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Whips and wine

**The wedding in Cana and the cleansing of the temple
a soliloquy by Mary of Magdala
based on John 2
by Ralph Milton**

The Gospel of John puts the story of the wedding in Cana right at the beginning of Jesus' ministry. I always found that delightful, because it means Jesus' first miracle was to keep the party going. That story is followed immediately by the painful account of Jesus driving the money changers out of the temple.

I had been listening to a recording of The Common Cup singing one of their powerful songs, Cana Wine, and this story coagulated in my mind. The Gospel of John says nothing about Mary of Magdala being at the wedding or going to Jerusalem with Jesus, but such details never stop a good story-teller.*

I had a song going through my head...

*Cana wine, Cana wine,
working on my heart and mind...*

And you know how it is. Once you get a song like that in your head, you keep humming it over and over. I felt just great, because it really was such a wonderful wedding there in Cana. Such a celebration. We laughed. We cried. We danced.

I drank a bit too much, I guess. O, I wasn't out of control or anything, but I woke up the next day with a headache, a bad headache actually. That song kept running through the headache. Sick and happy at the same time.

Now as we walked toward Jerusalem, I kept singing the song...

*...flowing free, filling me,
till I lose all sense of time...*

"Mary!" Jesus spoke almost sharply. We had stopped to rest by a spring in a wadi. "We have to walk more quickly or we won't reach Jerusalem before Passover."

"And I'm slowing you down?" I asked.

"Yes. No. Not really. I'm sorry, Mary." Jesus was smiling but I could tell he was worried. I knew his moods. I could sense his fears. He was a strong man, but a man nevertheless, and sometimes afraid.

"Mary, when you were so sick, in Magdala, when we first met. And I was able to help you get rid of that sickness, those demons that were destroying you...do you remember how at first you were angry at me?"

"Yes. It's always scary to change. I guess I'd grown comfortable with my own sickness. That was my identity. When you took that away, I had to change, and I don't think I wanted to."

Jesus looked very sober. Then he grinned. "Let's get going. Sing the song a bit faster, Mary. It'll speed us up a little."

It wasn't till we were near Jerusalem that Jesus began talking about the temple and the money changers. "They charge a whole day's wages just to change foreign coins into temple money. That's way too much. It's not fair to the poor people. And the price for those animals for sacrifice? An animal costs ten times as much in the temple as it does in the marketplace. And Mary, God doesn't even want those burnt offerings. God wants our hearts, not burnt meat."

Jesus walked in silence for awhile. There was a fire building in his eyes. The muscles in his jaw pulsed under his beard.

"And the Gentiles. That's all they can see of the temple. All they get is the yelling and shouting and the money changing and the stink. And that's where they're supposed to pray. Can you imagine trying to pray in a place like that?"

I'd never been to Jerusalem. This was my first visit and till this moment, I'd been excited and happy.

"What are you going to do, Jesus?"

"I shouldn't do anything. If I'm smart, I'll keep my mouth shut."

"You're not much good at being smart when you're upset, Jesus." That comment got me an annoyed look, then a grudging smile.

Jesus didn't tell me what he planned to do in the temple. I don't think he knew himself. But the more he thought about the temple, the more he got upset.

We stopped at Bethany, just outside Jerusalem, to stay with our friends, the sisters Mary and Martha and their brother Lazarus. It was a pleasant evening, catching up on old friends, gentle arguments, new ideas. They wanted to know all about the wedding in Cana. I told them how we seemed to run out of wine, then suddenly there were six huge jars full of the best wine we ever tasted.

"Hey, wasn't that a party?" Lazarus said. He suspected Jesus had something to do with the wine, but Jesus just smiled and wouldn't say a thing.

The next morning, Jesus was up and gone before I was awake.

"He went to the temple," said Martha.

"But we were going to go together!" I was angry.

"I think he needed to go alone," said Martha. "He seemed to have something very heavy on his mind."

"He's upset about the money changers, Martha. I'm just afraid he's going to do something crazy that'll get him into trouble."

Which is exactly what happened. He came rushing in at noon that day. His cloak was torn. He had an ugly bruise on his cheek. And as I went to him, I smelled the acrid sweat of tension.

"We have to go right away, Mary," he said.

"But I haven't been to the temple yet. I haven't even been into Jerusalem."

"I'm sorry. All right." he snapped.

And so we left and walked together in a tense, unhappy silence.

But then, the hard walking – the coolness of the evening seemed to dissipate the fear and anger and frustration of the day. Leaning against a rock that night, Jesus told me what he had done, how he had gone into the temple intent on simply explaining why things needed to change.

"I tried to tell them how evil it was to do this in the temple. But nobody would listen. I lost my temper," Jesus said sadly. "I just lost it and I started turning over tables and lashing out at people and yelling at them. I even made a whip and started beating at them."

I sighed. "And they'll be no more grateful to you than I was, when you purged the evil from my life."

The sun had set. The shadows closed around us. The evening star was bright and clear against the gathering darkness.

"It's better to make wine," I said.

"Hmmm?"

"It's better to make wine than whips. Good wine softens the soul. A whip hardens the heart."

Jesus looked long and deeply at the evening star. "Amen, Mary," he finally said, and closed his eyes into an exhausted sleep.

There were more stars now. Have you noticed that in the night, there is more darkness in the sky than there is light? But it's the light we see. It's the light that shines into our soul.

And so I sang my song into myself and to the stars...

*....a new life's rising in me too,
like an overflowing stream,
and it comes from the taste of Cana wine...*

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**Ralph Milton has written a number of books,
all of them available through Wood Lake Publishing.
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