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THE NEW MAGDALEN.

BY WILKIE COLLINS.

FIRST SCENE.—The Cottage on the Frontier.

CHAPTER II.

MAGDALEN—IN MODERN TIMES.

"WHEN your mother was alive were you ever out with her after night-fall in the streets of a great city?"

In those extraordinary terms Mercy Merrick opened the confidential interview which Grace Roseberry had forced on her. Grace answered simply:

"I don't understand you."

"I will put it in another way," said the nurse. Its unnatural hardness and sternness of tone passed away from her voice, and its native gentleness and sadness returned, as she made that reply. "You read the newspapers like the rest of the world," she went on; "have you ever read of your unhappy fellow creatures (the starving outcasts of the population) whom Want has driven into Sin?"

Still wondering, Grace answered that she had read of such things often, in newspapers and in books.

"Have you heard—when those starving and sinning fellow creatures happened to be women—of Refugees established to protect and reclaim them?"

The wonder in Grace's mind passed away, and a vague suspicion of something painful to come took its place.

"These are extraordinary questions," she said, nervously. "What do you mean?"

"Answer me," the nurse insisted. "Have you heard of the Refugees? Have you heard of the women?"

"Yes."

"Move your chair a little farther away from me," she paused. Her voice, without losing its steadiness, fell to its lowest tones. "I was once of those women," she said quietly.

Grace sprang to her feet with a faint cry. She stood petrified—incapable of uttering a word.

"I have been in a Refuge," pursued the sweet sad voice of the other woman. "I have been in a Prison. Do you still wish to be my friend? Do you still insist on sitting close by me and taking my hand?"

She waited for a reply, and no reply came.

"You see you were wrong," she went on gently, "when you called me cruel—and I was right when I told you I was kind."

At that appeal Grace composed herself, and spoke:

"I don't wish to offend you," she began confusedly.

Mercy Merrick stopped her there.

"You don't offend me," she said, without the faintest note of displeasure in her tone. "I am accustomed to stand in the pillory of my own past life. I sometimes ask myself if it was all my fault. I sometimes wonder if Society had no duties towards me when I was a child selling matches in the street—when I was a hard-working girl, fainting at my needle for want of food."

Her voice faltered a little for the first time as it pronounced those words; she waited a moment, and recovered herself.

"It's too late to dwell on these things now," she said, resignedly. "Society can subscribe to reclaim me—but Society can't take me back. You see me here in a place of trust—patiently, humbly, doing all the good I can. It doesn't matter! Here, or elsewhere, what I am can never alter what I was. For three years past, all that a sincerely penitent woman can do I have done. It doesn't matter! Once let my past story be known, and the shadow of it comes over me; the kindest people shrink."

She waited again. Would a word of sympathy come to comfort her from the other woman's lips? No! Miss Roseberry was shocked; Miss Roseberry was confused.

"I am very sorry for you," was all that Miss Roseberry could say.

"Everybody is sorry for me," answered the nurse, as patiently as ever; "everybody is kind to me. But the lost place is not to be regained. I can't get back! I can't get back!" she cried, with a passionate outburst of despair—checked instantly, the moment it had escaped her.

"Shall I tell you what my experience has been?" she resumed. "Will you hear the story of Magdalen—in modern times?"

Grace drew back a step; Mercy instantly understood her.

"I am going to tell you nothing that you need shrink from hearing," she said. "A lady in your position would not understand the trials and the struggles that I have passed through. My story shall begin at the Refuge. The matron sent me out to service with the character that I had honestly earned—the character of a reclaimed woman. I justified the confidence placed in me; I was a faithful servant. One day, my mistress sent for me—

a kind mistress, if ever there was one yet. 'Mercy, I am sorry for you; it has come out that I took you from a Refuge; I shall lose every servant in the house; you must go.' I went back to the matron—another kind woman. She received me like a mother. 'We will try again, Mercy; don't be cast down.' I told you I had been in Canada?"

Grace began to feel interested in spite of herself. She answered with something like warmth in her tone. She returned to her chair—placed at its safe and significant distance from the chest.

The nurse on.

"My next place was in Canada, with an officer's wife; gentlefolks who had emigrated. More kindness; and, this time, a pleasant, peaceful life for me. I said to myself, 'Is the lost place regained? Have I got back?' My mistress died. New people came into our neighbourhood. There was a young lady among them—my master began to think of another wife. I have the misfortune (in my situation) to be what is called a handsome woman; I rouse the curiosity of strangers. The new people asked questions about me; my master's answers did not satisfy them. In a word, they found me out. The old story again! 'Mercy, I am very sorry; scandal is very busy with you and with me; we are innocent, but there is no help for it—we must part.' I left the place; having gained one advantage during my stay in Canada, which I find of use to me here."

"What is it?"

"Our nearest neighbours were French Canadians. I learned to speak the French language."

"Did you return to London?"

