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THE NEW MAGDALEN.

BY WILKIE COLLINS.

SECOND SCENE.—*Mablethorpe House.*

CHAPTER XXVII.—(Continued)

"I have not tried to make the worst of my trials and troubles in telling you what my life has been. I have honestly described it for what it was when I met with Miss Roseberry—a life without hope. May you never know the temptation that tried me, when the shell struck its victim in the French cottage. There she lay—dead! Her name was untainted. Her future promised me the reward which had been denied to the honest efforts of a penitent woman. My lost place in the world was offered back to me on the one condition, that I stooped to win it by a fraud. I had no prospect to look forward to; I had no friend near to advise me and to save me: the fairest years of my womanhood had been wasted in the vain struggle to recover my good name. Such was my position when the possibility of personating Miss Roseberry first forced itself on my mind. Impulsively, recklessly—wickedly, if you like—I seized the opportunity, and let you pass me through the German lines under Miss Roseberry's name. Arrived in England, having had time to reflect, I made my first and last effort to draw back before it was too late. I went to the Refuge, and stopped on the opposite side of the street, looking at it. The old hopeless life of irretrievable disgrace confronted me as I fixed my eyes on the familiar door; the horror of returning to that life was more than I could force myself to endure. An empty cab passed me at the moment. The driver held up his hand. In sheer despair I stopped him; and when he said 'Where to?'—in sheer despair again I answered, 'Mablethorpe House.'

"Of what I have suffered in secret since my own successful deception established me under Lady Janet's care I shall say nothing. Many things which must have surprised you in my conduct are made plain to you by this time. You must have noticed long since that I was not a happy woman. Now you know why.

"My confession is made; my conscience has spoken at last. You are released from your promise to me—you are free. Thank Mr. Julian Gray if I stand here, self-accused of the offence that I have committed, before the man whom I have wronged."

CHAPTER XXVIII.

SENTENCE IS PRONOUNCED ON HER.

It was done. The last tones of her voice died away in silence.

Her eyes still rested on Horace. After hearing what he had heard, could he resist that gentle pleading look? Would he forgive her? A while since, Julian had seen tears on his cheeks, and had believed that he felt for her. Why was he now silent? Was it possible that he only felt for himself?

For the last time—at the crisis of her life—Julian spoken for her. He had never loved her as he loved her at that moment; it tried even his generous nature to plead her cause with Horace against himself. But he had promised her, without reserve, all the help that her true friend could offer. Faithfully and manfully, he redeemed his promise.

"Horace!" he said.

Horace slowly looked up. Julian rose and approached him.

"She has told you to thank me, if her conscience has spoken. Thank the noble nature which answered when I called upon it! Own the priceless value of a woman who can speak the truth. Her heart-felt repentance is a joy in Heaven. Shall it not plead for her on earth? Honour her, if you are a Christian! Feel for her, if you are a man!"

He waited. Horace never answered him.

Mercy's eyes turned tearfully on Julian. His heart was the heart that felt for her! His words were the words which comforted and pardoned her! When she looked back again at Horace, it was with an effort. His last hold on her was lost. In her inmost mind a thought rose unbidden—a thought which was not to be repressed. "Can I ever have loved this man?"

She advanced a step towards him; it was not possible, even yet, to completely forget the past. She held out her hand.

He rose, on his side—without looking at her.

"Before we part for ever," she said to him, "will you take my hand as a token that you forgive me?"

He hesitated. He half lifted his hand. The next moment the generous impulse died away in him. In its place came the mean fear of what might happen if he trusted himself to the dangerous fascination of her touch. His hand dropped again at his side; he turned away quickly.

"I can't forgive her!" he said.

With that horrible confession—without even a last look at her—he left the room.

At the moment when he opened the door, Julian's contempt for him burst its way through all restraints.

"Horace," he said, "I pity you!"

