hard lot. But how can I resist him, after having watched for weeks at his bedside; after having seen his first smile, and heard his first grateful words to me while I was slowly helping him back to life?'

"There is the tone which she takes through four closely written pages of nauseous humblity and clap-trap sentiment? It is enough to make one despise women. Thank God, there is the contrast at hand, to remind me of what is due to the better few among the sex. I feel that my mother and my sisters are doubly precious to me now. May I add, on the side of consolation, that I prize with hardly inferior gratitude the privilege of corresponding with you?

"Farewell, for the present. I am too rudely shaken in my most cherished convictions, I am too depressed and disheartened to write more. All good wishes go with you, dear Miss Roseberry, until we meet.

"Most truly yours,
HORACE HOLMCROFT."

IV.

Extracts from the DIARY of THE REVEREND JULIAN GRAY.

FIRST EXTRACT.

".... 'A month to-day since we were married! I have only one thing to say: I would cheerfully go through all that I have suffered, to live this one month over again. I never knew what happiness was until now. And better still, I have persuaded Mercy that it is all her doing. I have scattered her misgivings to the winds; she is obliged to submit to evidence, and to own that she can make the happiness of my life.

"We go back to London to-morrow. She regrets leaving the tranquil retirement of this remote seaside place—she dreads change. I care nothing for it. It is all one to me where I go, so long as my wife is with me."

SECOND EXTRACT.

"The first cloud has risen. I entered the room unexpectedly just now, and found her in tears.

"With considerable difficulty I persuaded her to tell me what had happened. Are there any limits to the mischief that can be done by the tongue of a foolish woman? The landlady at my lodgings is the woman in this case. Having no decided plans for the future as yet, we returned (most unfortunately, as the event has proved,) to the room in London which I inhabited in my bachelor days. They are still mine for six weeks to come, and Mercy was unwilling to let me incur the expense of taking her to an hotel. At breakfast this morning, I rashly congratulated myself (in my wife's hearing) on finding that a much smaller collection than usual of letters and cards had accumulated in my absence. Breakfast over, I was obliged to go out. Painfully sensitive, poor thing, to any change in my experience of the little world around me which it is possible to connect with the event of my marriage, Mercy questioned the landlady, in my absence, about the diminished number of my visitors and my correspondents. The woman seized the opportunity of gossiping about me and my affairs, and my wife's quick perception drew the right conclusion unerringly. My marriage has decided certain wise heads of families on discontinuing their social relations with me. The facts, unfortunately, speak for themselves. People who, in former years, habitually called upon me and invited me—or who, in the event of my absence, habitually wrote to me at this season—have abstained with a remarkable unanimity from calling, inviting, or writing now.

"It would have been sheer waste of time—to say nothing of its also implying a want of confidence in my wife—if I had attempted to set things right by disputing Mercy's conclusion. I could only satisfy her that not so much as the shadow of disappointment or mortification rested on my mind. In this way I have, to some extent, succeeded in composing my poor darling. But the wound has been inflicted, and the wound is felt. There is no disguising that result. I must face it boldly.

"Trifling as this incident is in my estimation, it has decided me on one point already. In shaping my future course, I am now resolved to act on my own convictions—in preference to taking the well-meant advice of such friends as are still left to me.

"All my little success in life has been gained in the pulpit. I am what is termed a popular preacher—but I have never, in my secret self, felt any exultation in my own notoriety, or any extraordinary respect for the means by which it has been won. In the first place, I have a very low idea of the importance of oratory as an intellectual accomplishment. There is no other art in which the conditions of success are so easy of attainment; there is no other art in the practice of which so much that is purely superficial passes itself off habitually for something that claims to be profound. Then again, how poor it is in the results which it achieves! Take my own case. How often (for example) have I thundered with all my heart and soul against the wicked extravagance of dress amongst women—against their filthy false hair, and their nauseous powders and paints! How often (to take another example) have I denounced the mercenary and material spirit of the age, the habitual corruptions and dishonesties of commerce, in high places and in low! What good have I done? I have delighted the very people whom it was my object to rebuke. 'What a charming sermon!' 'More eloquent than ever!' 'I used to dread the sermon at the other church—do you know I quite look forward to it now?' That is the effect I produce on Sunday. On Monday the women are off to the milliners to spend more money than ever—the city men are off to business to make more money than ever—while my grocer, loud in my praises in his Sunday coat, turns up his week-day sleeves and adulterates his favourite preacher's sugar as cheerfully as usual!

"I have often, in past years, felt the objections to pursuing my career, which are here indicated. They were bitterly present to my mind when I resigned my curacy, and they strongly influence me now.