"Where else could I go, without a character?" said Mercy, sadly. "I went back again to the matron. Sickness had broken out in the Refuge, I made myself useful as a nurse. One of the doctors was struck with me—I fell in love with me, as the phrase is. He would have married me. The nurse, as an honest woman, was bound to tell him the truth. He never appeared again. The old story! I began to be weary of saying to myself, 'I can't get back! I can't get back!' Despair got hold of me, the despair that hardens the heart. I might have committed suicide; I might have drifted back into my old life—but for one man."

At those last words, her voice—quiet and even through the earlier parts of her sad story—began to falter once more. She stopped; following silently the memories and associations roused in her by what she had just said. Had she forgotten the presence of another person in the room? Grace's curiosity left Grace no resource but to say a word on her side.

"Who was the man?" she asked. "How did he befriend you?"

"Befriend me? He doesn't even know that such a person as I am is in existence."

This strange answer, naturally enough, only strengthened the anxiety of Grace to hear more.

"You said just now,"—she began.

"I said just now that he saved me. He did save me; you shall hear how. One Sunday, our regular clergyman at the Refuge was not able to officiate. His place was taken by a stranger, quite a young man. The matron told us the stranger's name was John Gray. I sat in the back row of seats, under the shadow of the gallery, where I could see him without his seeing me. His text was from the words, 'Joy shall be in Heaven over one sinner that repenteth, more than over ninety and nine just persons which need no repentance.' What happier women might have thought of his sermon I cannot say; there was not a dry eye among us at the Refuge. As for me, he touched my heart as no man had touched it before or since. The hard despair melted in me at the sound of his voice; the weary round of my life showed its nobler side again while he spoke. From that time I have accepted my hard lot, I have been a patient woman. I might have been something more, I might have been a happy woman, if I could have prevailed on myself to speak to Julian Gray."

"What hindered you from speaking to him?"

"I was afraid."

"Afraid of what?"

"Afraid of making my hard life harder still."

A woman who could have sympathized with her would perhaps have guessed what those words meant. Grace was simply embarrassed by her; and Grace failed to guess.

"I don't understand you," she said.

There was no alternative for Mercy but to own the truth in plain words. She sighed, and said the words.

"I was afraid I might interest him in my sorrows, and might set my heart on him in return."

The utter absence of any fellow-feeling with her on Grace's side expressed itself unconsciously in the plainest terms.

"You!" she exclaimed, in a tone of blank astonishment.

The nurse rose slowly to her feet. Grace's expression of surprise told her plainly—almost brutally—that her confession had gone far enough.

"I astonish you?" she said. "Ah, my young

lady, you don't know what rough usage a woman's heart can bear, and still beat truly! Before I saw Julian Gray I only knew men as objects of horror to me. Let us drop the subject. The preacher at the Refuge is nothing but a remembrance now—the one welcome remembrance of my life! I have nothing more to tell you. You insisted on hearing my story—you have heard it."

"I have not heard how you found employment here," said Grace; continuing the conversation with uneasy politeness, as she best might.

Mercy crossed the room, and slowly raked together the last living embers of the fire.

"The matron has friends in France," she answered, "who are connected with the military hospitals. It was not difficult to get me the place, under those circumstances. Society can find a use for me here. My hand is as light, my words of comfort are as welcome among those suffering wretches" (she pointed to the room in which the wounded men were lying) "as if I was the most reputable woman breathing. And if a stray shot comes my way before the war is over—well! Society will be rid of me on easy terms."

She stood looking thoughtfully into the wreck of the fire—as if she saw in it the wreck of her own life. Common humanity made it an act of necessity to say something to her. Grace considered—advanced a step towards her—stopped—and took refuge in the most trivial of all the common phrases which one human being can address to another.

"If there is anything I can do for you"—she began. The sentence, halting there, was never finished. Miss Roseberry was just merciful enough towards the lost woman who had rescued and sheltered her to feel that it was needless to say more.

The nurse lifted her noble head, and advanced slowly toward the canvas screen to return to her duties.

"Miss Roseberry might have taken my hand!" she thought to herself, bitterly. No! Miss Roseberry stood there at a distance, at a loss what to say next. "What can you do for me?" Mercy asked, stung by the cold courtesy of her companion into a momentary outburst of contempt. "Can you change my identity? Can you give me the name and the place of an innocent woman? If I only had your chance? If I only had your reputation and your prospects!" She laid one hand over her bosom, and controlled herself. "Stay here," she resumed, "while I go back to my work. I will see that your clothes are dried. You shall wear my clothes as short a time as possible."

With those melancholy words—touchingly, and bitterly spoken—she moved to pass into the kitchen, when she noticed that the pattering sound of the rain against the window was audible no more. Dropping the canvas for the moment, she retraced her steps, and, unfastening the wooden shutter, looked out.

The moon was rising dimly in the watery sky; the rain had ceased; the friendly darkness which had hidden the French position from the German scouts was lessening every moment. In a few hours more (if nothing happened) the English lady might resume her journey. In a few hours more the morning would dawn.

Mercy lifted her hand to close the shutter. Before she could fasten it the report of a rifle-shot reached the cottage from one of the distant posts. It was followed almost instantly by a second report, nearer and louder than the first. Mercy paused, with the shutter in her hand, and listened intently for the next sound.