As the words escaped him, he looked back at Mercy. She had turned aside from both of them—she had retired to a distant part of the library. The first bitter foretaste of what was in store for her when she faced the world again had come to her from Horace! The energy which had sustained her thus far, quailed before the dreadful prospect—doubly dreadful to a woman—of obloquy and contempt. She sank on her knees before a little couch in the darkest corner of the room. "Oh, Christ, have mercy on me!" That was her prayer—no more.

Julian followed her. He waited a little. Then, his kind hand touched her; his friendly voice fell consolingly on her ear.

"Rise, poor wounded heart! Beautiful, purified soul, God's angels rejoice over you! Take your place among the noblest of God's creatures!"

He raised her as he spoke. All her heart went out to him. She caught his hand—she pressed it to her bosom; she pressed it to her lips—then dropped it suddenly, and stood before him trembling like a frightened child.

"Forgive me!" was all she could say. "I was so lost and lonely—and you are so good to me!"

She tried to leave him. It was useless—her strength was gone; she caught at the head of the couch to support herself. He looked at her. The confession of his love was just rising to his lips—he looked again, and checked it. No; not at that moment; not when she was helpless and ashamed; not when her weakness might make her yield, only to regret it at a later time. The great heart which had spared her, and felt for her from the first, spared her and felt for her now.

He, too, left her—but not without a word at parting.

"Don't think of your future life just yet," he said, gently. "I have something to propose when rest and quiet have restored you." He opened the nearest door—the door of the dining room—and went out.

The servants engaged in completing the decoration of the dinner-table noticed, when "Mr. Julian" entered the room, that his eyes were "brighter than ever." He looked (they remarked) like a man who "expected good news." They were inclined to suspect—though he was certainly rather young for it—that her ladyship's nephew was in a fair way of preferment to the church.

Mercy seated herself on the couch.

There are limits, in the physical organization of man, to the action of pain. When suffering has reached a given point of intensity the nervous sensibility becomes incapable of feeling more. The rule of Nature, in this respect, applies not only to sufferers in the body, but to sufferers in the mind as well. Grief, rage, terror, have also their appointed limits. The moral sensibility, like the nervous sensibility, reaches its period of absolute exhaustion, and feels no more.

The capacity for suffering in Mercy had attained its term. Alone in the library, she could feel the physical relief of repose; she could vaguely recall Julian's parting words to her, and sadly wonder what they meant—and she could do no more.

An interval passed; a brief interval of perfect rest.

She recovered herself sufficiently to be able to look at her watch and to estimate the lapse of time that might yet pass before Julian returned to her as he had promised. While her mind was still languidly following this train of thought, she was disturbed by the ringing of a bell in the hall, used to summon the servant whose duties were connected with that part of the house. In leaving the library, Horace had gone out by the door which led into the hall, and had failed to close it. She plainly heard the bell—and a moment later (more plainly still) she heard Lady Janet's voice!

She started to her feet. Lady Janet's letter was still in the pocket of her apron—the letter which imperatively commanded her to abstain from making the very confession that had just passed her lips! It was near the dinner-hour; and the library was the favourite place in which the mistress of the house and her guests assembled at that time. It was no matter of doubt; it was an absolute certainty that Lady Janet had only stopped in the hall on her way into the room.

The alternative for Mercy lay between instantly leaving the library by the dining-room door—or remaining where she was, at the risk of being sooner or later compelled to own that she had deliberately discovered her benefactress. Exhausted by what she had already suffered, she stood trembling and irresolute, unable of deciding which alternative she should choose.

Lady Janet's voice, clear and resolute, penetrated into the room. She was reprimanding the servant who had answered the bell.

"Is it your duty in my house to look after the lamps?"

"Yes, my lady."

"And is it my duty to pay you your wages?"

"If you please, my lady."

"Why do I find the light in the hall dim, and the wick of that lamp smoking? I have not failed in my duty to you. Don't let me find you failing again in your duty to me."

(Never had Lady Janet's voice sounded so sternly in Mercy's ear as it sounded now. If she spoke with that tone of severity to a servant who had neglected a lamp, what had her adopted daughter to expect, when she discovered that her entreaties and her commands had been alike set at defiance?)

