

## **CHAPTER XXVII. MAGDALEN'S APPRENTICESHIP.**

"MR. JULIAN GRAY has asked me to tell him, and to tell you, Mr. Holmcroft, how my troubles began. They began before my recollection. They began with my birth.

"My mother (as I have heard her say) ruined her prospects, when she was quite a young girl, by a marriage with one of her father's servants--the groom who rode out with her. She suffered, poor creature, the usual penalty of such conduct as hers. After a short time she and her husband were separated--on the condition of her sacrificing to the man whom she had married the whole of the little fortune that she possessed in her right.

"Gaining her freedom, my mother had to gain her daily bread next. Her family refused to take her back. She attached herself to a company of strolling players.

"She was earning a bare living in this way, when my father accidentally met with her. He was a man of high rank, proud of his position, and well known in the society of that time for his many accomplishments and his refined tastes. My mother's beauty fascinated him. He took her from the strolling players, and surrounded her with every luxury that a woman could desire in a house of her own.

"I don't know how long they lived together. I only know that my father, at the time of my first recollections, had abandoned her. She had excited his suspicions of her fidelity--suspicions which cruelly wronged her, as she declared to her dying day. I believed her, because she was my mother. But I cannot expect others to do as I did--I can only repeat what she said. My father left her absolutely penniless. He never saw her again; and he refused to go to her when she sent to him in her last moments on earth.

"She was back again among the strolling players when I first remember her. It was not an unhappy time for me. I was the favorite pet and plaything of the poor actors. They taught me to sing and to dance at an age when other children are just beginning to learn to read. At five years old I was in what is called 'the profession,' and had made my poor little reputation in booths at country fairs. As early as that, Mr. Holmcroft, I had begun to live under an assumed name--the prettiest name they could invent for me 'to look well in the bills.' It was sometimes a hard struggle for us, in bad seasons, to keep body and soul together. Learning to sing and dance in public often meant

learning to bear hunger and cold in private, when I was apprenticed to the stage. And yet I have lived to look back on my days with the strolling players as the happiest days of my life!

"I was ten years old when the first serious misfortune that I can remember fell upon me. My mother died, worn out in the prime of her life. And not long afterward the strolling company, brought to the end of its resources by a succession of bad seasons, was broken up.

"I was left on the world, a nameless, penniless outcast, with one fatal inheritance--God knows, I can speak of it without vanity, after what I have gone through!--the inheritance of my mother's beauty.

"My only friends were the poor starved-out players. Two of them (husband and wife) obtained engagements in another company, and I was included in the bargain. The new manager by whom I was employed was a drunkard and a brute. One night I made a trifling mistake in the course of the performances--and I was savagely beaten for it. Perhaps I had inherited some of my father's spirit--without, I hope, also inheriting my father's pitiless nature. However that may be, I resolved (no matter what became of me) never again to serve the man who had beaten me. I unlocked the door of our miserable lodging at daybreak the next morning; and, at ten years old, with my little bundle in my hand, I faced the world alone.

"My mother had confided to me, in her last moments, my father's name and the address of his house in London. 'He may feel some compassion for you' (she said), 'though he feels none for me: try him.' I had a few shillings, the last pitiful remains of my wages, in my pocket; and I was not far from London. But I never went near my father: child as I was, I would have starved and died rather than go to him. I had loved my mother dearly; and I hated the man who had turned his back on her when she lay on her deathbed. It made no difference to Me that he happened to be my father.

"Does this confession revolt you? You look at me, Mr. Holmcraft, as if it did.

"Think a little, sir. Does what I have just said condemn me as a heartless creature, even in my earliest years? What is a father to a child--when the child has never sat on his knee, and never had a kiss or a present from him? If we had met in the street, we should not have known each other. Perhaps in after-days, when I was starving in London, I may have begged of my father without knowing it; and he may have thrown his daughter a penny to get rid of her, without knowing it either! What is there sacred in the relations between father and child, when they are such relations as

these? Even the flowers of the field cannot grow without light and air to help them! How is a child's love to grow, with nothing to help it?

"My small savings would have been soon exhausted, even if I had been old enough and strong enough to protect them myself. As things were, my few shillings were taken from me by gypsies. I had no reason to complain. They gave me food and the shelter of their tents, and they made me of use to them in various ways. After a while hard times came to the gypsies, as they had come to the strolling players. Some of them were imprisoned; the rest were dispersed. It was the season for hop-gathering at the time. I got employment among the hop-pickers next; and that done, I went to London with my new friends.

