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## THE NEW MAGDALEN.

BY WILKIE COLLINS.

SECOND SCENE—*Mablethorpe House.*

CHAPTER XXII.—(Continued.)

"I will leave it to events to answer that question," he said. "You will not have long to wait. In the meantime, I have put you on your guard." He stooped, and spoke his next words earnestly, close at her ear. "Hold fast by the admirable courage which you have shown thus far," he went on. "Suffer anything, rather than suffer the degradation of yourself. Be the woman whom I once spoke of—the woman I still have in my mind—who can nobly reveal the noble nature that is in her. And never forget this—my faith in you is as firm as ever!"

She looked at him proudly and gratefully. "I am pledged to justify your faith in me," she said. "I have put it out of my own power to yield. Horace has my promise that I will explain everything to him, in this room."

Julian started. "Has Horace himself asked it of you?" he inquired. "He, at least, has no suspicion of the truth."

"Horace has appealed to my duty to him as his betrothed wife," she answered. "He has the first claim to my confidence—he resents my silence, and he has a right to resent it. Terrible as it will be to open his eyes to the truth, I must do it if he asks me."

She was looking at Julian while she spoke. The old longing to associate with the hard trial of the confession the one man who had felt for her, and believed in her, revived under another form. If she could only know, while she was saying the fatal words to Horace, that Julian was listening too, she would be encouraged to meet the worst that could happen! As the idea crossed her mind, she observed that Julian was looking towards the door through which they had lately passed. In an instant she saw the means to her end. Hardly waiting to hear the few kind expressions of sympathy and approval which he addressed to her, he hinted timidly at the proposal which she had now to make to him.

"Are you going back into the next room?" she asked.

"Not if you object to it," he replied.

"I don't object. I want you to go there."

"After Horace has joined you?"

"Yes. After Horace has joined me."

"Do you wish to see me when it is over?"

She summoned her resolution, and told him frankly what she had in her mind.

"I want you to be near me while I am speaking to Horace," she said. "It will give me courage if I can feel that I am speaking to you as well as to him. I can count on your sympathy—and sympathy is so precious to me now! Am I asking too much, if I ask you to leave the door unclosed, when you go back to the dining-room? Think of the dreadful trial—to him as well as to me! I am only a woman; I am afraid I may sink under it, if I have no friend near me. And I have no friend but you."

In those simple words she tried her powers of persuasion on him for the first time.

Between perplexity and distress, Julian was, for the moment, at a loss how to answer her. The love for Mercy which he dared not acknowledge, was as vital a feeling in him as the faith in her which he had been free to avow. To refuse anything that she asked of him in her sore need—and, more even than that, to refuse to hear the confession which it had been her first impulse to make to him—these were cruel sacrifices to his sense of what was due to Horace and of what was due to himself. But shrink as he might, even from the appearance of deserting her, it was impossible for him (except under a reserve which was almost equivalent to a denial) to grant her request.

"All that I can do, I will do," he said. "The door shall be left unclosed, and I will remain in the next room, on this condition—that Horace knows of it as well as you. I should be unworthy of your confidence in me if I consented to be a listener on any other terms. You understand that, I am sure, as well as I do."

She had never thought of her proposal to him in this light. Womanlike, she had thought of nothing but the comfort of having him near her. She understood him now. A faint flush of shame rose on her pale cheeks, as she thanked him. He delicately relieved her from her embarrassment by putting a question which naturally occurred under the circumstances.

"Where is Horace all this time?" he asked.

"Why is he not here?"

"He has been called away," she answered, "by a message from Lady Janet."

The reply more than astonished Julian; it

seemed almost to alarm him. He returned to Mercy's chair; he said to her eagerly, "Are you sure?"

"Horace himself told me that Lady Janet had insisted on seeing him."

"When?"

"Not long ago. He asked me to wait for him here, while he went upstairs."

Julian's face darkened ominously.

"This confirms my worst fears," he said.

"Have you had any communication with Lady Janet?"

Mercy replied by showing him his aunt's note. He read it carefully through.

"Did I not tell you," he said, "that she would find some excuse for refusing to hear your confession? She begins by delaying it, simply to gain time for something else which she has in her mind to do. When did you receive this note? Soon after you went upstairs?"

"About a quarter of an hour after, as well as I can guess."

"Do you know what happened down here, after you left us?"

"Horace told me that Lady Janet had offered Miss Roseberry the use of her boudoir."

"Any more?"

"He said that you had shown her the way to the room."

"Did he tell you what happened after that?"

"No."

"Then I must tell you. If I can do nothing more in this serious state of things, I can at least prevent your being taken by surprise."

In the first place, it is right you should know that I had a motive for accompanying Miss Roseberry to the boudoir. I was anxious (for your sake) to make some appeal to her better self—if she had any better self to address. I own I had doubts of my success—judging by what I had already seen of her. My doubts were confirmed. In the ordinary intercourse of life, I should merely have thought her a commonplace uninteresting woman. Seeing her as I saw her while we were alone—in other words, penetrating below the surface—I have never, in all my sad experience, met with such a hopelessly narrow, mean, and low nature as hers. Understanding, as she could not fail to do, what the sudden change in Lady Janet's behaviour towards her really meant, her one idea was to take the cruellest possible advantage of it. So far from feeling any consideration for you, she was only additionally embittered towards you. She protested against your being permitted to claim the merit of placing her in her right position here, by your own voluntary avowal of the truth. She insisted on publicly denouncing you, and on forcing Lady Janet to dismiss you, unheard, before the whole household.

