

Mary Magdalene

A Play in Three Acts

BY

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

I have borrowed from Mr. Paul Heyse's drama, *Maria von Magdala*, the idea of two situations in my play, namely, at the end of the first act, the intervention of Christ, who stops the crowd raging against Mary Magdalene with these words, spoken behind the scenes: "He that is without sin among you, let him cast the first stone;" and, in the third, the dilemma in which the great sinner finds herself, of saving or destroying the Son of God, according as she consents or refuses to give herself to a Roman.

Before setting to work, I asked the venerable German poet, whom I hold in the highest esteem, for his permission to develop those two situations, which, so to speak, were merely sketched in his play, with its incomparably richer plot than mine; and I offered to recognize his rights in whatever manner he thought proper. My respectful request was answered with a refusal, none too courteous, I regret to say, and almost threatening.

From that moment, I was bound to consider that the words from the Gospel, quoted above, are common property; and that the dilemma of which I speak is one of those which occur pretty frequently in dramatic literature. It seemed to me the more lawful to make use of it inasmuch as I had happened to imagine it in the fourth act of *Joyzelle*, in the same year in which *Maria von Magdala* was published and before I was able to become acquainted with that play.

I will add that, excepting the principle of these two situations, in all that concerns the subject of the play, the conduct of the action, the persons, the characters, the evolution and the atmosphere, our two works have absolutely nothing in common: not a phrase, not a cue of the one will be found in the other.

Having said this, I am happy to express to the aged master my gratitude for an intellectual benefit which is none the less great for being involuntary.

MAURICE MAETERLINCK.

ACT I

(The gardens of ANNÆUS SILANUS at Bethany. A Roman terrace. A quincunx. Marble benches, porticoes, statues. In the centre, a basin with a fountain. Arbours. Orange-trees and laurel-trees in stone vases. A balustrade on the right and left, overlooking the valley. A balustrade at the back, open at the middle to give access to a walk lined with plane-trees and statues and ending in a thick hedge of laurels which closes the garden.)

SCENE I

(ENTER ANNÆUS SILANUS AND LUCIUS VERUS)

SILANUS

Here is the terrace, the glory of my little domain: it reminds me of my terrace at Præneste, which was the crown of my desires. Here are my orange-trees, my cypresses and my oleanders. Here is the fish-pond, the portico with the images of the gods: one of them is a statue of Minerva, discovered at Antioch. (*Pointing to the landscape on the left.*) And here you have the incomparable view over the valley, where spring already reigns. We hang midway in space. Admire the anemones streaming down the slopes of Bethany. It is as though the earth were ablaze beneath the olive-trees. Here I relish in peace the advantages of old age, which knows how to take pleasure in the past; for youth narrows the enjoyment of good things, by considering only those which are present....

VERUS

At last! Here are trees and water and grass!... I had lost the memory of them since my arrival in this stony desert which men call Judæa.... But how comes it, O my good master, that you have taken up your abode near that dull and barren city, where the soil is abominable, where the men are ugly, churlish, crafty and mischievous, unclean and barbarous?

SILANUS

As you know, I came with the Procurator Valerius Gratus to Cæsarea; then I returned to Rome, where you were for some time my faithful and favourite pupil. But soon I became ashamed of teaching a wisdom whose certainties became more doubtful to my

mind as the assurance wherewith I proclaimed them increased. I was brought back here, to this barbarous Judæa, by the strangest curiosity. During my first sojourn, I had begun to study the sacred books of the Jews. They are crude and bloodthirsty; but they also contain beautiful myths and the early efforts of an uncivilized but, at times, singular wisdom. They have not yet wearied me.

VERUS

Yes, our friend Appius, whom I met at Antioch, told me of your studies and of your sudden and inordinate passion for old Jewish books....

SILANUS

He will be here shortly....

VERUS

Who? Appius?... Is he at Jerusalem?

SILANUS

Did you not know?... But how long have you yourself been in this country?... In your letter of two days since, you did not tell me....

VERUS

Nearly a week; and I wished to give my first leisure to you. I left Antioch to go to Jerusalem with the Procurator Pontius Pilate. He fears disturbances and will probably need the help of my old legionaries....

SILANUS

The spacious, ample Appius, whose words are as rambling as his habits and bring together the most distant friends, spoke to me of you, even as he spoke to you of me. He told me that, when he had the good fortune to meet you at Antioch, you seemed a prey to some great unhappy love....

VERUS

Which was that?

SILANUS

What! Can the handsomest of military tribunes, in his magnificent array, know more than one love that is not happy?... It concerned a woman of these regions, a Galilean, if I be not mistaken....

