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THE NEW MAGDALEN.

BY WILKIE COLLINS.

SECOND SCENE—Mablethorpe House.

CHAPTER XIII.—(Continued.)

"Can the doctor do nothing?"

Lady Janet's bright eyes answered, before she replied in words, with a look of supreme contempt.

"The doctor!" she repeated disdainfully. "I brought Grace back last night in sheer despair, and I sent for the doctor this morning. He is at the head of his profession; he is said to be making ten thousand a year—and he knows no more about it than I do. I am quite serious. The great physician has just gone away with two guineas in his pocket. One guinea for advising me to keep her quiet; another guinea for telling me to trust to time. Do you wonder how he gets on at this rate? My dear boy, they all get on in the same way. The medical profession thrives on two incurable diseases in these modern days—a He-disease and a She-disease. She-disease—nervous depression; He-disease—suppressed gout. Remedies, one guinea if you go to the doctor; two guineas if the doctor goes to you. I might have bought a new bonnet," cried her ladyship, indignantly, "with the money I have given to that man! Let us change the subject. I lose my temper when I think of it. Besides, I want to know something. Why did you go abroad?"

At that plain question Julian looked unaffectedly surprised.

"I wrote to explain," he said. "Have you not received my letter?"

"Oh, I got your letter. It was long enough, in all conscience—and, long as it was, it didn't tell me the one thing I wanted to know."

"What is the one thing?"

Lady Janet's reply pointed—not palpably at first—at that second motive for Julian's journey which she had suspected Julian of concealing from her.

"I want to know," she said, "why you troubled yourself to make your inquiries on the Continent *in person*? You know where my old courier is to be found. You have yourself pronounced him to be the most intelligent and trustworthy of men. Answer me honestly—could you not have sent him in your place?"

"I might have sent him," Julian admitted—a little reluctantly.

"You might have sent the courier—and you were under an engagement to stay here as my guest. Answer me honestly once more. Why did you go away?"

Julian hesitated. Lady Janet paused for his reply, with the air of a woman who was prepared to wait (if necessary) for the rest of the afternoon.

"I had a reason of my own for going," Julian said at last.

"Yes?" rejoined Lady Janet, prepared to wait (if necessary) till the next morning.

"A reason," Julian resumed, which I would rather not mention."

"Oh!" said Lady Janet. "Another mystery—eh? And another woman at the bottom of it, no doubt? Thank you—that will do—I am sufficiently answered. No wonder—as a clergyman—that you look a little confused. There is perhaps a certain grace, under the circumstances, in looking confused. We will change the subject again. You stay here, of course, now you have come back?"

Once more the famous pulpit orator seemed to find himself in the inconceivable predicament of not knowing what to say. Once more Lady Janet looked resigned to wait—if necessary) until the middle of next week.

Julian took refuge in an answer worthy of the most commonplace man on the face of the civilized earth.

"I beg your ladyship to accept my thanks and excuses," he said.

Lady Janet's many-ringed fingers mechanically stroking the cat in her lap, began to stroke him the wrong way. Lady Janet's inexhaustible patience showed signs of failing her at last.

"Mighty civil, I am sure," she said. "Make it complete. Say Mr. Julian Gray presents his compliments to Lady Janet Roy, and regrets that a previous engagement—Julian!" exclaimed the old lady, suddenly pushing the cat off her lap, and flinging her last pretence of good temper to the winds—"Julian, I am not to be trifled with! There is but one explanation of your conduct—you are evidently avoiding my house. Is there somebody you dislike in it? Is it Me?"

Julian intimated by a gesture that his aunt's last question was absurd. (The much-injured cat elevated his back, waved his tail slowly, walked to the fire-place, and honoured the rug by taking a seat on it.)

Lady Janet persisted. "Is it Grace Roseberry?" she asked next.

Even Julian's patience began to show signs of yielding. His manner assumed a sudden decision, his voice rose a tone louder.

"You insist on knowing?" he said. "It is Miss Roseberry."

