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THE NEW MAGDALEN.

BY WILKIE COLLINS.

SECOND SCENE.—*Mablethorpe House.*

CHAPTER XXIII.—(Continued.)

Grace returned slowly to the chair that she had left. She stood by it, with one hand grasping the top rail, and with her eyes fixed in mocking scrutiny on Lady Janet's face.

"At last your ladyship shows your hand," she said. "Hush-money!"

"You will send me back to my papers," rejoined Lady Janet. "How obstinate you are!"

Grace's hand closed tighter and tighter round the rail of the chair. Without witnesses, without means, without so much as a refuge—thanks to her own coarse cruelties of language and conduct—in the sympathies of others, the sense of her isolation and her helplessness was almost maddening at that final moment. A woman of finer sensibilities would have instantly left the room. Grace's impenetrably hard and narrow mind impelled her to meet the emergency in a very different way. A last base vengeance, to which Lady Janet had voluntarily exposed herself, was still within her reach. "For the present," she thought, "there is but one way of being even with your ladyship. I can cost you as much as possible."

"Pray make some allowances for me," she said. "I am not obstinate—I am only a little awkward at matching the audacity of a lady of high rank. I shall improve with practice. My own language is, as I am painfully aware, only plain English. Permit me to withdraw it, and to substitute yours. What advance is your ladyship (delicately) prepared to offer me?"

Lady Janet opened a drawer, and took out her cheque-book.

The moment of relief had come at last! The only question now left to discuss was evidently the question of amount. Lady Janet considered a little. The question of amount was (to her mind) in some sort a question of conscience as well. Her love for Mercy and her loathing for Grace, her horror of seeing her darling degraded and her affection profaned by a public exposure, had hurried her—there was no disputing it—into treating an injured woman harshly. Hatred as Grace Roseberry might be, her father had left her, in his last moments, with Lady Janet's full concurrence, to Lady Janet's care. But for Mercy, she would have been received at Mablethorpe House as Lady Janet's companion, with a salary of one hundred pounds a year. On the other hand, how long (with such a temper as she had revealed) would Grace have remained in the service of her protectress? She would, probably, have been dismissed in a few weeks, with a year's salary to compensate her, and with a recommendation to some suitable employment. What would be a fair compensation now? Lady Janet decided that five years' salary immediately given, and future assistance rendered if necessary, would represent a fit remembrance of the late Colonel Roseberry's claims, and a liberal pecuniary acknowledgment of any harshness of treatment which Grace might have sustained at her hands. At the same time, and for the further satisfying of her own conscience, she determined to discover the sum which Grace herself would consider sufficient, by the simple process of making Grace herself propose the terms.

"It is impossible for me to make you an offer," she said, "for this reason,—your need of money will depend greatly on your future plans. I am quite ignorant of your future plans."

"Perhaps your ladyship will kindly advise me?" said Grace satirically.

"I cannot altogether undertake to advise you," Lady Janet replied. "I can only suppose that you will scarcely remain in England, where you have no friends. Whether you go to law with me or not, you will surely feel the necessity of communicating personally with your friends in Canada. Am I right?"

Grace was quite quick enough to understand this as it was meant. Properly interpreted the answer signified—"If you take your compensation in money, it is understood, as part of the bargain, that you don't remain in England to annoy me."

"Your ladyship is quite right," she said. "I shall certainly not remain in England. I shall consult my friends—and" she added mentally, "go to law with you afterwards, if I possibly can, with your own money!"

"You will return to Canada," Lady Janet proceeded; "and your prospects there will be, probably, a little uncertain at first. Taking this into consideration, at what amount do you estimate, in your own mind, the pecuniary assistance which you will require?"

"May I count on your ladyship's kindness to correct me if my own ignorant calculations turn out to be wrong?" Grace asked innocently.

Here again the words, properly interpreted,

had a special signification of their own: "It is stipulated, on my part, that I put myself up to auction, and that my estimate shall be regulated by your ladyship's highest bid." Thoroughly understanding the stipulation, Lady Janet bowed, and waited gravely.

