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THE NEW MAGDALEN.

BY WILKIE COLLINS.

FIRST SCENE.—*The Cottage on the Frontier.*

CHAPTER III.—(Continued.)

As the canvas screen fell over him, the sharp report of the rifle-firing was suddenly and grandly dominated by the roar of cannon. The instant after, a shell exploded in the garden outside, within a few yards of the window.

Grace sank on her knees with a shriek of terror. Mercy—without losing her self-possession—advanced to the window, and looked out.

"The moon has risen," she said. "The Germans are shelling the village."

Grace rose, and ran to her for protection. "Take me away!" she cried. "We shall be killed if we stay here." She stopped, looking in astonishment at the tall black figure of the nurse, standing immovably by the window. "Are you made of iron?" she exclaimed. "Will nothing frighten you?"

Mercy smiled sadly. "Why should I be afraid of losing my life?" she answered. "I have nothing worth living for."

The roar of the cannon shook the cottage for the second time. A second shell exploded in the courtyard, on the opposite side of the building.

Bewildered by the noise, panic-stricken at the danger from the shells threatened the cottage more and more nearly, Grace threw her arms round the nurse, and clung, in the abject familiarity of terror, to the woman whose hand she had shrunk from touching, not five minutes since. "Where is it safest?" she cried. "Where can I hide myself?"

"How can I tell where the next shell will fall?" Mercy answered quietly.

The steady composure of the one woman seemed to madden the other. Releasing the nurse, Grace looked wildly round for a way of escape from the cottage. Making first for the kitchen, she was driven back by the clamour and confusion attending the removal of those among the wounded who were strong enough to be placed in the waggon. A second look round showed her the door leading into the yard. She rushed to it, with a cry of relief. She had just laid her hand on the lock when the third report of cannon burst over the place.

Starting back a step, Grace lifted her hands mechanically to her ears. At the same moment, the third shell burst through the roof of the cottage, and exploded in the room, just inside the door. Mercy sprang forward, unhurt, from her place at the window. The burning fragments of the shell were already firing the dry wooden floor, and in the midst of them, dimly seen through the smoke, lay the insensible body of her companion in the room. Even at that dreadful moment the nurse's presence of mind did not fail her. Hurrying back to the place that she had just left, near which she had already noticed the miller's empty sacks lying in a heap, she seized two of them, and, throwing them on the floor, trampled out the fire. That done, she knelt by the senseless woman, and lifted her head.

Was she wounded? or dead?

Mercy raised one helpless hand, and laid her fingers on the wrist. While she was still vainly trying to feel for the beating of the pulse, Surgeon Surville (alarmed for the ladies) hurried in to inquire if any harm had been done.

Mercy called to him to approach. "I am afraid the shell has struck her," she said, yielding her place to him. "See if she is badly hurt?"

The surgeon's anxiety for his charming patient expressed itself briefly in an oath, with a prodigious emphasis laid on one of the letters in it—the letter R.

"Take off her cloak," he cried, raising his hand to her neck. "Poor angel! She has turned in falling; the string is twisted round her throat."

Mercy removed the cloak. It dropped on the floor, as the surgeon lifted Grace in his arms.

"Get a candle," he said impatiently; "they will give you one in the kitchen." He tried to feel the pulse; his hand trembled, the noise and confusion in the kitchen bewildered him. "Just heaven!" he exclaimed, "my emotions overpower me!"

Mercy approached him with the candle. The light disclosed the frightful injury which a fragment of the shell had inflicted on the Englishwoman's head. Surgeon Surville's manner altered on the instant. The expression of anxiety left his face; its professional composure covered it suddenly like a mask. What was the object of his admiration now? An inert burden in his arms—nothing more. The change in his face was not lost on Mercy. Her large grey eyes watched him attentively. "Is the lady seriously wounded?" she asked.

"Don't trouble yourself to hold the light

any longer," was the cool reply. "It's all over—I can do nothing for her."

"Dead?"

