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The New Magdalen

By

Wilkie Collins

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TO THE MEMORY OF CHARLES ALLSTON COLLINS. (9th April, 1873.)

Contents

FIRST SCENE.--The Cottage on the Frontier.....	3
PREAMBLE.....	3
CHAPTER I. THE TWO WOMEN.....	4
CHAPTER II. MAGDALEN--IN MODERN TIMES.....	12
CHAPTER III. THE GERMAN SHELL.....	18
CHAPTER IV. THE TEMPTATION.....	25
CHAPTER V. THE GERMAN SURGEON.....	31
CHAPTER VI. LADY JANET'S COMPANION.....	41
CHAPTER VII. THE MAN IS COMING.....	50
CHAPTER VIII. THE MAN APPEARS.....	63
CHAPTER IX. NEWS FROM MANNHEIM.....	71
CHAPTER X. A COUNCIL OF THREE.....	81
CHAPTER XI. THE DEAD ALIVE.....	86
CHAPTER XII. EXIT JULIAN.....	95
CHAPTER XIII. ENTER JULIAN.....	104
CHAPTER XIV. COMING EVENTS CAST THEIR SHADOWS BEFORE.....	112
CHAPTER XV. A WOMAN'S REMORSE.....	119
CHAPTER XVI. THEY MEET AGAIN.....	130
CHAPTER XVII. THE GUARDIAN ANGEL.....	136
CHAPTER XVIII. THE SEARCH IN THE GROUNDS.....	145
CHAPTER XIX. THE EVIL GENIUS.....	156
CHAPTER XX. THE POLICEMAN IN PLAIN CLOTHES.....	163
CHAPTER XXI. THE FOOTSTEP IN THE CORRIDOR.....	177
CHAPTER XXII. THE MAN IN THE DINING-ROOM.....	188
CHAPTER XXIII. LADY JANET AT BAY.....	200
CHAPTER XXIV. LADY JANET'S LETTER.....	215
CHAPTER XXV. THE CONFESSION.....	222
CHAPTER XXVI. GREAT HEART AND LITTLE HEART.....	230
CHAPTER XXVII. MAGDALEN'S APPRENTICESHIP.....	237
CHAPTER XXVIII. SENTENCE IS PRONOUNCED ON HER.....	249
EPILOGUE:.....	268
I.....	268
II.....	273
III.....	274
IV.....	278

FIRST SCENE.--The Cottage on the Frontier.

PREAMBLE.

THE place is France.

The time is autumn, in the year eighteen hundred and seventy--the year of the war between France and Germany.

The persons are, Captain Arnault, of the French army; Surgeon Surville, of the French ambulance; Surgeon Wetzel, of the German army; Mercy Merrick, attached as nurse to the French ambulance; and Grace Roseberry, a traveling lady on her way to England.

CHAPTER I. THE TWO WOMEN.

IT was a dark night. The rain was pouring in torrents.

Late in the evening a skirmishing party of the French and a skirmishing party of the Germans had met, by accident, near the little village of Lagrange, close to the German frontier. In the struggle that followed, the French had (for once) got the better of the enemy. For the time, at least, a few hundreds out of the host of the invaders had been forced back over the frontier. It was a trifling affair, occurring not long after the great German victory of Weissenbourg, and the newspapers took little or no notice of it.

Captain Arnault, commanding on the French side, sat alone in one of the cottages of the village, inhabited by the miller of the district. The Captain was reading, by the light of a solitary tallow-candle, some intercepted dispatches taken from the Germans. He had suffered the wood fire, scattered over the large open grate, to burn low; the red embers only faintly illuminated a part of the room. On the floor behind him lay some of the miller's empty sacks. In a corner opposite to him was the miller's solid walnut-wood bed. On the walls all around him were the miller's colored prints, representing a happy mixture of devotional and domestic subjects. A door of communication leading into the kitchen of the cottage had been torn from its hinges, and used to carry the men wounded in the skirmish from the field. They were now comfortably laid at rest in the kitchen, under the care of the French surgeon and the English nurse attached to the ambulance. A piece of coarse canvas screened the opening between the two rooms in place of the door. A second door, leading from the bed-chamber into the yard, was locked; and the wooden shutter protecting the one window of the room was carefully barred. Sentinels, doubled in number, were placed at all the outposts. The French commander had neglected no precaution which could reasonably insure for himself and for his men a quiet and comfortable night.

Still absorbed in his perusal of the dispatches, and now and then making notes of what he read by the help of writing materials placed at his side, Captain Arnault was interrupted by the appearance of an intruder in the room. Surgeon Surville, entering from the kitchen, drew aside the canvas screen, and approached the little round table at which his superior officer was sitting.

"What is it?" said the captain, sharply.

"A question to ask," replied the surgeon. "Are we safe for the night?"

"Why do you want to know?" inquired the captain, suspiciously.

The surgeon pointed to the kitchen, now the hospital devoted to the wounded men.

"The poor fellows are anxious about the next few hours," he replied. "They dread a surprise, and they ask me if there is any reasonable hope of their having one night's rest. What do you think of the chances?"