Gravely, on her side, Grace began.

"I am afraid I should want more than a hundred pounds," she said.

Lady Janet made her first bid. "I think so too."

"More, perhaps, than two hundred?"

Lady Janet made her second bid. "Probably."

"More than three hundred? Four hundred? Five hundred?"

Lady Janet made her highest bid. "Five hundred pounds will do," she said.

In spite of herself, Grace's rising colour betrayed her ungovernable excitement. From her earliest childhood she had been accustomed to see shillings and sixpences carefully considered before they were parted with. She had never known her father to possess so much as five golden sovereigns at his own disposal (unencumbered by debt) in all her experience of him. The atmosphere in which she had lived and breathed was the all-stifling atmosphere of genteel poverty. There was something horrible in the greedy eagerness of her eyes as they watched Lady Janet, to see if she was really sufficiently in earnest to give away five hundred pounds sterling with a stroke of her pen.

Lady Janet wrote the cheque in a few seconds, and pushed it across the table.

Grace's hungry eyes devoured the golden line, "Pay to myself or bearer five hundred pounds," and verified the signature beneath, "Janet Roy." Once sure of the money whenever she chose to take it, the native meanness of her nature instantly asserted itself. She tossed her head, and let the cheque lie on the table, with an overacted appearance of caring very little whether she took it or not.

"Your ladyship is not to suppose that I snap at your cheque," she said.

Lady Janet leaned back in her chair and closed her eyes. The very sight of Grace Roseberry sickened her. Her mind filled suddenly with the image of Mercy. She longed to feast her eyes again on that grand beauty, to fill her ears again with the melody of that gentle voice.

"I require time to consider—in justice to my own self-respect," Grace went on.

Lady Janet wearily made a sign, granting time to consider.

"Your ladyship's boudoir is, I presume, still at my disposal?"

Lady Janet silently granted the boudoir.

"And your ladyship's servants are at my orders, if I have occasion to employ them?"

Lady Janet suddenly opened her eyes. "The whole household is at your orders!" she cried furiously. "Leave me!"

Grace was far from being offended. If anything, she was gratified—there was a certain triumph in having stung Lady Janet into an open outbreak of temper. She insisted forthwith on another condition.

"In the event of my deciding to receive the cheque," she said, "I cannot, consistently with my own self-respect, permit it to be delivered to me otherwise than enclosed. Your ladyship will (if necessary) be so kind as to enclose it. Good evening."

She sauntered to the door; looking from side to side, with an air of supreme disparagement, at the priceless treasures of art which adorned the walls. Her eyes dropped superciliously on the carpet (the design of a famous French painter) as if her feet condescended in walking over it. The audacity with which she had entered the room had been marked enough; it shrank to nothing before the infinitely superior proportions of the insolence with which she left it.

The instant the door was closed Lady Janet rose from her chair. Reckless of the wintry chill in the outer air, she threw open one of the windows. "Pah!" she exclaimed, with a shudder of disgust, "the very air of the room is tainted by her!"

She returned to her chair. Her mood changed, as she sat down again—her heart was with Mercy once more. "Oh, my love!" she murmured, "how low I have stooped, how miserably I have degraded myself—and all for You!" The bitterness of the retrospect was unendurable. The inbred force of the woman's nature took refuge from it in an outburst of defiance and despair. "Whatever she has done the wretch deserves it! Not a living creature in this house shall say she has deceived me. She has not deceived me—she loves me! What do I care whether she has given me her true name or not? She has given me her true heart. What right had Julian to play upon her feelings and pry into her secrets? My poor tempted, tortured child! I won't hear her confession. Not another word shall she say to any living creature. I am mistress—I will forbid it at once!" She snatched a piece of note-paper from the case; hesitated; and threw it from her on the table. "Why not send for my darling?" she thought. "Why write?" She hesitated once more, and resigned the idea. "No! I can't trust myself! I haven't seen her yet!"

