A Magnificent Mother

By

Heather Graham

In 1914, President Woodrow Wilson issued a proclamation that made the second Sunday of May Mother’s Day in the United States.

But, of course, mothers have been mothers since the beginning of time.

Circa the early 1700s . . .

The generation that witnessed the prosecution of witches in the Massachusetts Bay Colony—and around the world—were still reeling from the fears of the time, seeking new ways, and in some cases, discovering cults, believing in the promises of a better life.

And as in many cases, discovering that truth and the beauty of life lay in far more simple beliefs. But then as now, leaving might not be easy, and the aftermath might create a few conundrums and some serious decisions to be made.

And thus, for Melinda and David Markham, a new life was about to begin. For Melinda, there was no choice, not even any thought to be given regarding those abandoned and left behind.

David would realize that she was truly a magnificent mother, and that in a way, he wasn’t so bad at “mothering” himself.

A Magnificent Mother

The Year of Our Lord 1704

A forest compound in Massachusetts

 “No!”

 David Markham said the word decisively. He was not leaving; and he knew his wife, Melinda, would never agree with him doing so.

 It had been so wonderful at first. Abel Calvern had seemed like the answer to the world when they had first heard him speak. After all, they were still looking back at the witchcraft years. They were still learning to understand religion had been difficult, accepting that the world had been wrong and cruel in much of Europe, burning so-called “witches” to death and hanging them in Salem and other places. It had been good to stop the horror, and yet, so many who had been good Puritans came out of it all so lost, some with no faith, others with fears 0they would all be damned for what had happened.

 Abel Calvern had given such great, uplifting sermons! And he had made them all feel like a wonderful family, until . . .

 He had started separating the married couples. And different women had become pregnant when they hadn’t been with their husbands.

 And now . . .

 Now the man was asking that he give him Melinda.

 “No!” David repeated, his anger growing. “I listened to you for so long! I believed in your promises, in your speeches about goodness and kindness. You’re nothing but a con man, sir! Nothing but a con man seeking to take other men’s wives and their children to follow in your ways, do your bidding!”

 Abel Calvern stared at him furiously. Abel was a tall man. He dressed in long flowing robes like a priest. His beard and hair were long, and he appeared like an apostle of old—intentionally, David thought now.

 “Such arrogance will not be tolerated—” Abel began.

 “You’re right. It won’t!” Melinda said.

 For a moment, even David feared she was going to walk over to Abel.

 “Your arrogance, sir, mocks the very God you supposedly honor. And we are leaving!”

 David could see the man thinking quickly. Call on the others to hurt them—kill him, possibly. Others might have already died, he thought.

 But David was not a timid man0. He stood taller than their so-called prophet; and he was, he knew, powerful from the amount of physical labor Abel had the men working.

 He wondered briefly if the man would resort to violence. Besides himself, there weren’t many men left in the group, just a few who were still baffled by the prophet’s determination men and women must have split quarters.

 “Leave and remember! You will burn in Hell forever!” Abel declared, pointing a finger at him as if he could curse him into eternity.

 To David’s surprise, that didn’t sit well with Melinda.

 “My husband will rot in Hell?” she queried. “No, sir! It will not be. You, sir, will rot in Hell forever! You have taken the wives of other men, against everything we were ever taught about the sanctity of marriage! How dare you? How dare you!” she demanded.

 That’s when Abel cracked.

 “Take her!” he commanded. “We will take her to the hanging tree, lest she poison the minds of others!”

 David was ready to fight.

 And ready to die.

 But to his amazement, the group around them was dead still—frozen.

 “Take her!” Abel bellowed.

 And that’s when the fray began. Because, obviously, Melinda’s words had struck home with some of those in doubt.

 Fisticuffs flew, but in the end, most of the women cowered back in fear; and few of the men were of David’s agility and determination, nor were they eager to hang anyone.

 In the end, he could honestly say he wasn’t the one who killed Abel.

 Nor was it Melinda. Somewhere in the fray, Abel fell and hit his head hard on a piece of New England granite.

 He was gone.