"You don't like her?" cried Lady Janet, with a sudden burst of angry surprise.

Julian broke out, on his side: "If I see any more of her," he answered, the rare colour mounting passionately in his cheeks, "I shall be the unhappiest man living. If I see any more of her, I shall be false to my old friend who is to marry her. Keep us apart. If you have any regard for my peace of mind, keep us apart."

Unutterable amazement expressed itself in his aunt's lifted hands. Ungovernable curiosity uttered itself in his aunt's next words.

"You don't mean to tell me you are in love with Grace?"

Julian sprang restlessly to his feet, and disturbed the cat at the fire-place. (The cat left the room.)

"I don't know what to tell you," he said. "I can't realize it to myself. No other woman has ever roused the feeling in me which *this* woman seems to have called to life in an instant. In the hope of forgetting her I broke my engagement here; I purposely seized the opportunity of making those inquiries abroad. Quite useless. I think of her, morning, noon, and night. I see her and hear her, at this moment, as plainly as I see and hear You. She has made *her-self* a part of *my-self*. I don't understand my life without her. My power of will seems to be gone. I said to myself this morning, 'I will write to my aunt; I won't go back to Mablethorpe House.' Here I am in Mablethorpe House, with a mean subterfuge to justify me to my own conscience. 'I owe it to my aunt to call on my aunt.' That is what I said to myself on the way here; and I was secretly hoping every step of the way that she would come into the room when I got here. I am hoping it now. And she is engaged to Horace Holmeroff—to my oldest friend, to my best friend! Am I an infernal rascal? or am I a weak fool? God knows—I don't. Keep my secret, aunt. I am heartily ashamed of myself; I used to think I was made of better stuff than this. Don't say a word to Horace. I must, and will, conquer it. Let me go."

He snatched up his hat. Lady Janet, rising with the activity of a young woman, pursued him across the room, and stopped him at the door.

"No," answered the resolute old lady, "I won't let you go. Come back with me."

As she said those words she noticed with a certain fond pride the brilliant colour mounting in his cheeks—the flashing brightness which lent an added lustre to his eyes. He had never, to her mind, looked so handsome before. She took his arm, and led him to the chairs which they had just left. It was shocking, it was wrong (she mentally admitted), to look on Mercy, under the circumstances, with any other eye than the eye of a brother or a friend. In a clergyman (perhaps) doubly wrong. But, with all her respect for the vested interests of Horace, Lady Janet could not blame Julian. Worse still, she was privately conscious that he had, somehow or other, risen, rather than fallen, in her estimation within the last minute or two. Who could deny that her adopted daughter was a charming creature? Who could wonder if a man of refined tastes admired her? Upon the whole, her ladyship humanely decided that her nephew was rather to be pitied than blamed. What daughter of Eve, no matter whether she was seventeen or seventy, could have honestly arrived at any other conclusion? Do what a man may—let him commit anything he likes, from an error to a crime—so long as there is a woman at the bottom of it, there is an inexhaustible fund of pardon for him in every other woman's heart. "Sit down," said Lady Janet, smiling in spite of herself; "and don't talk in that horrible way again. A man, Julian—especially a famous man like you—ought to know how to control himself."

Julian burst out laughing bitterly.

"Send up-stairs for my self-control," he said. "It's in her possession—not in mine—Good morning, aunt."

He rose from his chair. Lady Janet instantly pushed him back into it.

"I insist on your staying here," she said, "if it is only for a few minutes longer. I have something to say to you."

"Does it refer to Miss Roseberry?"

"It refers to the hateful woman who frightened Miss Roseberry. Now are you satisfied?"

Julian bowed, and settled himself in his chair.

"I don't much like to a knowledge it," his aunt went on. "But I want you to understand that I have something really serious to speak about, for once in a way. Julian! that wretch not only frightens Grace—she actually frightens Me."

"Frightens you? She is quite harmless, poor thing."

"Poor thing!" repeated Lady Janet. "Did you say, 'poor thing'?"

"Yes."

"Is it possible that you pity her?"