"I have no wish to weary and pain you by dwelling on this part of my childhood in detail. It will be enough if I tell you that I sank lower and lower until I ended in selling matches in the street. My mother's legacy got me many a sixpence which my matches would never have charmed out of the pockets of strangers if I had been an ugly child. My face, which was destined to be my greatest misfortune in after-years, was my best friend in those days.

"Is there anything, Mr. Holmcroft, in the life I am now trying to describe which reminds you of a day when we were out walking together not long since?

"I surprised and offended you, I remember; and it was not possible for me to explain my conduct at the time. Do you recollect the little wandering girl, with the miserable faded nosegay in her hand, who ran after us, and begged for a half-penny? I shocked you by bursting out crying when the child asked us to buy her a bit of bread. Now you know why I was so sorry for her. Now you know why I offended you the next day by breaking an engagement with your mother and sisters, and going to see that child in her wretched home. After what I have confessed, you will admit that my poor little sister in adversity had the first claim on me.

"Let me go on. I am sorry if I have distressed you. Let me go on.

"The forlorn wanderers of the streets have (as I found it) one way always open to them of presenting their sufferings to the notice of their rich and charitable fellow-creatures. They have only to break the law--and they make a public appearance in a court of justice. If the circumstances connected with their offense are of an interesting kind, they gain a second advantage: they are advertised all over England by a report in the newspapers.

"Yes! even I have my knowledge of the law. I know that it completely overlooked me as long as I respected it. But on two different occasions it became my best friend when I set it at defiance! My first fortunate offense was committed when I was just twelve years old.

"It was evening time. I was half dead with starvation; the rain was falling; the night was coming on. I begged--openly, loudly, as only a hungry child can beg. An old lady in a carriage at a shop door complained of my importunity. The policeman did his duty. The law gave me a supper and shelter at the station-house that night. I appeared at the police court, and, questioned by the magistrate, I told my story truly. It was the every-day story of thousands of children like me; but it had one element of interest in it. I confessed to having had a father (he was then dead) who had been a man of rank; and I owned (just as openly as I owned everything else) that I had never applied to him for help, in resentment of his treatment of my mother. This incident was new, I suppose; it led to the appearance of my 'case' in the newspapers. The reporters further served my interests by describing me as 'pretty and interesting.' Subscriptions were sent to the court. A benevolent married couple, in a respectable sphere of life, visited the workhouse to see me. I produced a favorable impression on them--especially on the wife. I was literally friendless; I had no unwelcome relatives to follow me and claim me. The wife was childless; the husband was a good-natured man. It ended in their taking me away with them to try me in service.

"I have always felt the aspiration, no matter how low I may have fallen, to struggle upward to a position above me; to rise, in spite of fortune, superior to my lot in life. Perhaps some of my father's pride may be at the root of this restless feeling in me. It seems to be a part of my nature. It brought me into this house--and it will go with me out of this house. Is it my curse or my blessing? I am not able to decide.

"On the first night when I slept in my new home I said to myself, 'They have taken me to be their servant: I will be something more than that--they shall end in taking me for their child.' Before I had been a week in the house I was the wife's favorite companion in the absence of her husband at his place of business. She was a highly accomplished woman, greatly her husband's superior in cultivation, and, unfortunately for herself, also his superior in years. The love was all on her side. Excepting certain occasions on which he roused her jealousy, they lived together on sufficiently friendly terms. She was one of the many wives who resign themselves to be disappointed in their husbands--and he was one of the many husbands who never know what

their wives really think of them. Her one great happiness was in teaching me. I was eager to learn; I made rapid progress. At my pliant age I soon acquired the refinements of language and manner which characterized my mistress. It is only the truth to say that the cultivation which has made me capable of personating a lady was her work.

"For three happy years I lived under that friendly roof. I was between fifteen and sixteen years of age, when the fatal inheritance from my mother cast its first shadow on my life. One miserable day the wife's motherly love for me changed in an instant to the jealous hatred that never forgives. Can you guess the reason? The husband fell in love with me.

"I was innocent; I was blameless. He owned it himself to the clergyman who was with him at his death. By that time years had passed. It was too late to justify me.

