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THE NEW MAGDALEN.

BY WILKIE COLLINS.

SECOND SCENE—Mablethorpe House.

CHAPTER XXVIII.—Continued.

Lady Janet, more quickly yet, looked away at the programme of the opera-house. Still the same melancholy false pretences! still the same useless and cruel delay! Incapable of enduring the position now forced upon her, Mercy put her hand into the pocket of her apron, and drew from it Lady Janet's letter.

"Will your ladyship forgive me," she began, in faint faltering tones, "if I venture on a painful subject? I hardly dare acknowledge—" In spite of her resolution to speak out plainly, the memory of past love and past kindness prevailed with her; the next words died away on her lips. She could only hold up the letter.

Lady Janet declined to see the letter. Lady Janet suddenly became absorbed in the arrangement of her bracelets.

"I know what you daren't acknowledge, you foolish child!" she exclaimed. "You daren't acknowledge that you are tired of this dull house. My dear! I am entirely of your opinion—I am weary of my own magnificence; I long to be living in one snug little room, with one servant to wait on me. I'll tell you what we will do. We will go to Paris in the first place. My excellent Migliore, prince of couriers, shall be the only persons in attendance. He shall take a lodging for us in one of the unfashionable quarters of Paris. We will rough it, Grace (to use the slang phrase), merely for a change. We will lead what they call a 'Bohemian life.' I know plenty of writers and painters and actors in Paris—the liveliest society in the world, my dear, until one gets tired of them. We will dine at the restaurant, and go to the play, and drive about in shabby little hired carriages. And when it begins to get monotonous (which it is only too sure to do) we will spread our wings and fly to Italy, and cheat the winter in that way. There is a plan for you! Migliore is in town. I will send to him this evening, and we will start to-morrow."

Mercy made another effort.

"I entreat your ladyship to pardon me," she resumed. "I have something serious to say. I am afraid—"

"I understand! You are afraid of crossing the Channel, and you don't like to acknowledge it. Pooh! The passage barely lasts two hours; we shall shut ourselves up in a private cabin. I will send at once—the courier may be engaged. Ring the bell."

"Lady Janet, I must submit to my hard lot. I cannot hope to associate myself again with any future plans of yours—"

"What! you are afraid of our 'Bohemian life' in Paris? Observe this, Grace! If there is one thing I hate more than another, it is 'an old head on young shoulders.' I say no more. Ring the bell."

"This cannot go on, Lady Janet! No words can say how unworthy I feel of your kindness, how ashamed I am—"

"Upon my honour, my dear, I agree with you. You ought to be ashamed, at your age, of making me get up to ring the bell."

Her obstinacy was immovable; she attempted to rise from the couch. But one choice was left to Mercy. She anticipated Lady Janet, and rang the bell.

The man-servant came in. He had his little letter tray in his hand, with a card on it, and a sheet of paper beside the card, which looked like an open letter.

"You know where my courier lives when he is in London?" asked Lady Janet.

"Yes, my lady."

"Send one of the grooms to him on horseback; I am in a hurry. The courier is to come here without fail to-morrow morning—in time for the tidal train to Paris. You understand?"

"Yes, my lady."

"What have you got there? Anything for me?"

"For Miss Roseberry, my lady."

As he answered, the man handed the card and the open letter to Mercy.

"The lady is waiting in the morning-room, miss. She wished me to say she has time to spare, and she will wait for you if you are not ready yet."

Having delivered his message in those terms, he withdrew.

Mercy read the name on the card. The matron had arrived! She looked at the letter next. It appeared to be a printed circular, with some lines in pencil added on the empty page. Printed lines and written lines swam before her eyes. She felt, rather than saw, Lady Janet's attention steadily and suspiciously fixed on her. With the matron's arrival the foredoomed end of the flimsy false pretences and the cruel delays had come.

"A friend of yours, my dear?"

"Yes, Lady Janet."

"Am I acquainted with her?"

"I think not, Lady Janet."