She took up the sheet of paper again, and wrote her second message to Mercy. This

time the note began fondly with a familiar form of address.

"MY DEAR CHILD,—I have had time to think, and compose myself a little, since I last wrote, requesting you to defer the explanation which you had promised me. I already understand (and appreciate) the motives which led you to interfere as you did downstairs, and I now ask you to entirely abandon the explanation. It will, I am sure, be painful to you (for reasons of your own into which I have no wish to inquire) to produce the person of whom you spoke, and as you know already, I myself am weary of hearing of her. Besides, there is really no need now for you to explain anything. The stranger whose visits here have caused us so much pain and anxiety will trouble us no more. She leaves England of her own free will, after a conversation with me which has perfectly succeeded in composing and satisfying her. Not a word more, my dear, to me, or to my nephew, or to any other human creature, of what has happened in the dining-room to day. When we next meet, let it be understood between us that the past is henceforth and for ever buried in oblivion. This is not only the earnest request—it is, if necessary, the positive command of your mother and friend,

"JANET ROY.

"P.S.—I shall find opportunities (before you leave your room) of speaking separately to my nephew and to Horace Holmcroft. You need dread no embarrassment when you next meet them. I will not ask you to answer my note in writing. Say yes, to the maid who will bring it to you, and I shall know we understand each other."

After sealing the envelope which inclosed these lines, Lady Janet addressed it, as usual, to "Miss Grace Roseberry." She was just rising to ring the bell, when the maid appeared with a message from the boudoir. The woman's tones and looks showed plainly that she had been made the object of Grace's insolent self-assertion as well as her mistress's.

"If you please, my lady, the person downstairs wishes—"

Lady Janet, frowning contemptuously, interrupted the message at the outset. "I know what the person downstairs wishes. She has sent you for a letter from me?"

"Yes, my lady."

"Anything more?"

"She has sent one of the men-servants, my lady, for a cab. If your ladyship had only heard how she spoke to him—"

Lady Janet intimated by a sign that she would rather not hear. She at once inclosed the cheque in an undirected envelope.

"Take that to her," she said, "and then come back to me."

Dismissing Grace Roseberry with all further consideration, Lady Janet sat, from her letter to Mercy in her hand, reflecting on her position, and on the efforts which it might still demand from her. Pursuing this train of thought, it now occurred to her that accident might bring Horace and Mercy together at any moment, and that, in Horace's present frame of mind, he would certainly insist on the very explanation which it was the foremost interest of her life to suppress. The dread of this disaster was in full possession of her when the maid returned.

"Where is Mr. Holmcroft?" she asked, the moment the woman entered the room.

"I saw him open the library door, my lady, just now, on my way upstairs."

"Was he alone?"

"Yes, my lady."

"Go to him, and say I want to see him here immediately."

The maid withdrew on her second errand. Lady Janet rose restlessly, and closed the open window. Her impatient desire to make sure of Horace so completely mastered her that she left her room, and met the woman in the corridor on her return. Receiving Horace's message of excuse, she instantly sent back the peremptory rejoinder, "Say that he will oblige me to go to him, if he persists in refusing to come to me. And, stay!" she added, remembering the undelivered letter. "Send Miss Roseberry's maid here; I want her."

Left alone again, Lady Janet paced once or twice up and down the corridor—then grew suddenly weary of the sight of it, and went back to her room. The two maids returned together. One of them, having announced Horace's submission, was dismissed. The other was sent to Mercy's room, with Lady Janet's letter. In a minute or two, the messenger appeared again, with the news that she had found the room empty.

"Have you any idea where Miss Roseberry is?"

"No, my lady."

Lady Janet reflected for a moment. If Horace presented himself without any needless delay the plain inference would be that she had succeeded in separating him from Mercy. If his appearance was suspiciously deferred, she decided on personally searching for Mercy in the reception-rooms on the lower floor of the house.

"What have you done with the letter?" she asked.

"I left it on Miss Roseberry's table, my lady."