"From the bottom of my heart."

The old lady's temper gave way again at

that reply. "I hate a man who can't hate anybody!" she burst out. "If you had been an ancient Roman, Julian, I believe you would have pitied Nero himself."

Julian cordially agreed with her. "I believe I should," he said quietly. "All sinners, my dear aunt, are more or less miserable sinners. Nero must have been one of the wretchedest of mankind."

"Wretched!" exclaimed Lady Janet. "Nero wretched! A man who committed robbery, arson and murder, to his own violin accompaniment—only wretched! What next, I wonder? When modern philanthropy begins to apologize for Nero, modern philanthropy has arrived at a pretty pass indeed! We shall hear next that Bloody Queen Mary was as playful as a kitten; and if poor dear Henry the Eighth carried anything to an extreme, it was the practice of the domestic virtues. Ah, how I hate cant! What were we talking about just now? You wander from the subject, Julian; you are, what I call, bird-witted. I protest I forget what I wanted to say to you. No, I won't be reminded of it. I may be an old woman, but I am not in my dotage yet! Why do you sit there staring? Have you nothing to say for yourself? Of all the people in the world, have you lost the use of your tongue?"

Julian's excellent temper, and accurate knowledge of his aunt's character, exactly fitted him to calm the rising storm. He contrived to lead Lady Janet insensibly back to the lost subject, by dexterous reference to a narrative which he had thus far left untold—the narrative of his adventures on the Continent."

"I have a great deal to say, aunt," he replied. "I have not yet told you of my discoveries abroad."

Lady Janet instantly took the bait.

"I knew there was something forgotten," she said. "You have been all this time in the house, and you have told me nothing. Begin directly."

Patient Julian began.

CHAPTER XIV.

COMING EVENTS CAST THEIR SHADOWS BEFORE.

"I WENT first to Mannheim, Lady Janet, as I told you I should in my letter; and I heard all that the consul and the hospital doctors could tell me. No new fact of the slightest importance turned up. I got my directions for finding the German surgeon, and I set forth to try what I could make next of the man who had performed the operation. On the question of his patient's identity he had (as a perfect stranger to her) nothing to tell me. On the question of her mental condition, however, he made a very important statement. He owned to me that he had operated on another person injured by a shell-wound on the head, at the battle of Solferino, and that the patient (recovering also in this case) recovered—mad. That is a remarkable admission; don't you think so?"

Lady Janet's temper had hardly been allowed time enough to subside to its customary level.

"Very remarkable, I dare say," she answered, "to people who feel any doubt of this pitiable body of yours being mad. I feel no doubt—and, thus far, I find your account of yourself, Julian, tiresome in the extreme. Get on to the end. Did you lay your hand on Mercy Merriek?"

"No."

"Did you hear anything of her?"

"Nothing. Difficulties beset me on every side. The French ambulance had shared in the disasters of France—it was broken up. The wounded Frenchmen were prisoners, somewhere in Germany, nobody knew where. The French surgeon had been killed in action. His assistants were scattered—most likely in hiding. I began to despair of making any discovery, when accident threw in my way two Prussian soldiers who had been in the French cottage. They confirmed what the German surgeon told the consul, and what Horace himself told me, namely, that no nurse in a black dress was to be seen in the place. If there had been such a person, she would certainly (the Prussians informed me) have been found in attendance on the injured Frenchman. The cross of the Geneva Convention would have been amply sufficient to protect her; no woman wearing that badge of honour would have disgraced herself by abandoning the wounded men before the Germans entered the place."

"In short," interposed Lady Janet, "there is no such person as Mercy Merriek?"

"I can draw no other conclusion," said Julian, "unless the English doctor's idea is the right one. After hearing what I have just told you, he thinks the woman herself is Mercy Merriek."

Lady Janet held up her hand, as a sign that she had no objection to make here.

"You and the doctor seem to have settled everything to your entire satisfaction on both sides," she said. "But there is one difficulty that you have neither of you accounted for yet."

"What is it, aunt?"