"You appear to be agitated. Does your visitor bring bad news? Is there anything that I can do for you?"

"You can add—immeasurably add, madam—to all your past kindnesses if you will only bear with me and forgive me."

"Bear with you, and forgive you? I don't understand."

"I will try to explain. Whatever else you may think of me, Lady Janet, for God's sake don't think me ungrateful!"

Lady Janet held up her hand for silence.

"I dislike explanations," she said, sharply. "Nobody ought to know that better than you. Perhaps the lady's letter will explain for you. Why have you not looked at it yet?"

"I am in great trouble, madam, as you noticed just now—"

"Have you any objection to my knowing who your visitor is?"

"No, Lady Janet."

"Let me look at her card, then."

Mercy gave the matron's card to Lady Janet, as she had given the matron's telegram to Horace.

Lady Janet read the name on the card—considered—decided that it was a name quite unknown to her—and looked next at the address: "Western District Refuge, Milburn Road."

"A lady connected with a Refuge?" she said, speaking to herself; "and calling here by appointment—if I remember the servant's message? A strange time to choose, if she has come for a subscription!"

She paused. Her brow contracted; her face hardened. A word from her would now have brought the interview to its inevitable end, and she refused to speak the word. To the last moment she persisted in ignoring the truth! Placing the card on the couch at her side, she pointed with her long yellow-white forefinger to the printed letter lying side by side with her own letter on Mercy's lap.

"Do you mean to read it, or not?" she asked.

Mercy lifted her eyes, fast filling with tears, to Lady Janet's face.

"May I beg that your ladyship will read it for me?" she said—and placed the matron's letter in Lady Janet's hand.

It was a printed circular announcing a new development in the charitable work of the Refuge. Subscribers were informed that it had been decided to extend the shelter and the training of the institution (thus far devoted to fallen women alone) so as to include destitute and helpless children found wandering in the streets. The question of the number of children to be thus rescued and protected was left dependent, as a matter of course, on the bounty of the friends of the Refuge; the cost of the maintenance of each one child being stated at the lowest possible rate. A list of influential persons who had increased their subscriptions so as to cover the cost, and a brief statement of the progress already made with the new work completed the appeal, and brought the circular to its end.

The lines traced in pencil (in the matron's handwriting) followed on the blank page.

"Your letter tells me, my dear, that you would like—remembering your own childhood—to be employed when you return among us in saving other poor children left helpless on the world. Our circular will inform you that I am able to meet your wishes. My first errand this evening in your neighbourhood was to take charge of a poor child—a little girl—who stands sadly in need of our care. I have ventured to bring her with me, thinking she might help to reconcile you to the coming change in your life. You will find us both waiting to go back with you to the old home. I write this instead of saying it, hearing from the servant that you are not alone, and being unwilling to intrude myself, as a stranger, on the lady of the house."

Lady Janet read the pencilled lines, as she had read the printed sentences, aloud. Without a word of comment, she laid the letter where she had laid the card; and, rising from her seat, stood for a moment in stern silence, looking at Mercy. The sudden change in her which the letter had produced—quietly as it had taken place—was terrible to see. On the frowning brow, in the flashing eyes, on the hardened lips, outraged love and outraged pride looked down on the lost woman, and said, as if in words, You have roused us at last.

"If that letter means anything," she said, "it means you are about to leave my house. There can be but one reason for your taking such a step as that."

"It is the only atonement I can make, madam—"

"I see another letter on your lap. Is it my letter?"

"Yes."

"Have you read it?"

"I have read it."

"Have you seen Horace Holmercroft?"

"Yes."

"Have you told Horace Holmercroft—"

"Oh, Lady Janet—"

"Don't interrupt me. Have you told Horace what my letter positively forbade you to communicate, either to him or to any living

creature? I want no protestations and excuses. Answer me instantly; and answer in one word—yes, or no."

Not even that haughty language, not even those pitiless tones, could extinguish in Mercy's heart the sacred memories of past kindness and past love. She fell on her knees—her outstretched hands touched Lady Janet's dress. Lady Janet sharply drew her dress away, and sternly repeated her last words.