The captain shrugged his shoulders. The surgeon persisted.

"Surely you ought to know?" he said.

"I know that we are in possession of the village for the present," retorted Captain Arnault, "and I know no more. Here are the papers of the enemy." He held them up and shook them impatiently as he spoke. "They give me no information that I can rely on. For all I can tell to the contrary, the main body of the Germans, outnumbering us ten to one, may be nearer this cottage than the main body of the French. Draw your own conclusions. I have nothing more to say."

Having answered in those discouraging terms, Captain Arnault got on his feet, drew the hood of his great-coat over his head, and lit a cigar at the candle.

"Where are you going?" asked the surgeon.

"To visit the outposts."

"Do you want this room for a little while?"

"Not for some hours to come. Are you thinking of moving any of your wounded men in here?"

"I was thinking of the English lady," answered the surgeon. "The kitchen is not quite the place for her. She would be more comfortable here; and the English nurse might keep her company."

Captain Arnault smiled, not very pleasantly. "They are two fine women," he said, "and Surgeon Surville is a ladies' man. Let them come in, if they are

rash enough to trust themselves here with you." He checked himself on the point of going out, and looked back distrustfully at the lighted candle.

"Caution the women," he said, "to limit the exercise of their curiosity to the inside of this room."

"What do you mean?"

The captain's forefinger pointed significantly to the closed window-shutter.

"Did you ever know a woman who could resist looking out of window?" he asked. "Dark as it is, sooner or later these ladies of yours will feel tempted to open that shutter. Tell them I don't want the light of the candle to betray my headquarters to the German scouts. How is the weather? Still raining?"

"Pouring."

"So much the better. The Germans won't see us." With that consolatory remark he unlocked the door leading into the yard, and walked out.

The surgeon lifted the canvas screen and called into the kitchen:

"Miss Merrick, have you time to take a little rest?"

"Plenty of time," answered a soft voice with an underlying melancholy in it, plainly distinguishable though it had only spoken three words.

"Come in, then," continued the surgeon, "and bring the English lady with you. Here is a quiet room all to yourselves."

He held back the canvas, and the two women appeared.

The nurse led the way--tall, lithe, graceful--attired in her uniform dress of neat black stuff, with plain linen collar and cuffs, and with the scarlet cross of the Geneva Convention embroidered on her left shoulder. Pale and sad, her expression and manner both eloquently suggestive of suppressed suffering and sorrow, there was an innate nobility in the carriage of this woman's head, an innate grandeur in the gaze of her large gray eyes and in the lines of her finely proportioned face, which made her irresistibly striking and beautiful, seen under any circumstances and clad in any dress. Her companion, darker in complexion and smaller in stature, possessed attractions which were quite marked enough to account for the surgeon's polite anxiety to shelter her in the captain's room. The common consent of mankind would have declared her to be an unusually pretty woman. She

wore the large gray cloak that covered her from head to foot with a grace that lent its own attractions to a plain and even a shabby article of dress. The languor in her movements, and the uncertainty of tone in her voice as she thanked the surgeon suggested that she was suffering from fatigue. Her dark eyes searched the dimly-lighted room timidly, and she held fast by the nurse's arm with the air of a woman whose nerves had been severely shaken by some recent alarm.

"You have one thing to remember, ladies," said the surgeon. "Beware of opening the shutter, for fear of the light being seen through the window. For the rest, we are free to make ourselves as comfortable here as we can. Compose yourself, dear madam, and rely on the protection of a Frenchman who is devoted to you!" He gallantly emphasized his last words by raising the hand of the English lady to his lips. At the moment when he kissed it the canvas screen was again drawn aside. A person in the service of the ambulance appeared, announcing that a bandage had slipped, and that one of the wounded men was to all appearance bleeding to death. The surgeon, submitting to destiny with the worst possible grace, dropped the charming Englishwoman's hand, and returned to his duties in the kitchen. The two ladies were left together in the room.

"Will you take a chair, madam?" asked the nurse.

"Don't call me 'madam,'" returned the young lady, cordially. "My name is Grace Roseberry. What is your name?"

The nurse hesitated. "Not a pretty name, like yours," she said, and hesitated again. "Call me 'Mercy Merrick,'" she added, after a moment's consideration.

Had she given an assumed name? Was there some unhappy celebrity attached to her own name? Miss Roseberry did not wait to ask herself these questions. "How can I thank you," she exclaimed, gratefully, "for your sisterly kindness to a stranger like me?"

"I have only done my duty," said Mercy Merrick, a little coldly. "Don't speak of it."

"I must speak of it. What a situation you found me in when the French soldiers had driven the Germans away! My traveling-carriage stopped; the horses seized; I myself in a strange country at nightfall, robbed of my money and my luggage, and drenched to the skin by the pouring rain! I am indebted to you for shelter in this place--I am wearing your clothes--I should have died of the fright and the exposure but for you. What return can I

make for such services as these?"

Mercy placed a chair for her guest near the captain's table, and seated herself, at some little distance, on an old chest in a corner of the room. "May I ask you a question?" she said, abruptly.