Surgeon Surville nodded, and shook his fist in the direction of the outposts. "Accursed Germans!" he cried, and looked down at the dead face on his arm, and shrugged his shoulders resignedly. "The fortunes of war!" he said, as he lifted the body and placed it on the bed in one corner of the room. "Next time, nurse, it may be you or me. Who knows? Bah! the problem of human destiny disgusts me." He turned from the bed, and illustrated his disgust by spitting on the fragments of the exploded shell. "We must leave her there," he resumed. "She was once a charming person—she is nothing now. Come away, Miss Mercy, before it is too late."

He offered his arm to the nurse; the creaking of the baggage-wagon, starting on its journey, was heard outside, and the shrill roll of the drums was renewed in the distance. The retreat had begun.

Mercy drew aside the canvas, and saw the badly-wounded men left helpless at the mercy of the enemy, on their straw beds. She refused the offer of Monsieur Surville's arm.

"I have already told you that I shall stay here," she answered.

Monsieur Surville lifted his hands in polite remonstrance. Mercy held back the curtain, and pointed to the cottage door.

"Go," she said. "My mind is made up."

Even at that final moment the Frenchman asserted himself. He made his exit with unimpaired grace and dignity. "Madam," he said, "you are sublime!" With that parting compliment the man of gallantry—true to the last to the admiration of the sex—bowed, with his hand on his heart, and left the cottage.

Mercy dropped the canvas over the doorway. She was alone with the dead woman.

The last tramp of footsteps, the last rumbling of the waggon-wheels died away in the distance. No renewal of firing from the position occupied by the enemy disturbed the silence that followed. The Germans knew that the French were in retreat. A few minutes more and they would take possession of the abandoned village; the tumult of their approach would become audible at the cottage. In the meantime the stillness was terrible. Even the wounded wretches who were left in the kitchen waited their fate in silence.

Alone in the room, Mercy's first look was directed to the bed.

The two women had met in the confusion of the first skirmish at the close of twilight. Separated, on their arrival at the cottage, by the duties required of the nurse, they had only met again in the captain's room. The acquaintance between them had been a short one; and it had given no promise of ripening into friendship. But the fatal accident had roused Mercy's interest in the stranger. She took the candle, and approached the corpse of the woman who had been literally killed at her side.

She stood by the bed, looking down in the silence of the night at the stillness of the dead face.

It was a striking face—once seen (in life or in death) not to be forgotten afterwards. The forehead was unusually low and broad; the eyes unusually far apart; the mouth and chin remarkably small. With tender hands Mercy smoothed the dishevelled hair and arranged the crumpled dress. "Not five minutes since," she thought to herself, "I was longing to change place with you!" She turned from the bed with a sigh. "I wish I could change places now!"

The silence began to oppress her. She walked slowly to the other end of the room.

The cloak on the floor—her own cloak, which she had lent to Miss Roseberry—attracted her attention as she passed it. She picked it up and brushed the dust from it, and laid it across a chair. This done, she put the light back on the table, and going to the window, listened for the first sounds of the German advance. The faint passage of the wind through some trees near at hand was the only sound that caught her ears. She turned from the window, and seated herself at the table, thinking. Was there any duty still left undone that Christian charity owed to the dead? Was there any further service that pressed for performance in the interval before the Germans appeared?

Mercy recalled the conversation that had passed between her ill-fated companion and herself. Miss Roseberry had spoken of her object in returning to England. She had mentioned a lady—a connection by marriage, to whom she was personally a stranger—who was waiting to receive her. Some one capable of stating how the poor creature had met with her death ought to write to her only friend. Who was to do it? There was nobody to do it but the one witness of the catastrophe now left in the cottage—Mercy herself.

She lifted the cloak from the chair on which she had placed it, and took from the pocket the leather letter-case which Grace had shown to her. The only way of discovering the address to write to in England was to open the case and examine the papers inside. Mercy opened the case—and stopped, feeling a strange reluctance to carry the investigation any further.