VERUS

Mary of Magdala?... Did he speak to you of her?... Where is she?... I did not see her again; she left Antioch suddenly; and I lost trace of her....

SILANUS

But why did she not listen to you?... Appius declared to me that she sets the men of this country, it is true, at naught, but shows herself not at all inexorable to the Roman knights....

VERUS

It is one of those riddles of womankind which our duties as soldiers hardly leave us time to solve. She did not appear to dislike me; at least, the dislike which she affected was not without a harsh gentleness.... But there was mingled with it a certain incomprehensible dread, which made her timidly avoid me.... Besides, she seemed lately to have suffered a great sorrow, for which she has already, I hear, consoled herself more than once....

SILANUS

I do not know; and all this does not seem to me so very discouraging. After all, why afflict one's self with what the gods created for pleasure?... Appius, therefore, wished me to cure you, by my wise counsels, of an ill that saddens you needlessly. But,

first, do you love her as much as Appius declares? His talk is often extravagant and heedless....

VERUS

I desired her, I still desire her, as I have never desired any woman....

SILANUS

You speak wisely in not separating, from the outset, desire and love. Besides, I understand. She is certainly the loveliest of all the many women whom I have admired in my life.

VERUS

What!... You have seen her?... Is she at Jerusalem then?

SILANUS

She is even nearer to us than Jerusalem, which is fifteen stadia from Bethany.... (*Drawing him a little to the right*). Come to this portico and look over there, at the bottom of the valley.... What do you see?...

VERUS

I see olive-trees, paths, tombs.... Then I see the pediments of palaces or temples, columns, cypresses.... One might think one's self in the outskirts of Rome.... But I do not perceive....

SILANUS

It was Herod the Great, a sort of raving lunatic, but given to building, who filled this valley with splendid palaces more Roman than those of Rome herself.... But look half-way down the hill, to the left of those three tall cypresses, three or four stadia from here.... Do you espy one of the most beautiful marble villas?...

VERUS

The villa with the wide white steps leading to a semicircular colonnade adorned with statues?...

SILANUS

That is where she has retired....

VERUS

Mary Magdalene?... In that solitude, so far from the city?...

SILANUS

She told me that she was fleeing from the fanaticism of the Jews, the tumult and the sickening smells, which increase twofold at Jerusalem as the Passover approaches....

VERUS

Then you see her?... You have spoken to her?...

SILANUS

The good Appius, knowing that the sight of a young and beautiful woman delights my eyes without endangering them, did not dissuade her from coming up to the house of a disarmed and harmless old man....

VERUS

What did she say to you?... What impression did she make upon you?...

SILANUS

She was clad in a raiment that seemed woven of pearls and dew, in a cloak of Tyrian purple with sapphire ornaments, and decked with jewels that rendered a little heavier this eastern pomp. As for her hair, surely, unloosed, it would cover the surface of that porphyry vase with an impenetrable veil of gold....

VERUS

I speak of her intelligence, her character.... Do not mistake: she is no vulgar courtesan.... She has other attractions, binding love more firmly....

SILANUS

I minded only her beauty, which is real and contents the eye.... However, we can judge better presently: she will soon be coming....

VERUS

She is coming here?... But does she know that she will find me with you?...

SILANUS

Most certainly. It seemed to me that this meeting would do more to assuage your malady than the wise counsels threatened by Appius....

VERUS

But she?... What did she say when she learnt that....

SILANUS

She smiled with a quivering and pensive grace.... The other guests will be our indispensable Appius and Cœlius, your fellow-pupil at Præneste.... I hope that they will bring our poor friend Longinus, who, three weeks ago, lost a little daughter two years old.... I will try to console him, by good and persuasive arguments, for a sorrow certainly disproportionate to his loss. We shall have, among other dishes—all excellent, I hope,—two fish from the Jordan, new to you, which, dressed by Davus, my old cook.... But I hear the sound of the double flute.... It must be the litter of the queen of Bethany and Jerusalem at the threshold of my house.... Your eyes will soon behold the soft light which they have missed and mine the smile that pleases them ... unless the silver mirrors in the Atrium delay her longer than they should....

VERUS

She is here....

(ENTER, on the right, MARY MAGDALENE. She is followed by some slaves, whom she dismisses with a harsh and imperious gesture.)

SCENE II

THE SAME, MARY MAGDALENE

SILANUS (*GOING UP TO RECEIVE MARY MAGDALENE*)

“Who is this that cometh out of the wilderness like pillars of smoke, perfumed with myrrh and frankincense?... Who is she that looketh forth as the morning, fair as the moon, clear as the sun and terrible as an army with banners,” as your sacred books sing at the approach of the Shulamite?...