"A hundred questions," cried Grace, "if you like." She looked at the expiring fire, and at the dimly visible figure of her companion seated in the obscurest corner of the room. "That wretched candle hardly gives any light," she said, impatiently. "It won't last much longer. Can't we make the place more cheerful? Come out of your corner. Call for more wood and more lights."

Mercy remained in her corner and shook her head. "Candles and wood are scarce things here," she answered. "We must be patient, even if we are left in the dark. Tell me," she went on, raising her quiet voice a little, "how came you to risk crossing the frontier in wartime?"

Grace's voice dropped when she answered the question. Grace's momentary gayety of manner suddenly left her.

"I had urgent reasons," she said, "for returning to England."

"Alone?" rejoined the other. "Without any one to protect you?"

Grace's head sank on her bosom. "I have left my only protector--my father--in the English burial-ground at Rome," she answered simply. "My mother died, years since, in Canada."

The shadowy figure of the nurse suddenly changed its position on the chest. She had started as the last word passed Miss Roseberry's lips.

"Do you know Canada?" asked Grace.

"Well," was the brief answer--reluctantly given, short as it was.

"Were you ever near Port Logan?"

"I once lived within a few miles of Port Logan."

"When?"

"Some time since." With those words Mercy Merrick shrank back into her corner and changed the subject. "Your relatives in England must be very

anxious about you," she said.

Grace sighed. "I have no relatives in England. You can hardly imagine a person more friendless than I am. We went away from Canada, when my father's health failed, to try the climate of Italy, by the doctor's advice. His death has left me not only friendless but poor." She paused, and took a leather letter-case from the pocket of the large gray cloak which the nurse had lent to her. "My prospects in life," she resumed, "are all contained in this little case. Here is the one treasure I contrived to conceal when I was robbed of my other things."

Mercy could just see the letter-case as Grace held it up in the deepening obscurity of the room. "Have you got money in it?" she asked.

"No; only a few family papers, and a letter from my father, introducing me to an elderly lady in England--a connection of his by marriage, whom I have never seen. The lady has consented to receive me as her companion and reader. If I don't return to England soon, some other person may get the place."

"Have you no other resource?"

"None. My education has been neglected--we led a wild life in the far West. I am quite unfit to go out as a governess. I am absolutely dependent on this stranger, who receives me for my father's sake." She put the letter-case back in the pocket of her cloak, and ended her little narrative as unaffectedly as she had begun it. "Mine is a sad story, is it not?" she said.

The voice of the nurse answered her suddenly and bitterly in these strange words:

"There are sadder stories than yours. There are thousands of miserable women who would ask for no greater blessing than to change places with you."

Grace started. "What can there possibly be to envy in such a lot as mine?"

"Your unblemished character, and your prospect of being established honorably in a respectable house."

Grace turned in her chair, and looked wonderingly into the dim corner of the room.

"How strangely you say that!" she exclaimed. There was no answer; the shadowy figure on the chest never moved. Grace rose impulsively, and drawing her chair after her, approached the nurse. "Is there some romance in your life?" she asked. "Why have you sacrificed yourself to the terrible duties which I find you performing here? You interest me indescribably. Give me your hand."

Mercy shrank back, and refused the offered hand.

"Are we not friends?" Grace asked, in astonishment.

"We can never be friends."

"Why not?"

The nurse was dumb. Grace called to mind the hesitation that she had shown when she had mentioned her name, and drew a new conclusion from it. "Should I be guessing right," she asked, eagerly, "if I guessed you to be some great lady in disguise?"

Mercy laughed to herself--low and bitterly. "I a great lady!" she said, contemptuously. "For Heaven's sake, let us talk of something else!"

Grace's curiosity was thoroughly roused. She persisted. "Once more," she whispered, persuasively, "let us be friends." She gently laid her hand as she spoke on Mercy's shoulder. Mercy roughly shook it off. There was a rudeness in the action which would have offended the most patient woman living. Grace drew back indignantly. "Ah!" she cried, "you are cruel."

"I am kind," answered the nurse, speaking more sternly than ever.

"Is it kind to keep me at a distance? I have told you my story."

The nurse's voice rose excitedly. "Don't tempt me to speak out," she said; "you will regret it."

Grace declined to accept the warning. "I have placed confidence in you," she went on. "It is ungenerous to lay me under an obligation, and then to shut me out of your confidence in return."

"You will have it?" said Mercy Merrick. "You shall have it! Sit down again." Grace's heart began to quicken its beat in expectation of the disclosure that was to come. She drew her chair closer to the chest on which the nurse was

sitting. With a firm hand Mercy put the chair back to a distance from her. "Not so near me!" she said, harshly.

"Why not?"

"Not so near," repeated the sternly resolute voice. "Wait till you have heard what I have to say."

Grace obeyed without a word more. There was a momentary silence. A faint flash of light leaped up from the expiring candle, and showed Mercy crouching on the chest, with her elbows on her knees, and her face hidden in her hands. The next instant the room was buried in obscurity. As the darkness fell on the two women the nurse spoke.