"You talk glibly enough, Julian, about this woman's mad assertion that Grace is the

missing nurse, and that she is Grace. But you have not explained yet how the idea first got into her head; and, more than that, how it is that she is acquainted with my name and address, and perfectly familiar with Grace's papers and Grace's affairs. These things are a puzzle to a person of my average intelligence. Can your clever friend, the doctor, account for them?"

"Shall I tell you what he said, when I saw him this morning?"

"Will it take long?"

"It will take about a minute."

"You agreeably surprise me. Go on."

"You want to know how she gained her knowledge of your name, and of Miss Roseberry's affairs," Julian resumed. "The doctor says in one of two ways. Either Miss Roseberry must have spoken of you, and of her own affairs, while she and the stranger were together in the French cottage; or the stranger must have obtained access privately to Miss Roseberry's papers. Do you agree so far?"

Lady Janet began to feel interested for the first time.

"Perfectly," she said. "I have no doubt Grace rashly talked of matters which an older and wiser person would have kept to herself."

"Very good. Do you also agree that the last idea in the woman's mind when she was struck by the shell might have been (quite probably) the idea of Miss Roseberry's identity and Miss Roseberry's affairs? You think it likely enough? Well! what happens after that? The wounded woman is brought to life by an operation, and she becomes delirious in the hospital at Mannheim. During her delirium the idea of Miss Roseberry's identity ferments in her brain, and assumes its present perverted form. In that form it still remains. As a necessary consequence, she persists in reversing the two identities. She says she is Miss Roseberry, and declares Miss Roseberry to be Mercy Merriek. There is the doctor's explanation. What do you think of it?"

"Very ingenious, I dare say. The doctor doesn't quite satisfy me, however, for all that. I think—"

What Lady Janet thought was not destined to be expressed. She suddenly checked herself, and held up her hand for the second time.

"Another objection?" inquired Julian.

"Hold your tongue!" cried the old lady. "If you say a word more I shall lose it again."

"Lose what, aunt?"

"What I wanted to say to you, ages ago. I have got it back again—it begins with a question. (No more of the doctor! I have had enough of him!) Where is she—your pitiable lady, my crazy wretch—where is she now? Still in London?"

"Yes."

"And still at large?"

"Still with the landlady, at her lodgings."

"Very well. Now, answer me this! What is to prevent her from making another attempt to force her way (or steal her way) into my house? How am I to protect Grace, how am I to protect myself, if she comes here again?"

"Is that really what you wished to speak to me about?"

"That, and nothing else."

They were both too deeply interested in the subject of their conversation to look towards the conservatory, and to notice the appearance at that moment of a distant gentleman among the plants and flowers, who had made his way in from the garden outside. Advancing noiselessly on the soft Indian matting, the gentleman crept long revealed himself under the form and features of Horace Holmeroff. Before entering the dining-room he paused, fixing his eyes inquisitively on the back of Lady Janet's visitor—the back being all that he could see in the position he then occupied. After a pause of an instant the visitor spoke, and further uncertainty was at once at an end. Horace, nevertheless, made no movement to enter the room. He had his own jealous distrust of what Julian might be tempted to say at a private interview with his aunt; and he waited a little longer, on the chance that his doubts might be verified.

"Neither you nor Miss Roseberry need any protection from the poor deluded creature," Julian went on. "I have gained great influence over her—and I have satisfied her that it is useless to present herself here again."

"I beg your pardon," interposed Horace, speaking from the conservatory door. "You have done nothing of the sort."

(He had heard enough to satisfy him that the talk was not taking the direction which his suspicions had anticipated. And, as an additional incentive to show himself, a happy chance had now offered him the opportunity of putting Julian in the wrong.)

"Good heavens, Horace!" exclaimed Lady Janet. "Where do you come from? And what do you mean?"

"I heard at the lodge that your ladyship and Grace had returned last night. And I came in at once, without troubling the servants, by the shortest way." He turned to Julian next. "The woman you were speaking of just now—the poor creature—has been here again already—in Lady Janet's absence."