

MAGDALEN'S SONG

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HE sweet mystery of her life, the theme of love divine that entrances us when presented with the life of St. Mary Magdalen—is it a sense of failure, of incompleteness? Emotional, impulsively affectionate, proud and tameless, so it seems, was this Lady of Magdala who came by so tortuous a path to the feet of Christ. Francis Thompson¹ describes the flight of a soul from its “tremendous Lover,” God, as an erratic flight “down the arches of the years,” with the soul attaining mountain-tops of hope only to plunge into chasms of fear, today running in the sunshine of laughter, tomorrow “in mists of tears,” ever pleading at the casements of human hearts for a love that will hold forever. And somehow or other, even though Thompson did not write of a soul seeking shelter in unholy loves, yet few souls quite fill the rôle of the pursued, so it seems, as did St. Mary Magdalen.

We know next to nothing about her. But might we not imagine that she, too, fled and sought and pleaded all in vain till she at length turned in exhaustion to wait for her Pursuer? How many times, when her quest for the enduring love seemed to prosper, did sudden silences come upon her, bringing with them “an anguish of doubt, and fear, a night upon all her heart’s experience”? Is all this true, and might we say that Mary Magdalen, like the subject of Francis Thompson’s work, stood one day “amid the dust o’ the mounded years,” reflecting that she had indeed shaken “the pillaring hours” but only to have pulled her life down upon her? Did she too hear a Voice that “beat more instant than the Feet” of her Pursuer: “All things betray thee, who betrayest Me”? Or must one admit that he spins another fantasy about the Magdalen? But then, few names conjure up so many fantasies as that of St. Mary Magdalen, whom even the Holy Ghost has enshrouded in mystery. At all events, we know that Mary Magdalen was she “out of whom he (Jesus) had cast seven devils,” the universality of vice, as St. Gregory comments upon the words of St. Luke.

But Mary did hear a Voice. It was the Voice of the Galilean,

¹*The Hound of Heaven.*

He who had not come "to call the just, but sinners." She listened to the words that poured from His lips as He spoke to the multitudes, and listened again on another day, perhaps—how many times we know not—until she could resist His indirect appeal to her heart no longer. She must make herself worthy of the friendship of this Man who so strangely answered the questions and longings of her heart and told her with His eyes so much of what she sought, almost as much as with the words of His mouth. *He* would not betray her. She knelt at His feet and begged to be allowed to follow Him. But He, to whom a contrite and humbled heart was most acceptable sacrifice, granted more than she asked. For Mary of Magdala became one of those intimates "who ministered unto him of their substance." Mary knew at last the secret of all living; she found at length the end and all of living.

But alas, even as we stand happily meditating upon the predominance of the theme of love divine, we cannot help but perceive a motif of pain struggling for the mastery. This Man is the Man of Sorrows. One year, two years at most, she followed Him in joy and gladness, a novice in the school of Christian life. Then sinners crucified the Master. Too soon, it seems, separation, pain and heartache and longing, gained control of the theme.

Jesus pleaded forgiveness for His executioners. To a stranger thief, He gave a paradise. Mother Mary He gave a son, and St. John a Mother. But to Magdalen, who loved Him only less ardently than John and His Mother, Jesus spoke not so much as a word of parting. St. John was there, he who recorded so much of our Divine Lord's last moments and devoted so many words to the tale of Mary Magdalen and her beloved Master. St. John would have told us of a spoken word. But no, to separation was added the pain of an inexplicable silence. Mary Magdalen knelt at His nail-pierced feet, and the rubies of His blood were silent witnesses to the anguish of this strange life apart.

Joseph and Nicodemus took Jesus down from the Cross, and John placed Him in the arms of His Mother. John and Joseph and Nicodemus bore Him to the tomb, and Mother Mary arranged Him in the sepulchre. Mary Magdalen was the last to leave. Where had she to go? Her all was now but a lingering memory of happiness that could not be restored. With the setting sun she had to leave the garden, for the Sabbath was at hand. Was there an iron band around her heart that grew tighter as her steps took her farther and farther from the end of all her living?

The last to leave, she was the first to return when the Sabbath

rest was done. "On the first day of the week, Mary Magdalen cometh early, when it was yet dark, unto the sepulchre; and she saw the stone taken away from the sepulchre."² She ran to Peter and to the disciple whom Jesus loved. Peter and John came running, and saw, and went away. But Mary, returning, sought again the Body of her Master. Belief in His being alive she had none, for she, too, was "seeking the living among the dead." Disappointment soon exhausted her hopes of finding the Sacred Body of Jesus. But love kept her in the garden. She wept. It is no wonder that she failed to recognize Jesus when she saw Him. "She thinking that it was the gardener, saith to him: Sir, if thou hast taken him hence, tell me where thou hast laid him, and I will take him away." Tenderly, always the understanding One, Jesus spoke one word. "Mary." It was enough. Love swelled triumphant, once more joy was master of the theme. Her every loss restored, "Mary turning to him saith: Rabboni." Deep called on deep in the sounding of each other's name.