A moment's consideration satisfied her that her scruples were misplaced. If she respected the case as inviolable, the Germans would certainly not hesitate to examine it, and the Germans would hardly trouble themselves to write to England. Which were the fittest eyes to inspect the papers of the deceased lady—the eyes of men and foreigners, or the eyes of her own countrywoman? Mercy's hesitation left her. She emptied the contents of the case on the table.

That trifling action decided the whole future course of her life.

CHAPTER IV.

THE TEMPTATION.

SOME letters, tied together with a ribbon, attracted Mercy's attention first. The ink in which the addresses were written had faded with age. The letters, directed alternately to Colonel Roseberry and to the Honourable Mrs. Roseberry, contained a correspondence between the husband and wife at a time when the Colonel's military duties had obliged him to be absent from home. Mercy tied the letters up again, and passed on to the papers that lay next in order under her hand.

These consisted of a few leaves pinned together, and headed (in a woman's handwriting), "My Journal at Rome." A brief examination showed that the journal had been written by Miss Roseberry, and that it was mainly devoted to a record of the last days of her father's life.

After replacing the journal and the correspondence in the case the one paper left on the table was a letter. The envelope—which was unsealed—bore this address: "Lady Janet Roy, Mablethorpe House, Kensington, London." Mercy took the enclosure from the open envelope. The first lines she read informed her that she had found the Colonel's letter of introduction, presenting his daughter to her protectress on her arrival in England.

Mercy read the letter through. It was described by the writer as the last effort of a dying man. Colonel Roseberry wrote affectionately of his daughter's merits, and regretfully of her neglected education—attributing the latter to the pecuniary losses which had forced him to emigrate to Canada in the character of a poor man. fervent expressions of gratitude followed, addressed to Lady Janet. "I owe it to you," the letter concluded, "that I am dying with my mind at ease about the future of my darling girl. To your generous protection I commit the one treasure I have left to me on earth. Through your long lifetime you have nobly used your high rank and your great fortune as a means of doing good. I believe it will not be counted among the least of your virtues hereafter, that you comforted the last hours of an old soldier by opening your heart and your home to his friendless child."

So the letter ended. Mercy laid it down with a heavy heart. What a chance the poor girl had lost! A woman of rank and fortune waiting to receive her—a woman so merciful and so generous that the father's mind had been easy about the daughter on his death-bed—and there the daughter lay, beyond the reach of Lady Janet's kindness, beyond the need of Lady Janet's help!

The French captain's writing materials were left on the table. Mercy turned the letter over so that she might write the news of Miss Roseberry's death on the blank page at the end. She was still considering what expressions she should use, when the sound of complaining voices from the next room caught her ear. The wounded men left behind were moaning for help—the deserted soldiers were losing their fortitude at last.

She entered the kitchen. A cry of delight welcomed her appearance—the mere sight of her composed the men. From one straw bed to another she passed with comforting words that gave them hope, with skilled and tender hands that soothed their pain. They kissed the hem of her black dress, they called her their guardian angel, as the beautiful creature moved among them, and bent over their hard pillows her gentle compassionate face. "I will be with you when the Germans come," she said, as she left them to return to her unwritten letter. "Courage, my poor fellows! you are not deserted by your nurse."

"Courage, madame!" the men replied; "and God bless you!"

If the firing had been resumed at the moment—if a shell had struck her dead in the act of succouring the afflicted, what Christian judgment would have hesitated to declare that there was a place for this woman in Heaven? But, if the war ended and left her still living, where was the place for her on earth? Where were her prospects? Where was her home?

She returned to the letter. Instead, however, of seating herself to write, she stood by the table, absently looking down at the morsel of paper.

A strange fancy had sprung to life in her mind on re-entering the room; she herself smiled faintly at the extravagance of it. What if she were to ask Lady Janet Roy to let her supply Miss Roseberry's place? She had met with Miss Roseberry under critical circumstances; and she had done for her all that one woman could do to help another. There was

in this circumstance some little claim to notice, perhaps, if Lady Janet had no other companion and reader in view. Suppose she ventured to plead her own cause—what would the noble and merciful lady do? She would write back, and say, "Send me references as to your character, and I will see what can be done." Her character! Her references! Mercy laughed bitterly, and sat down to write in the fewest words all that was needed from her—a plain statement of the facts.