Having administered her reprimand, Lady Janet had not done with the servant yet. She had a question to put to him next.

"Where is Miss Roseberry?"

"In the library, my lady."

Mercy returned to the couch. She could stand no longer; she had not even resolution enough left to lift her eyes to the door.

Lady Janet came in more rapidly than usual. She advanced to the couch, and tapped Mercy playfully on the cheek with two of her fingers.

"You lazy child! Not dressed for dinner? Oh fie, fie!"

Her tone was as playfully affectionate as the action which had accompanied her words. In speechless astonishment Mercy looked up at her.

Always remarkable for the taste and splendour of her dress, Lady Janet had, on this occasion, surpassed herself. There she stood revealed in her grandest velvet, her richest jewelry, her finest lace—with no one to entertain at the dinner-table but the ordinary members of the circle at Mablethorpe House. Noticing this as strange to begin with, Mercy further observed, for the first time in her experience, that Lady Janet's eyes avoided meeting hers. The old lady took her place companionably on the couch; she ridiculed her "lazy child's" plain dress, without an ornament of any sort on it, with her best grace; she affectionately put her arm round Mercy's waist, and rearranged with her own hand the disordered locks of Mercy's hair—but the instant Mercy herself looked at her, Lady Janet's eyes discovered something supremely interesting in the familiar objects that surrounded her on the library walls.

How were these changes to be interpreted?

To what possible conclusion did they point? Julian's profound knowledge of human nature, if Julian had been present, might have found the clue to the mystery. He might have surmised (incredible as it was), that Mercy's timidity before Lady Janet was fully reciprocated by Lady Janet's timidity before Mercy. It was even so. The woman whose immovable composure had conquered Grace Roseberry's utmost insolence in the hour of her triumph—the woman who, without once flinching, had faced every other consequence of her resolution to ignore Mercy's true position in the house—quailed for the first time, when she found herself face to face with the very person for whom she had suffered and sacrificed so much. She had shrunk from the meeting with Mercy, as Mercy had shrunk from the meeting with her. The splendour of her dress meant simply that, when other excuses for delaying the meeting down stairs had all been exhausted, the excuse of a long and elaborate toilet had been tried next. Even the moments occupied in reprimanding the servant had been moments seized on as the pretext for another delay. The hasty entrance into the room, the nervous assumption of playfulness in language and manner, the evasive and wandering eyes, were all referable to the same cause. In the presence of other Lady Janet had successfully silenced the protest of her own inbred delicacy and inbred sense of honour. In the presence of Mercy, whom she loved with a mother's love—in the presence of Mercy, for whom she had stooped to deliberate concealment of the truth—all that was high and noble in the woman's nature rose in her and rebuked her. What will the daughter of my adoption, the child of my first and last experience of maternal love, think of me, now that I have made myself an accomplice in the fraud of which she is ashamed? How can I look her in the face, when I have not hesitated, out of selfish consideration for my own tranquillity, to forbid that frank avowal of the truth which her finer sense of duty had spontaneously bound her to make? Those were the torturing questions in Lady Janet's mind, while her arm was wound affectionately round Mercy's waist, while her fingers were busying themselves familiarly with the arrangement of Mercy's hair. Thence, and thence only, sprang the impulse which set her talking, with an uneasy affectation of frivolity, of any topic within the range of conversation, so long as it related to the future, and completely ignored the present and the past.

"The winter here is unendurable," Lady Janet began. "I have been thinking, Grace, about what we had better do next."

Mercy started. Lady Janet had called her "Grace." Lady Janet was still deliberately assuming to be innocent of the faintest suspicion of the truth.