"Now I can have my revenge! At last Lady Janet is afraid of me!" Those were her own words—I am almost ashamed to repeat them—those, on my honour, were her own words! Every possible humiliation to be heaped on you; no consideration to be shown for Lady Janet's age and Lady Janet's position; nothing, absolutely nothing, to be allowed to interfere with Miss Roseberry's vengeance and Miss Roseberry's triumph! There is this woman's shameless view of what is due to her, as stated by herself in the plainest terms. I kept my temper; I did all I could to bring her to a better frame of mind. I might as well have pleaded—I won't say with a savage; savages are sometimes accessible to remonstrance, if you know how to teach them—I might as well have pleaded with a hungry animal to abstain from eating while food was within its reach. I had just given up the hopeless effort in disgust, when Lady Janet's maid appeared with a message for Miss Roseberry from her mistress: "My lady's compliments, ma'am, and she will be glad to see you at your earliest convenience in her room!"

Another surprise! Grace Roseberry invited to an interview with Lady Janet! It would have been impossible to believe it, if Julian had not heard the invitation given with his own ears.

"She instantly rose," Julian proceeded.

"I won't keep her ladyship waiting a moment," she said; "show me the way." She signed to the maid to go out of the room first, and then turned round and spoke to me from the door. I despair of describing the insolent exultation of her manner—I can only repeat her words: "This is exactly what I wanted! I had intended to insist on seeing Lady Janet; she saves me the trouble; I am infinitely obliged to her." With that, she nodded to me, and closed the door. I have not seen her, and I have not heard of her, since. For all I know, she may be still with my aunt, and Horace may have found her there when he entered the room."

"What can Lady Janet have to say to her?" Mercy asked eagerly.

"It is impossible even to guess. When you found me in the dining-room I was considering that very question. I cannot imagine that any neutral ground can exist, on which it is possible for Lady Janet and this woman to meet. In her present frame of mind, she will in all probability insult Lady Janet before she has been five minutes in the room. I own I am completely puzzled. The one conclusion I can arrive at is, that the note which my aunt sent to you, the private interview with Miss Roseberry which has followed, and

the summons to Horace which has succeeded in its turn, are all links in the same chain of events, and are all tending to that renewed temptation against which I have already warned you."

Mercy held up her hand for silence. She looked towards the door that opened on the hall; had she heard a footstep outside? No. All was still. Not a sign yet of Horace's return.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, "what would I not give to know what is going on up-stairs?"

"You will soon know it now," said Julian. "It is impossible that our present uncertainty can last much longer."

He turned away, intending to go back to the room in which she had found him. Looking at her situation from a man's point of view, he naturally assumed that the best service he could now render to Mercy would be to leave her to prepare herself for the interview with Horace. Before he had taken three steps away from her, she showed him the difference between the woman's point of view and the man's. The idea of considering beforehand what she should say never entered her mind. In her horror of being left by herself at that critical moment, she forgot every other consideration. Even the warning remembrance of Horace's jealous distrust of Julian passed away from her, for the moment, as completely as if it never had a place in her memory. "Don't leave me!" she cried. "I can't wait here alone. Come back—come back!"

She rose impulsively, while she spoke, as if to follow him into the dining-room, if he persisted in leaving her.

A momentary expression of doubt crossed Julian's face as he retraced his steps and signed to her to be seated again. Could she be depended on (he asked himself) to sustain the coming test of her resolution, when she had not courage enough to wait for events in a room by herself? Julian had yet to learn that a woman's courage rises with the greatness of the emergency. Ask her to accompany you through a field in which some harmless cattle happen to be grazing, and it is doubtful, in nine cases out of ten, if she will do it. Ask her, as one of the passengers in a ship on fire, to help in setting an example of composure to the rest, and it is certain, in nine cases out of ten, that she will do it. As soon as Julian had taken a chair near her, Mercy was calm again.

"Are you sure of your resolution?" he asked.

"I am certain of it," she answered, "as long as you don't leave me by myself."

The talk between them dropped there.

They sat together, in silence, with their eyes fixed on the door, waiting for Horace to come in.

After the lapse of a few minutes, their attention was attracted by a sound outside in the grounds. A carriage of some sort was plainly audible, approaching the house.

The carriage stopped; the bell rang; the front door was opened. Had a visitor arrived? No voice could be heard making inquiries. No footsteps but the servant's footsteps crossed the hall. A long pause followed; the carriage remaining at the door. Instead of bringing some one to the house, it had apparently arrived to take some one away.

The next event was the return of the servant to the front door. They listened again. Again, no second footstep was audible. The door was closed; the servant recrossed the hall; the carriage was driven away. Judging by sounds alone, no one had arrived at the house, and no one had left the house.

Julian looked at Mercy. "Do you understand this?" he asked.