"He was at an age (when I was under his care) when men are usually supposed to regard women with tranquillity, if not with indifference. It had been the habit of years with me to look on him as my second father. In my innocent ignorance of the feeling which really inspired him, I permitted him to indulge in little paternal familiarities with me, which inflamed his guilty passion. His wife discovered him--not I. No words can describe my astonishment and my horror when the first outbreak of her indignation forced on me the knowledge of the truth. On my knees I declared myself guiltless. On my knees I implored her to do justice to my purity and my youth. At other times the sweetest and the most considerate of women, jealousy had now transformed her to a perfect fury. She accused me of deliberately encouraging him; she declared she would turn me out of the house with her own hands. Like other easy-tempered men, her husband had reserves of anger in him which it was dangerous to provoke. When his wife lifted her hand against me, he lost all self-control, on his side. He openly told her that life was worth nothing to him without me. He openly avowed his resolution to go with me when I left the house. The maddened woman seized him by the arm--I saw that, and saw no more. I ran out into the street, panic-stricken. A cab was passing. I got into it before he could open the house door, and drove to the only place of refuge I could think of--a small shop, kept by the widowed sister of one of our servants. Here I obtained shelter for the night. The next day he discovered me. He made his vile proposals; he offered me the whole of his fortune; he declared his resolution, say what I might, to return the next day. That night, by help of the good woman who had taken care of me--under cover of the darkness, as if I had been to blame!--I was secretly removed to the East End of London, and placed under the charge of a trustworthy person who lived, in a very

humble way, by letting lodgings.

"Here, in a little back garret at the top of the house, I was thrown again on the world--an age when it was doubly perilous for me to be left to my own resources to earn the bread I ate and the roof that covered me.

"I claim no credit to myself--young as I was, placed as I was between the easy life of Vice and the hard life of Virtue--for acting as I did. The man simply horrified me: my natural impulse was to escape from him. But let it be remembered, before I approach the saddest part of my sad story, that I was an innocent girl, and that I was at least not to blame.

"Forgive me for dwelling as I have done on my early years. I shrink from speaking of the events that are still to come.

"In losing the esteem of my first benefactress, I had, in my friendless position, lost all hold on an honest life--except the one frail hold of needle-work. The only reference of which I could now dispose was the recommendation of me by my landlady to a place of business which largely employed expert needle-women. It is needless for me to tell you how miserably work of that sort is remunerated: you have read about it in the newspapers. As long as my health lasted I contrived to live and to keep out of debt. Few girls could have resisted as long as I did the slowly-poisoning influences of crowded work-room, insufficient nourishment, and almost total privation of exercise. My life as a child had been a life in the open air: it had helped to strengthen a constitution naturally hardy, naturally free from all taint of hereditary disease. But my time came at last. Under the cruel stress laid on it my health gave way. I was struck down by low fever, and sentence was pronounced on me by my fellow-lodgers: 'Ah, poor thing, her troubles will soon be at an end!'

"The prediction might have proved true--I might never have committed the errors and endured the sufferings of after years--if I had fallen ill in another house.

"But it was my good, or my evil, fortune--I dare not say which--to have interested in myself and my sorrows an actress at a suburban theatre, who occupied the room under mine. Except when her stage duties took her away for two or three hours in the evening, this noble creature never left my bedside. Ill as she could afford it, her purse paid my inevitable expenses while I lay helpless. The landlady, moved by her example, accepted half the weekly rent of my room. The doctor, with the Christian kindness of his profession, would take no fees. All that the tenderest care could accomplish

was lavished on me; my youth and my constitution did the rest. I struggled back to life--and then I took up my needle again.

"It may surprise you that I should have failed (having an actress for my dearest friend) to use the means of introduction thus offered to me to try the stage--especially as my childish training had given me, in some small degree, a familiarity with the Art.

"I had only one motive for shrinking from an appearance at the theatre--but it was strong enough to induce me to submit to any alternative that remained, no matter how hopeless it might be. If I showed myself on the public stage, my discovery by the man from whom I had escaped would be only a question of time. I knew him to be habitually a play-goer and a subscriber to a theatrical newspaper. I had even heard him speak of the theatre to which my friend was attached, and compare it advantageously with places of amusement of far higher pretensions. Sooner or later, if I joined the company he would be certain to go and see 'the new actress.' The bare thought of it reconciled me to returning to my needle. Before I was strong enough to endure the atmosphere of the crowded workroom I obtained permission, as a favor, to resume my occupation at home.

"Surely my choice was the choice of a virtuous girl? And yet the day when I returned to my needle was the fatal day of my life.