CHAPTER III.

THE GERMAN SHELTER.

A THIRD rifle-shot rang through the night air, close to the cottage. Grace started and approached the window in alarm.

"What does that firing mean?" she asked.

"Signals from the outposts," the nurse quietly replied.

"Is there any danger? Have the Germans come back?"

Surgeon Surville answered the question. He lifted the canvas screen, and looked into the room as Miss Roseberry spoke.

"The Germans are advancing on us," he said. "Their vanguard is in sight."

Grace sank on the chair near her, trembling from head to foot. Mercy advanced to the surgeon, and put the decisive question to him:

"Do we defend the position?" she inquired.

Surgeon Surville ominously shook his head.

"Impossible! We are outnumbered as usual—ten to one."

The shrill roll of the French drums was heard outside.

"There is the retreat sounded!" said the surgeon. "The captain is not a man to think twice about what he does. We are left to take care of ourselves. In five minutes we must be out of this place."

A volley of rifle-shots rang out as he spoke. The German vanguard was attacking the French at the outposts. Grace caught the surgeon entreatingly by the arm.

"Take me with you," she cried. "Oh, sir, I have suffered from the Germans already! Don't forsake me, if they come back!"

The surgeon was equal to the occasion; he placed the hand of the pretty Englishwoman on his breast.

"Fear nothing, madam," he said, looking as if he could have annihilated the whole German force with his own invincible arm. "A Frenchman's heart beats under your hand. A Frenchman's devotion protects you."

Grace's head sank on his shoulder. Monsieur Surville felt that he had asserted himself; he looked round invitingly at Mercy. She, too, was an attractive woman. The Frenchman had another shoulder at her service. Unhappily, the room was dark—the look was lost on Mercy. She was thinking of the helpless men in the inner chamber, and she quietly recalled the surgeon to a sense of his professional duties.

"What is to become of the sick and wounded?" she asked.

Monsieur Surville shrugged one shoulder—the shoulder that was free.

"The strongest among them we can take away with us," he said. "The others must be left here. Fear nothing for yourself, dear lady. There will be a place for you in the baggage-wagon."

"And for me, too?" Grace pleaded eagerly.

The surgeon's invincible arm stole round the young lady's waist, and answered mutely with a squeeze.

"Take her with you," said Mercy. "My place is with the men whom you leave behind."

Grace listened in amazement. "Think what you risk," she said, "if you stop here."

Mercy pointed to her left shoulder.

"Don't alarm yourself on my account," she answered, "the red cross will protect me."

Another roll of the drum warned the susceptible surgeon to take his place as director-general of the ambulance, without any further delay. He conducted Grace to a chair, and placed both her hands on his heart this time, to reconcile her to the misfortune of his absence. "Wait here till I return for you," he whispered. "Fear nothing, my charming friend. Say to yourself, 'Surville is the soul of honour! Surville is devoted to me!'" He struck his breast; he again forgot the obscurity in the room, and cast one look of unutterable homage at his charming friend. "A bientôt!" he cried, and kissed his hand and disappeared.

(To be continued.)

ART AND LITERATURE.

Mdlle. Tietjens will visit America this fall.

A monument to Henri Regnault is to be erected in Paris.

Victor Hugo is said to be busily engaged upon a new drama.

Gustave Doré is said to have drawn, for publication, no less than 45,000 designs.

The Halifax Philharmonic Society intend erecting a public concert hall in that city.

Miss Braddon's new novel, "To The Bitter End," will shortly be published in book form.

Stanley's autograph is advertised for sale at Brighton for the moderate sum of three guineas.

The French papers have suddenly knighted Stanley, and speak of him as Sir Henry Stanley.

Miss Anna Cornwall, formerly well-known in English musical circles, died last month at the age of 93.

Mr. Stanley's book, giving an account of his adventures in Africa, will appear about the end of the month.

The Municipality of Rome has conferred the title of Roman citizen on Mauzoni, the talented author of "I Promessi Sposi."

One of the most able of Parisian journalists, M. Guérault, the editor and founder of the *Opinion Nationale*, died recently at the age of 62.

Adolph Adam's "Saint Cecilia" mass will be executed, for the first time in Canada, at Quebec, on the feast of the Patroness of Music, Nov. 22.

Froude, the historian, will be the guest of the Messrs. Scribner & Co., at a grand complimentary dinner to be given at New York on the 10th instant.

At Constantinople there has been started a new journal entitled the *Orient Illustré*. The greater part of the letter-press is in French, with a species of political summary in Italian.

The library of the late Tycoons of Japan, consisting of upwards of one hundred thousand volumes, is, by order of the Mikado, to be arranged and placed under proper regulations at the service of the public.

The illustrated edition of M. M. Erckmann-Chatrian's "Histoire du Plébiscite" has been suppressed by the French authorities, at the instance of the Prussian Government, who considered that some of the illustrations were calculated to give an unfavourable impression of the conduct of the Prussian soldiers during the war.

Bad Breath rendered pure by using Colby's Pills a short time.