She silently shook her head.

"If any person has gone away in the carriage," Julian went on, "that person can hardly have been a man, or we must have heard him in the hall."

The conclusion which her companion had just drawn from the noiseless departure of the supposed visitor, raised a sudden doubt in Mercy's mind.

"Go and inquire!" she said eagerly.

Julian left the room; and returned again, after a brief absence, with signs of grave anxiety in his face and manner.

"I told you I dreaded the most trifling events that were passing about us," he said.

"An event, which is far from being trifling, has just happened. The carriage which we heard approaching along the drive turns out to have been a cab sent for from the house. The person who has gone away in it——"

"Is a woman, as you supposed?"

"Yes."

Mercy rose excitedly from her chair.

"It can't be Grace Roseberry?" she exclaimed.

"It is Grace Roseberry."

"Has she gone away alone?"

"Alone—after an interview with Lady Janet."

"Did she go willingly?"

"She herself sent the servant for the cab."

"What does it mean?"

"It is useless to inquire. We shall soon know."

They resumed their seats; waiting, as they had waited already, with their eyes on the library door.

### CHAPTER XXIII.

LADY JANET AT BAY.

The narrative leaves Julian and Mercy for a while, and, ascending to the upper regions of the house, follows the march of events in Lady Janet's room.

The maid had delivered her mistress's note to Mercy, and had gone away again on her second errand to Grace Roseberry in the boudoir. Lady Janet was seated at her writing-table, waiting for the appearance of the woman whom she had summoned to her presence. A single lamp diffused its mild light over the books, pictures, and busts round her, leaving the farther end of the room, in which the bed was placed, almost lost in obscurity. The works of art were all portraits; the books were all presentation copies from the authors. It was Lady Janet's fancy to associate her bedroom with memorials of the various persons whom she had known in the long course of her life—all of them more or less distinguished; most of them, by this time, gathered with the dead.

She sat near her writing table, lying back in her easy chair—the living realization of the picture which Julian's description had drawn. Her eyes were fixed on a photographic likeness of Mercy, which was so raised upon a little gilt easel as to enable her to contemplate it under the full light of the lamp. The bright mobile old face was strangely and sadly changed. The brow was fixed; the mouth was rigid; the whole face would have been like a mask, moulded in the hardest forms of passive resistance and suppressed rage, but for the light and life still thrown over it by the eyes. There was something unutterably touching in the keen hungering tenderness of the look which they fixed on the portrait, intensified by an underlying expression of fond and patient reproach. The danger which Julian so wisely dreaded was in the rest of the face; the love which he had so truly described was in the eyes alone. They still spoke of the cruelly-profound affection which had been the one immeasurable joy, the one inexhaustible hope, of Lady Janet's closing life. The brow expressed nothing but her obstinate determination to stand by the wreck of that joy, to rekindle the dead ashes of that hope. The lips were only eloquent of her unflinching resolution to ignore the hateful present and to save the sacred past. "My idol may be shattered, but none of you shall know it. I stop the march of discovery; I extinguish the light of truth. I am deaf to your words, I am blind to your proofs. At seventy years old, my idol is my life. It shall be my idol still."

The silence in the bedroom was broken by a murmuring of women's voices outside the door.

Lady Janet instantly raised herself in the chair, and snatched the photograph off the easel. She laid the portrait face downwards among some papers on the table—then abruptly changed her mind, and hid it among the thick folds of lace which clothed her neck and bosom. There was a world of love in the action itself, and in the sudden softening of the eye which accompanied it. The next moment Lady Janet's mask was on. Any superficial observer who had seen her now, would have said, "This is a hard woman!"

The door was opened by the maid, Grace Roseberry entered the room.

She advanced rapidly, with a defiant assurance in her manner, and a lofty carriage of her head. She sat down in the chair to which Lady Janet silently pointed, with a thump; she returned Lady Janet's grave bow with a nod and a smile. Every movement and every look of the little, worn, white-faced, shabbily-dressed woman expressed insolent triumph, and said, as if in words, "My turn has come!"

"I am glad to wait on your ladyship," she began, without giving Lady Janet an opportunity of speaking first. "Indeed I should have felt it my duty to request an interview, if you had not sent your maid to invite me up here."

"You would have felt it your duty to request an interview?" Lady Janet repeated very quietly. "Why?"

The tone in which that one last word was spoken embarrassed Grace at the outset. It established as great a distance between Lady Janet and herself as if she had been lifted in her chair and conveyed bodily to the other end of the room.

"I am surprised that your ladyship should not understand me," she said, struggling to conceal her confusion. "Especially after your kind offer of your own boudoir."

Lady Janet remained perfectly unmoved. "I do not understand you," she answered, just as quietly as ever.

Grace's temper came to her assistance. She recovered the assurance which had marked her first appearance on the scene.

"In that case," she resumed, "I must enter into particulars, in justice to myself. I can place but one interpretation on the extraordinary change in your ladyship's behaviour to me downstairs. The conduct of that abominable woman has, at last, opened your eyes to the deception that has been practised on you. For some reason of your own, however, you have not yet chosen to recognize me openly. In this painful position something is due to