No! Not a line could she put on the paper. That fancy of hers was not to be dismissed at will. Her mind was perversely busy now, with an imaginative picture of the beauty of Mablethorpe House and the comfort and elegance of the life that was led there. Once more she thought of the chance which Miss Roseberry had lost. Unhappy creature! what a home would have been open to her if the shell had only fallen on the side of the window instead of on the side of the yard!

Mercy pushed the letter away from her, and walked impatiently to and fro in the room.

The perversity in her thoughts was not to be mastered in that way. Her mind only abandoned one useless train of reflection to occupy itself with another. She was now looking by anticipation at her own future. What were her prospects (if she lived through it) when the war was over? The experience of the past delicately with pitiless fidelity the dreary scene. Go where she might, do what she might, it would end always in the same way. Curiosity and admiration excited by her beauty; inquiries made about her; the story of the past discovered; Society charitably sorry for her; Society generously subscribing for her; and still, through all the years of her life, the same result in the end—the shadow of the old disgrace surrounding her as with a pestilence; isolating her among other women; branding her, even when she had earned her pardon in the sight of God, with the mark of an indelible disgrace in the sight of man; there was the prospect! And she was only five-and-twenty last birthday, she was in the prime of her health and her strength; she might live, in the course of nature, fifty years more!

She stopped again at the bedside; she looked again at the face of the corpse.

To what end had the shell struck the woman who had some hope in her life and spared the woman who had none? The words she had herself spoken to Grace Roseberry came back to her as she thought of it. "If I only had your chance! If I only had your reputation and your prospects!" And there was the chance wasted! there were the enviable prospects thrown away! It was almost maddening to contemplate that result, feeling her own position as she felt it. In the bitter mockery of despair, she bent over the lifeless figure, and spoke to it as if it had ears to hear her. "Oh!" she said, longingly, "if you could be Mercy Merrick, and if I could be Grace Roseberry, now!"

The instant the words passed her lips, she started into an erect position. She stood by the bed, with her eyes staring wildly into empty space; with her brain in a flame; with her heart beating as if it would stifle her. "If you could be Mercy Merrick and if I could be Grace Roseberry, now!" In one breathless moment the thought assumed a new development in her mind. In one breathless moment the conviction struck her like an electric shock. *She might be Grace Roseberry if she died!* There was absolutely nothing to stop her from presenting herself to Lady Janet Roy under Grace's name and in Grace's place!

What were the risks? Where was the weak point in the scheme?

Grace had said it herself in so many words—she and Lady Janet had never seen each other. Her friends were in Canada; her relations in England were dead. Mercy knew the place in which she had lived—the place called Port Logan—as well as she had known it herself. Mercy had only to read the manuscript journal to be able to answer any questions relating to the visit to Rome and to Colonel Roseberry's death. She had no accomplished lady to personate; Grace had spoken herself—her father's letter spoke also in the plainest terms—of her neglected education. Everything, literally everything, was in the lost woman's favour. The people with whom she had been connected in the ambulance had gone, to return no more. Her own clothes were on Miss Roseberry at that moment—marked with her own name. Miss Roseberry's clothes, marked with her name, were drying, at Mercy's disposal, in the next room. The way of escape from the unendurable humiliation of her present life, lay open before her at last. What a prospect it was! A new identity, which she might own anywhere! a new name, which was beyond reproach! a new past life, into which all the world might search, and be welcome! Her colour rose, her eyes sparkled; she had never been so irresistibly beautiful as she looked at the moment when the new future disclosed itself, radiant with new hope.

She waited a minute, until she could look at her own daring project from another point of view. Where was the harm of it? What did her conscience say?

(To be continued.)