"I had now not only to provide for the wants of the passing hour--I had my debts to pay. It was only to be done by toiling harder than ever, and by living more poorly than ever. I soon paid the penalty, in my weakened state, of leading such a life as this. One evening my head turned suddenly giddy; my heart throbbed frightfully. I managed to open the window, and to let the fresh air into the room, and I felt better. But I was not sufficiently recovered to be able to thread my needle. I thought to myself, 'If I go out for half an hour, a little exercise may put me right again.' I had not, as I suppose, been out more than ten minutes when the attack from which I had suffered in my room was renewed. There was no shop near in which I could take refuge. I tried to ring the bell of the nearest house door. Before I could reach it I fainted in the street.

"How long hunger and weakness left me at the mercy of the first stranger who might pass by, it is impossible for me to say.

"When I partially recovered my senses I was conscious of being under shelter somewhere, and of having a wine-glass containing some cordial drink held to my lips by a man. I managed to swallow--I don't know how



little, or how much. The stimulant had a very strange effect on me. Reviving me at first, it ended in stupefying me. I lost my senses once more.

"When I next recovered myself, the day was breaking. I was in a bed in a strange room. A nameless terror seized me. I called out. Three or four women came in, whose faces betrayed, even to my inexperienced eyes, the shameless infamy of their lives. I started up in the bed. I implored them to tell me where I was, and what had happened--

"Spare me! I can say no more. Not long since you heard Miss Roseberry call me an outcast from the streets. Now you know--as God is my judge I am speaking the truth!--now you know what made me an outcast, and in what measure I deserved my disgrace."

Her voice faltered, her resolution failed her, for the first time.

"Give me a few minutes," she said, in low, pleading tones. "If I try to go on now, I am afraid I shall cry."

She took the chair which Julian had placed for her, turning her face aside so that neither of the men could see it. One of her hands was pressed over her bosom, the other hung listlessly at her side.

Julian rose from the place that he had occupied. Horace neither moved nor spoke. His head was on his breast: the traces of tears on his cheeks owned mutely that she had touched his heart. Would he forgive her? Julian passed on, and approached Mercy's chair.

In silence he took the hand which hung at her side. In silence he lifted it to his lips and kissed it, as her brother might have kissed it. She started, but she never looked up. Some strange fear of discovery seemed to possess her. "Horace?" she whispered, timidly. Julian made no reply. He went back to his place, and allowed her to think it was Horace.

The sacrifice was immense enough--feeling toward her as he felt--to be worthy of the man who made it.

A few minutes had been all she asked for. In a few minutes she turned toward them again. Her sweet voice was steady once more; her eyes rested softly on Horace as she went on.



"What was it possible for a friendless girl in my position to do, when the full knowledge of the outrage had been revealed to me?"

"If I had possessed near and dear relatives to protect and advise me, the wretches into whose hands I had fallen might have felt the penalty of the law. I knew no more of the formalities which set the law in motion than a child. But I had another alternative (you will say). Charitable societies would have received me and helped me, if I had stated my case to them. I knew no more of the charitable societies than I knew of the law. At least, then, I might have gone back to the honest people among whom I had lived? When I received my freedom, after the interval of some days, I was ashamed to go back to the honest people. Helplessly and hopelessly, without sin or choice of mine, I drifted, as thousands of other women have drifted, into the life which set a mark on me for the rest of my days.

"Are you surprised at the ignorance which this confession reveals?"

"You, who have your solicitors to inform you of legal remedies and your newspapers, circulars, and active friends to sound the praises of charitable institutions continually in your ears--you, who possess these advantages, have no idea of the outer world of ignorance in which your lost fellow-creatures live. They know nothing (unless they are rogues accustomed to prey on society) of your benevolent schemes to help them. The purpose of public charities, and the way to discover and apply to them, ought to be posted at the corner of every street. What do we know of public dinners and eloquent sermons and neatly printed circulars? Every now and then the ease of some forlorn creature (generally of a woman) who has committed suicide, within five minutes' walk, perhaps, of an institution which would have opened its doors to her, appears in the newspapers, shocks you dreadfully, and is then forgotten again. Take as much pains to make charities and asylums known among the people without money as are taken to make a new play, a new journal, or a new medicine known among the people with money and you will save many a lost creature who is perishing now.

"You will forgive and understand me if I say no more of this period of my life. Let me pass to the new incident in my career which brought me for the second time before the public notice in a court of law.