"Yes? or No?"

"Yes."

She had owned it at last! To this end, Lady Janet had submitted to Grace Roseberry; had offended Horace Holmercroft; had stooped for the first time in her life to concealments and compromises that degraded her. After all that she had sacrificed and suffered—there Mercy knelt at her feet, self-convicted of violating her commands, trampling on her feelings, deserting her house! And who was the woman who had done this? The same woman who had perpetrated the fraud, and who had persisted in the fraud, until her benefactress had descended to become her accomplice. Then, and then only, she had suddenly discovered that it was her sacred duty to tell the truth!

In proud silence the great lady met the blow that had fallen on her. In proud silence, she turned her back on her adopted daughter, and walked to the door.

Mercy made her last appeal to the kind friend whom she had offended—to the second mother whom she had loved.

"Lady Janet! Lady Janet! Don't leave me without a word. Oh, madam, try to feel for me a little! I am returning to a life of humiliation—the shadow of my old disgrace is falling on me once more. We shall never meet again. Even though I have not deserved it, let my repentance plead with you! Say you forgive me!"

Lady Janet turned round on the threshold of the door.

"I never forgive ingratitude," she said. "Go back to the Refuge."

The door opened, and closed on her. Mercy was alone again in the room.

Unforgiven by Horace, unforgiven by Lady Janet! She put her hands to her burning head—and tried to think. Oh, for the cool air of the night! Oh, for the friendly shelter of the Refuge! She could feel those sad longings in her: it was impossible to think.

She rang the bell—and shrank back the instant she had done it. Had she any right to take that liberty? She ought to have thought of it before she rang. Habit—all habit. How many hundreds of times she had rung the bell at Mablethorpe House!

The servant came in. She amazed the man—she spoke to him so timidly; she even apologized for troubling him!

"I am sorry to disturb you. Will you be so kind as to say to the lady that I am ready for her?"

"Wait to give that message," said a voice behind them, "until you hear the bell rung again."

Mercy looked round in amazement. Julian had returned to the library by the dining-room door.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE LAST TRIAL.

The servant left them together. Mercy spoke first.

"Mr. Gray!" she exclaimed, "why have you delayed my message? If you knew all, you would know that it is far from being a kindness to me to keep me in this house."

He advanced closer to her—surprised by her words, alarmed by her looks.

"Has any one been here in my absence?" he asked.

"Lady Janet has been here in my absence. I can't speak of it—my heart feels crushed—I can bear no more. Let me go!"

Briefly as she had replied, she had said enough. Julian's knowledge of Lady Janet's character told him what had happened. His face showed plainly that he was disappointed as well as distressed.

"I had hoped to have been with you when you and my aunt met, and to have prevented this," he said. "Believe me, she will atone for all that she may have harshly and hastily done, when she has had time to think. Try not to regret it, if she has made your hard sacrifice harder still. She has only raised you the higher—she has additionally ennobled you and endeared you in my estimation. Forgive me, if I own this in plain words. I cannot control myself—I feel too strongly."

At other times Mercy might have heard the coming avowal in his tones, might have discovered it in his eyes. As it was, her delicate insight was dulled, her fine perception was blunted. She held out her hand to him, feeling a vague conviction that he was kinder to her than ever—and feeling no more.

"I must thank you for the last time," she said. "As long as life is left, my gratitude will be a part of my life. Let me go. While I can still control myself, let me go!"

She tried to leave him, and ring the bell. He held her hand firmly and drew her closer to him.

"To the Refuge?" he asked.

"Yes!" she said. "Home again!"

"Don't say that!" he exclaimed. "I can't bear to hear it. Don't call the Refuge your home!"

"What else is it? Where else can I go?"

"I have come here to tell you. I said, if you remember, I had something to propose."

She felt the fervent pressure of his hand; she saw the mounting enthusiasm flashing in his eyes. Her weary mind roused itself a little. She began to tremble under the electric influence of his touch.