"No!" resumed her ladyship, affecting to

misunderstand Mercy's movement, "you are not to go up now and dress. There is no time, and I am quite ready to excuse you. You are a fool to me, my dear. You have reached the perfection of shabbiness. Ah! I remember when I had my whims and fancies too, and when I looked well in anything I wore, just as you do. No more of that. As I was saying, I have been thinking and planning what we are to do. We really can't stay here. Cold one day, and hot the next—what a climate! As for society, what do we lose if we go away? There is no such thing as society now. Assemblies of well-dressed mobs meet at each other's houses, tear each other's clothes, tread on each other's toes. If you are particularly lucky you sit on the staircase, you get a tepid ice, and you hear rapid talk in slang phrases all round you. There is modern society. If we had a good opera it would be something to stay in London for. Look at the programme for the season on that table—promising as much as possible on paper, and performing as little as possible on the stage. The same works, sung by the same singers year after year, to the same stupid people—in short, the dullest musical evenings in Europe. Not the more I think of it, the more plainly I perceive that there is but one sensible choice before us: we must go abroad. Set that pretty head to work; choose north or south, east or west; it's all the same to me. Where shall we go?"

Mercy looked at her quickly as she put the question.

(To be continued.)

Varieties.

The literature of epigrams and epitaphs comprises some of the smartest *jeux d'esprit* written by men against women, and by wives against their masters. The German poet Besser produced the epigram on Adam's sleep:

"He laid him down and slept; and from his side—

A woman in her magic beauty rose;
Dazzled and charmed, he called that woman 'bride.'

And his first sleep became his last repose."

The following is an epitaph to be found in the church at Great Woolford, Warwickshire:

"Here old John Randall lies,
Ale was his meat,
Ale was his drink,
Ale did his heart revive,
And if he could have drank his ale,
He still had been alive."

A well-dressed Scotchman was recently taken ill in London, and though the doctor saw no cause for alarm, the patient got low-spirited, thought he was going to die, and requested the doctor to break the news to a French girl in Rome, whom he loved dearer than life; he must do it gently, for she was a tender flower, and might pine away. So all tenderly the doctor wrote, and this was the response from the loving girl:—"Dr. B., I care nothing for that Mr. D., don't want to hear from him. You will please tell him to send me no more messages. Miss P. P. S.—Kill him."

The latest instance of abstraction or bullism is related of a Cork gentleman, who, on calling on a lady, was told by the servant that her mistress was not at home. As he turned to go off, he caught a glimpse of the lady's head in a mirror through a half-opened door. An hour after he called on another friend, and found the lady there. "I have just been to your house," said he, "but had not the pleasure of seeing you." "Indeed! I'm so sorry. But I went out in great haste on business." "In such haste, I presume, that you left your head behind you, for I saw it in the glass." "Did you? It is very possible; I am so absent-minded."

The *Dunbury News* gives an account of the vicissitudes of life as experienced by a young man in that place. He went to see a young lady, previously just having been to an oyster supper. As he neared the house he saw her father standing on the steps and hailed him. "Hello, old Tatpole; zat you? Where ish my lovely gazelle? Where ish my love now dreamin'?" The father looked at the young man, thinking he wanted something, placed his hand sadly upon his shoulder, turned him around, and filled the space under his coat-tail with leather. The young man don't go there any more; he says small-pox is hereditary in the family.

A man in the dress of a workman was lately walking in the streets of Berlin with a packet in his hand, sealed and inscribed with an address, and a note that it contained one hundred thalers in treasury bills. As the bearer appeared to be at a loss, he was accosted by a passenger, who asked him what he was looking for. The simple countryman placed the packet in the inquirer's hands, and requested that he would read the address. The reply was made as with an agreeable surprise, "Why, this letter is for me! I have been expecting it for a long while!" The messenger upon this demanded ten thalers for the carriage of the packet, which was readily paid, with a liberal addition to the porter. The new possessor of the packet hastened to an obscure corner to examine his prize; but, on breaking the seal, found nothing but a few sheets of paper, on which was written "Don't!"

A bad case of depravity in horseflesh is reported by the *Paris Figaro*. The favourite horse of a certain baron fell seriously ill, and, though every care was taken of the animal, it rapidly