MARY MAGDALENE

Do not speak to me of my sacred books. I loathe them, as I loathe everything that comes from that deceitful and sordid, greedy and mischievous nation....

VERUS (coming forward to greet her in his turn)

I will say then, in the Roman fashion, “Hail to the eldest daughter of Aglaia, youngest and happiest of the Graces!”

MARY MAGDALENE

Pity me, instead of praising me. I was robbed, last night, of my Carthaginian rubies, besides twelve of my finest pearls; and, what I feel even more, my Babylonian peacock and all the murænæ in my fish-pond....

VERUS

Who dared commit such manifest sacrilege?...

MARY MAGDALENE

I do not know.... I have had the slaves in charge of the aviary and the fish-pond beaten with rods and put to the torture: they have confessed nothing and I believe that they know nothing....

VERUS

Have you no clue, no suspicion?

SILANUS

The theft amazes me, for the country is safe.... I have been living here for nigh six years; and no one has ever tried to rob me of an atom of my wisdom, which is never under lock and key and is the only precious thing that I possess.... The Jew is crafty, sly and evil-minded; he practises cheating and usury as well as most of the cringing virtues and vices; but he nearly always avoids frank, straightforward theft, honest theft, if one may say so....

MARY MAGDALENE

I at first suspected some Tyrian workmen who are fitting one of the rooms in my villa with those movable panels which are changed at every course, so that the walls may harmonize with the dishes covering the table....

VERUS

I have seen some like them in the house of our Governor, Pomponius Flaccus, at Antioch; but I did not know that this fashion, so new to Rome herself, had already made its way into this remote country....

MARY MAGDALENE

Nor will you find it, except in my house; and the last palace of the Tetrarch Antipas is still without it.... Therefore I began by suspecting those workmen; but I have proofs that they are innocent. I now feel sure that the thieves must be sought among that band of vagrants and prowlers who have been infesting the country for some time....

SILANUS

The famous band of the Nazarene....

MARY MAGDALENE

Even so. Their leader, I hear, is a sort of unwashed brigand who entices the crowds with a rude kind of sorcery and, on the pretence of preaching some new law or doctrine, lives by plunder and surrounds himself with fellows capable of everything.... Besides, I have other causes to complain of them.... Two days ago, when I was walking in my gardens, under the portico that divides them from the road, a dozen wretches, belonging to that band, insulted me foully and threatened me with stones.... It is becoming intolerable; and it is time that the countryside were rid of them....

VERUS

I have heard about those people.... I know that the authorities have their eyes upon them.... I will have them watched more closely. For that matter, if you wish, it would be easy for me to arrest their leader....

MARY MAGDALENE

Do so, I pray you, and as soon as possible.... I should be especially grateful to you....

SILANUS

I believe that you are misled. The robbers, in my opinion, must not be looked for there. I am in a fairly good position to know the band, seeing that, for five or six days, it has been gathered near my house. I have even had the pleasure—for everything turns to pleasure at my age—I have even had the pleasure of attending one of their meetings. It was near the old road to Jericho. The leader was speaking in the midst of a crowd covered with dust and rags, among whom I observed a large number of rather repulsive cripples and sick. They seem extremely ignorant and exalted. They

are poor and dirty, but I believe them to be harmless and incapable of stealing more than a cup of water or an ear of wheat.... They were listening greedily to a more or less silly anecdote, the story of a son who returns to his father after squandering his patrimony.... I did not hear the end, for they looked upon me with a certain suspicion.... But the Galilean, or the Nazarene, as they call him here, is rather curious; and his voice is of a penetrating and peculiar sweetness.... He appears to be the son of a carpenter.... I will tell you more of him, I know many interesting things about him; but permit me first to go to the other side of the house, which commands the road, to see if my belated guests are not in sight....

(He GOES OUT on the left.)

SCENE III

MARY MAGDALENE, VERUS

VERUS

I was not prepared for the joy of seeing you again, of your own consent, after your cruel words. They deprived me even of the hope that is sometimes left to those whom one would drive to despair....

MARY MAGDALENE

I was stupid and foolish; but reason has returned; and I now know that the best love is not worth a tear....

VERUS

Inasmuch as it is hardly the best, nor even a good love, as soon as it causes tears to be shed....

MARY MAGDALENE

There is no more best or worst love for me. Until lately, I lived among falsehoods by which others profited; for the past six months, I have lived among truths by which I myself profit.

VERUS

What do you mean?...

MARY MAGDALENE

That I sell myself more skilfully and dearer than before.

VERUS

Magdalene!... You slander yourself!...

MARY MAGDALENE

You would see, if your desire prompted you to try your fortune, that, on the contrary, I rate myself very highly.

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