"Very well. Keep within hearing of the bell, in case I want you again."

Another minute brought Lady Janet's suspense to an end. She heard the welcome sound of a knock at her door from a man's hand. Horace hurriedly entered the room.

"What is it you want with me, Lady Janet?" he inquired, not very graciously.

"Sit down, Horace, and you shall hear."

Horace did not accept the invitation. "Excuse me," he said, "if I mention that I am rather in a hurry."

"Why are you in a hurry?"

"I have reasons for wishing to see Grace as soon as possible."

"And I have reasons," Lady Janet rejoined, "for wishing to speak to you about Grace before you see her; serious reasons. Sit down."

Horace started. "Serious reasons?" he repeated. "You surprise me."

"I shall surprise you still more before I have done."

Their eyes met, as Lady Janet answered in those terms. Horace observed signs of agitation in her, which he now noticed for the first time. His face darkened with an expression of sullen distrust—and he took the chair in silence.

(To be continued.)

Varieties.

An editor says his ancestors have been in the habit of living a hundred years. His opponent responds by saying that that was before the introduction of capital punishment.

Uncommonly intelligent are the coroners' juries in Mississippi. Twelve men in Warren County, in that State, returned a verdict that "The deceased died by the will of God or some other disease unknown to the jury."

The *Merrimac Journal* thinks it is very amusing to hear some of the heavy men, whose fortunes were left them by fathers or mothers-in-law, state that there is no tact or talent in the young men of our day.

An advertisement in a New York paper wants "a boy to open oysters about fifteen years old." That situation ought to be filled by a boy with a strong stomach and a terrific cold in his head—for those oysters must be extremely fragrant now.

A malicious libel is going the rounds that vegetation is so scarce at Cape Cod that two mullen stalks and a whortleberry bush are called a grove. The truth is that unless there are three whortleberry bushes they never think of saying grove.

WELSH VERDICT.—A coroners' jury in Wales lately held an inquest on the body of a convict who died in the county jail, and rendered a verdict that "the way of the transgressor is hard, and the deceased came to his death by natural causes."

A letter held for postage in the Wansville Post Office bore the following inscription:—

"Charles Augustus, the web-footed scrub,
To whom this letter must go,
Is chopping cord-wood for his grub
In Silver City, Idaho."

Strangers visiting Augusta, Me., while the snow is in the streets, are particularly cautioned not to kick any old hats they may notice in their path, as several citizens have had their heads seriously bruised in this way before they were dug out.—*N. Y. World.*

In Missouri, when a man kills another on Sunday they prosecute him under the law against desecrating the Sabbath by shooting at a mark, and have him fined \$5 and costs. It's the only sort of case that can be made out against murderers as a general rule.—*Chicago Post.*

A friend of ours, whenever he wishes to remember anything particularly in the morning, always turns a photograph face to the wall before retiring, and usually spends the greater part of the next day pondering over the problem what the mischief it was he wanted to remember.

Two Detroit women who have had a quarrel kept up hostilities through two parrots. One taught her Polly to say "you thief" whenever the enemy appeared in sight; the other's feathered ally screamed back, "You dye your hair." The power of the law had to be invoked, and both parrots were "injuncted."

The young man with presence of mind resides in Detroit. Just as he was lifting his hat to a couple of young ladies on Woodward Avenue a boy ran a sled against his legs, and the fashionable young man turned half a dozen pigeon-wings and came down on all fours. Picking up his hat without so much as a frown, he remarked to the ladies, "I am always subject to these dizzy spells in winter."

A Trojan is reported by a journal of his native city as being victimized at a Boston hotel. The unfortunate man, like the Hoosier, who ate nothing but oysters all the time he was in Baltimore, was determined to lose none of the delicacies of the season, and boldly called for "chicken ou shell," and asked the waiter to produce the viand, which he did in the shape of eggs. The Trojan was nonplussed. Upon inquiring what it meant, the waiter replied that it was a bad time of year for fresh eggs. They advertised them as chickens that there might be no mistake.

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