"I am weary of my cheaply-won success in the pulpit. I am weary of society as I find it in my time. I felt some respect for myself, and some heart and hope in my work, among the miserable wretches in Green Anchor Fields. But I cannot, and must not, return among them: I have no right, now, to trifle with my health and my life. I must go back to my preaching, or I must leave England. Among a primitive people; away from the cities—in the far and fertile West of the great American continent—I might live happily with my wife, and do good among my neighbours; secure of providing for our wants out of the modest little income which is almost useless to me here. In the life which I thus picture to myself I see love, peace, health, and duties and occupations that are worthy of a Christian man. What prospect is before me, if I take the advice of my friends and stay here? Work of which I am weary, because I have long since ceased to respect it;

petty malice that strikes at me through my wife, and mortifies and humiliates her, turn where she may. If I had only myself to think of, I might defy the worst that malice can do. But I have Mercy to think of—Mercy, whom I love better than my own life! Women live, poor things, in the opinions of others. I have had one warning already of what my wife is likely to suffer at the hands of my 'friends'—Heaven forgive me for misusing the word! Shall I deliberately expose her to fresh mortifications?—and this for the sake of returning to a career the rewards of which I no longer prize? No! We will both be happy—we will both be free! God is merciful; Nature is kind; Love is true, in the New World as well as the Old. To the New World we will go!"

THIRD EXTRACT.

"I hardly know whether I have done right or wrong. I mentioned yesterday to Lady Janet the cold reception of me on my return to London, and the painful sense of it felt by my wife.

"My aunt looks at the matter from her own peculiar point of view, and makes light of it accordingly. 'You never did, and never will, understand society, Julian,' said her ladyship. 'These poor stupid people simply don't know what to do. They are waiting to be told by a person of distinction whether they are, or are not, to recognize your marriage. In plain English, they are waiting to be led by me. Consider it done. I will lead them.'

"I thought my aunt was joking. The event of to-day has shown me that she is terribly in earnest. Lady Janet has issued invitations for one of her grand balls at Mablethorpe House; and she has caused the report to be circulated everywhere that the object of the festival is 'to celebrate the marriage of Mr. and Mrs. Julian Gray!'

"I at first refused to be present. To my amazement, however, Mercy sides with my aunt. She reminds me of all that we both owe to Lady Janet; and she has persuaded me to alter my mind. We are to go to the ball—at my wife's express request!

"The meaning of this, as I interpret it, is that my poor love is still pursued in secret by the dread that my marriage has injured me in the general estimation. She will suffer anything, risk anything, believe anything, to be freed from that one haunting doubt. Lady Janet predicts a social triumph; and my wife's despair—not my wife's conviction—accepts the prophecy. As for me, I am prepared for the result. It will end in our going to the New World, and trying society in its infancy, among the forests and the plains. I shall quietly prepare for our departure, and own what I have done at the right time—that is to say, when the ball is over."

(To be concluded in our next.)

Varieties.

Witty Aberdeen has a shopkeeper who recently took it into his head to have a holiday-shut shop, and wrote on the shutters—

"All flesh is grass, and grass is hay; We're here to-morrow, but we're gone to-day"— fishing.

A woman out West interfered with her brother's courtship, and begged him to stay at home evenings. He waited until the evening when she expected her own lover, and complied, and she says that fraternal affection is a heartless mockery.

THE PLEASURES OF CHILDHOOD.—Mr. Milliken's little boys asked him this morning to take them to the circus. Mr. Milliken refused kindly but firmly, but said if they were good he would take them around this afternoon to see their grandmother's grave.

A professor, in explaining to a class of young ladies the theory according to which the body is entirely renewed every seven years, said, "Thus, Miss B., in seven years you will in reality be no longer Miss B." "I really hope I shan't," demurely responded the girl, casting down her eyes.

A Sacramento lawyer remarked to the court, "It is my candid opinion, Judge, you are an old fool." The Judge allowed his mildly-beaming eye to fall upon the lawyer a brief moment, then, in a voice husky with suppressed tobacco juice and emotion, said: "It is my candid opinion that you are fined \$100."

Handel was a believer in the Darwin theory long before that writer had written. It is clear by the following fact: Handel happened once to be presiding over the oratorio of "Israel in Egypt." The first tenor began, entirely out of time, "I am an Israelite." Handel, who was at the organ, turned round, and glaring down upon the offender, in a voice of "ten thousand thunders" exclaimed, "You are you great beast."

If the French can be more complimentary than any other people, they can be also very much the reverse. A Paris Journal is our authority for saying that, recently, at the Closerie des Lilas, a lady in very bad humour said, savagely, to a gentleman, who had fixed his eyes on her for some time, "Why have you gaped at me for an hour, fool?" "Ah, madame," replied the gentleman, bowing very respectfully, "if you only knew how much you resemble my poor monkey which I loved so much—"

The sequel is left to conjecture.