"Sad as my experience has been, it has not taught me to think ill of human nature. I had found kind hearts to feel for me in my former troubles; and I had friends--faithful, self-denying, generous friends--among my sisters in adversity now. One of these poor women (she has gone, I am glad to think,

from the world that used her so hardly) especially attracted my sympathies. She was the gentlest, the most unselfish creature I have ever met with. We lived together like sisters. More than once in the dark hours when the thought of self-destruction comes to a desperate woman, the image of my poor devoted friend, left to suffer alone, rose in my mind and restrained me. You will hardly understand it, but even we had our happy days. When she or I had a few shillings to spare, we used to offer one another little presents, and enjoy our simple pleasure in giving and receiving as keenly as if we had been the most reputable women living.

"One day I took my friend into a shop to buy her a ribbon--only a bow for her dress. She was to choose it, and I was to pay for it, and it was to be the prettiest ribbon that money could buy.

"The shop was full; we had to wait a little before we could be served.

"Next to me, as I stood at the counter with my companion, was a gaudily-dressed woman, looking at some handkerchiefs. The handkerchiefs were finely embroidered, but the smart lady was hard to please. She tumbled them up disdainfully in a heap, and asked for other specimens from the stock in the shop. The man, in clearing the handkerchiefs out of the way, suddenly missed one. He was quite sure of it, from a peculiarity in the embroidery which made the handkerchief especially noticeable. I was poorly dressed, and I was close to the handkerchiefs. After one look at me he shouted to the superintendent: 'Shut the door! There is a thief in the shop!'

"The door was closed; the lost handkerchief was vainly sought for on the counter and on the floor. A robbery had been committed; and I was accused of being the thief.

"I will say nothing of what I felt--I will only tell you what happened.

"I was searched, and the handkerchief was discovered on me. The woman who had stood next to me, on finding herself threatened with discovery, had no doubt contrived to slip the stolen handkerchief into my pocket. Only an accomplished thief could have escaped detection in that way without my knowledge. It was useless, in the face of the facts, to declare my innocence. I had no character to appeal to. My friend tried to speak for me; but what was she? Only a lost woman like myself. My landlady's evidence in favor of my honesty produced no effect; it was against her that she let lodgings to people in my position. I was prosecuted, and found guilty. The tale of my disgrace is now complete, Mr. Holmcraft. No matter whether I was innocent or not, the shame of it remains--I have been imprisoned for theft.

"The matron of the prison was the next person who took an interest in me. She reported favorably of my behavior to the authorities and when I had served my time (as the phrase was among us) she gave me a letter to the kind friend and guardian of my later years--to the lady who is coming here to take me back with her to the Refuge.

"From this time the story of my life is little more than the story of a woman's vain efforts to recover her lost place in the world.

"The matron, on receiving me into the Refuge, frankly acknowledged that there were terrible obstacles in my way. But she saw that I was sincere, and she felt a good woman's sympathy and compassion for me. On my side, I did not shrink from beginning the slow and weary journey back again to a reputable life from the humblest starting-point--from domestic service. After first earning my new character in the Refuge, I obtained a trial in a respectable house. I worked hard, and worked uncomplainingly; but my mother's fatal legacy was against me from the first. My personal appearance excited remark; my manners and habits were not the manners and habits of the women among whom my lot was cast. I tried one place after another--always with the same results. Suspicion and jealousy I could endure; but I was defenseless when curiosity assailed me in its turn. Sooner or later inquiry led to discovery. Sometimes the servants threatened to give warning in a body--and I was obliged to go. Sometimes, where there was a young man in the family, scandal pointed at me and at him--and again I was obliged to go. If you care to know it, Miss Roseberry can tell you the story of those sad days. I confided it to her on the memorable night when we met in the French cottage; I have no heart repeat it now. After a while I wearied of the hopeless struggle. Despair laid its hold on me--I lost all hope in the mercy of God. More than once I walked to one or other of the bridges, and looked over the parapet at the river, and said to myself 'Other women have done it: why shouldn't I?'

"You saved me at that time, Mr. Gray--as you have saved me since. I was one of your congregation when you preached in the chapel of the Refuge You reconciled others besides me to our hard pilgrimage. In their name and in mine, sir, I thank you.

"I forget how long it was after the bright day when you comforted and sustained us that the war broke out between France and Germany. But I can never forget the evening when the matron sent for me into her own room and said, 'My dear, your life here is a wasted life. If you have courage enough left to try it, I can give you another chance.'

"I passed through a month of probation in a London hospital. A week after that I wore the red cross of the Geneva Convention--I was appointed nurse in a French ambulance. When you first saw me, Mr. Holmcroft, I still had my nurse's dress on, hidden from you and from everybody under a gray cloak.

"You know what the next event was; you know how I entered this house.

"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 offense, that I have committed, before the man whom I have wronged."