Strangely in the eyes of men, Jesus almost at once sent her away. "Jesus saith to her: Do not touch me, for I am not yet ascended to my Father. But go to my brethren and say to them that I ascend to my Father and your Father, my God and your God."³ Mary was human. But Jesus would have her to become divine. Ages before the Psalmist described the disappointment that must have been hers in being sent away so soon. "As the parched deer thirsts for the running streams, so does my lonely heart for Thee, O God!" "I am weary with my crying, my throat is parched, mine eyes have grown weak while waiting for my God."⁴ Yet no word of protest passed Mary's lips. It was enough for her that the Master should deem her worthy to be the Apostle to the Apostles. "Mary Magdalen cometh, and telleth the disciples: I have seen the Lord, and these things he said to me."

So it seems to have been until the end. A few hours with Christ, years of separation. There is a tradition, a strong tradition, but not as old a tradition as we should like, that tells of the identity of the Lady of Magdala both with the woman who washed Christ's feet

² *John* xx.

³ Of all the mysterious words in Scripture, these have been tortured into the most far-fetched meanings. Père Lagrange, O.P., gives them a far more sympathetic meaning in his interpretation: "But this was not the time for the sinner to shed tears on the Saviour's feet. Jesus now belonged to the world above, and although He had not yet ascended to His Father, that would take place before long and it was necessary that He should warn His disciples of the fact. This is apparently the meaning of the words. . . ." *The Gospel of Jesus Christ*, English Translation (New York, 1938), Vol. II, pg. 288.

⁴ *Psalms* xli, 1; lxiii, 4.

with her tears of repentance, and with Mary of Bethany, sister of Martha and Lazarus, who also anointed the Master's feet under much the same circumstances as her sister in Christ Jesus. While the Scriptures do not encourage the tradition, neither do they disprove it. Modern exegetes are inclined more to the opinion that the Evangelists speak of three persons, no one of them to be identified with the others.⁵ And yet Holy Mother Church encourages us in her liturgy to meditate upon them as one, and, to tell the truth, it is hard to think of them otherwise, so avid have we been to grasp every little detail that will add to our knowledge of the lovable Mary. In the light, then, of the Church's encouragement, we can trace Mary's path a little further along her journey to eternal life than the Garden of the Resurrection, where the Scriptures leave us. Raised each morning by angel hands from her cave on a mountain near Marseilles to the peak's greater heights, Mary heard the celestial choirs singing the praises of her Beloved Master. A singular privilege was this. "The eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither hath it entered into the heart of man, what things God hath prepared for them that love him."⁶ But on second thought, how many nights did St. Mary Magdalen kneel pleading as the Psalmist pleaded ages before: "When shall I come and appear before the face of God?"⁷ She who wished but to be dissolved and be with Christ, lived on for thirty years in the blessed solitude of Sainte Baume.

And so as the strains of pure love on earth melt into the strains of heaven's perfect love, we hear the theme in all its clarity, and perhaps understand what it tries to convey. Days of gloom, "days when mortal flesh would fain take rest," days of renunciation were intermingled with days of joy when Mary went on through this valley of tears with the light of another world in her eyes and the angels' song in her heart. For her, pain was always, as it had been for her Master, not just the "price of happiness but the thing itself." For she remembered, as all are bidden to remember: "The servant is not greater than the Master."

This then must be the secret, the theme, the mystery. Mary Magdalen learned to live in the world and yet be not of the world. Her peace of heart was a peace that goes hand in hand with sacrifice. No man could take it from her because no mere man had given it to her. Her peace was the memory of her beloved Master, Whose will on earth had been to do the will of His Father, Whose will was her

⁵ Cf. Lagrange, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, p. 172.

⁶ I Cor. II, 9.

⁷ Ps. XLI, 3.

will, her joy, her life. St. Mary Magdalen sought first the kingdom of God and His justice. And while Christ does often fulfill His promise literally by adding to such a soul "all things" for which it feels need, yet in her case, as in so many others, He fulfilled His promise by raising her soul above the need. The fruit of the promise is the same, "the peace of God, which surpasseth understanding," which the world cannot give because it does not comprehend the nature of a peace attained by using a sword on self. As our Divine Lord expressed His mission, "I came not to send peace, but the sword," so does the saint accept it. The notion contained in the words is fundamental to the Christian life, a hard saying, but a true one. St. Mary Magdalen must have found it hard, for she was a very *human* person. But she must have accepted it and lived it, for she *is* a saint.