"Something to propose?" she repeated.

"What is there to propose?"

"Let me ask you a question on my side."

"What have you done to-day?"

"You know what I have done—it is your work," she answered humbly. "Why return to it now?"

"I return to it for the last time; I return to it with a purpose which you will soon understand. You have abandoned your marriage engagement; you have forfeited Lady Janet's love; you have ruined all your worldly prospects—you are now returning, self-devoted, to a life which you have yourself described as a life without hope. And all this you have done of your own free will—at a time when you are absolutely secure of your position in the house—for the sake of speaking the truth. Now tell me. Is a woman who can make that sacrifice a woman who will prove unworthy of the trust, if a man places in her keeping his honour and his name?"

She understood him at last. She broke away from him with a cry. She stood with her hands clasped, trembling and looking at him.

He gave her no time to think. The words poured from his lips without conscious will or conscious effort of his own.

"Mercy, from the first moment when I saw you I loved you! You are free; I may own it; I may ask you to be my wife!"

She drew back from him farther and farther, with a wild imploring gesture of her hand.

"No! no!" she cried. "Think of what you are saying! think of what you would sacrifice! It cannot, must not, be."

His face darkened with a sudden dread. His head fell on his breast. His voice sank so low that she could barely hear it.

"I had forgotten something," he said.

"You have reminded me of it."

She ventured back a little nearer to him.

"Have I offended you?"

He smiled sadly. "You have enlightened me. I had forgotten that it doesn't follow, because I love you, that you should love me in return. Say that it is so, Mercy—and I leave you."

A faint tinge of colour rose on her face—then left it again paler than ever. Her eyes looked downward timidly under the eager gaze that he fastened on her.

"How can I say so?" she answered simply. "Where is the woman in my place whose heart could resist you?"

He eagerly advanced; he held out his arms to her in breathless, speechless joy. She drew back from him once more with a look that horrified him—a look of blank despair.

"Am I fit to be your wife?" she asked. "Must I remind you of what you owe to your high position, your spotless integrity, your famous name? Think of all that you have done for me, and then think of the black ingratitude of it if I ruin you for life by consenting to our marriage—if I selfishly, cruelly, wickedly drag you down to the level of a woman like me?"

(To be continued.)

As a material for fancy dresses, tapestry for covering furniture, for lacés, embroidery, hostery, &c., the *Journal of Applied Science* says the glass tissue will probably, at some future time, occupy a prominent place. Owing to its brilliancy and the splendour of its colours, it is the most beautiful material for dressing the hair, neck, and head. In softness, the glass yarn almost approaches silk; and to the touch, it is like the finest wool or cotton. It possesses remarkable strength, and it remains unchanged in light and warmth, and is not altered by moisture or acids. Spots may readily be removed by washing. Being non-inflammable and incombustible, it is especially valuable for making dress materials for ladies. Clothes of glass fabrics are much warmer than those of cotton or wool, at the same time they are of low specific gravity. They are also adapted for veils, as they repel the dust remarkably well. The composition of the material is still a secret, and the spinning requires extraordinary dexterity and constant attention. This part of the business is said to be very trying to the sight. The cloth (which is equal to about eleven drachms avoirdupois) is sold for 2 florins 83 cts. gold. Some manufactures of glass yarn are sold at the following prices: Bedouin tassels, from 2s. to 3s.; eagle feathers, from 1s. 6d. to 3s. 6d.; ostrich feathers, from 2s. to 3s.; bouquets, 3s.; cuffs, 5s. 6d.; ladies' neckties, 2s. to 18s.; gentlemen's neckties, from 2s. to 8s. 9d.; watch chains, from 1s. to 4s.; echnions, from 2s. to 18s.; trimmings, 1s. 6d. and upwards per yard; ladies' cloths, from 6d. to 9d. per yard; ladies' hats, from 18s. 6d. to £3. The Austrian Minister of Commerce has already organized schools for glass spinning in the principal seats of glass manufacture in Bohemia.