 Naturally, confusion reigned; and once again, it was Melinda who stepped forward.

 “We have seen years of terror, years in which we lived afraid, afraid there might be witches, afraid we might be accused of being witches. We needed something, and we grasped at the words of a false prophet. It’s time for us to find our places, to live normal lives, to take our children and teach them about real human decency, to raise our children to help others and learn to love with fidelity and grace.”

 “Aye, indeed!” One of the men cried. “I’ll be going home to Boston!”

 “Back to Connecticut!” Another said.

 One of the women burst into tears. “Beloved, will you forgive me! Will you love me again?” she cried.

 “As I always have!” her husband vowed.

 There was talk; some split off together. Others had made their own decisions. But in the end, they all headed back to the little compound to gather their things before moving on.

 “My love,” David told Melinda, stopping her while packing, taking her by her shoulders. “Thank you with all my heart. Thank you for loving me enough to see the truth, to . . .”

 She frowned and he stopped speaking.

 “What?” he asked her.

 “Listen!”

 She hurried out of their little wooden cabin in the woods, and he followed her.

 Then he could hear it, too.

 They burst into another cabin. It was the children’s cabin. And there were three little ones there. A boy of five or six, and two little girls, one who was maybe four and another who was just toddling around.

 It was the youngest child, the little toddling girl, who was crying.

 Melinda swept her up into her arms, looking around curiously. The person assigned to watch the children—a task given to all, four hours each, for the offspring born in the compound—was nowhere to be seen.

 Melinda soothed the little one and the boy ran to David.

 “They’re gone! My Mum and my dad . . . I saw them leaving! I’m so scared! Father Abel talked about the demons in the dark; and it’s going to be dark. We’re all alone and I’m so scared! And Katie is scared, and Martha must be hungry and . . .” He broke off, sinking to the ground and crying. “They just left all of us here to be swallowed up by the demons in the darkness!”

 “No, no, no, lad! You’re Timmy, if I remember right,” David said, hunkering down to talk to the little boy. “Timmy?”

 The child sniffed and nodded.

 “We’re not going to leave you,” he said softly.

 Timmy looked up hopefully.

 “Is everyone really . . . gone?” David asked. He let out a long sigh. “Well, there are constables somewhere. We’re going to need to explain a dead man and then . . . I’d thought about going to my brother’s place in Rhode Island and—”

 “That’s a wonderful idea!” Melinda said. She was smiling at him. Naturally, he’d always thought she was beautiful with her amber eyes and long flowing dark hair. But today . . . she was standing so straight, her smile was so strong. He realized the depth of her courage.

 “We’re taking the children with us, right?” he asked.

 She nodded. “David,” she asked softly, “What else could we do? I mean, I don’t want to scare you further, but I believe that . . .”

 She broke off. He wasn’t sure how he suddenly knew, but he knew. She was going to have his child.

 So, that would be four. They’d be building new lives, worrying about four.

 How did he not love her more than ever?

 “You’re going to make a great mother,” he told her.

 She rocked the little one she held gently and said softly, “As of this moment, I am a mother. A mother doesn’t need to be the one who gave birth. A mother simply gives love, nurtures, and teaches.”

 He nodded. “Well. I guess we’d best get these little darlings packed up, get the rest of our things, and hope a few of the horses are left. Timmy, can—”

 “I can ride, sir! I can ride well,” Timmy promised, looking from Melinda to David with wonder. “I can ride on my own if you can help the girls.”

 “That we can,” David assured him. He looked over at his wife. “Here’s hoping!” he said softly.

 It took some time. And in a strange way, it was chilling. They were the only ones left in the compound. He was afraid there had been a few events he’d known nothing about since he’d been working in the fields or hunting for their meals.

 Events such as hangings, since Abel had demanded his followers *hang* Melinda. That they take her to the *hanging* tree.

 He felt both he and Melinda had been growing increasingly unhappy as they had seen their friends part and many disappear, but he’d never imagined what might have happened to some.

 He wished then that he’d asked more questions, but it was too late.

 Those who had remained in the compound, perhaps because of fear, had fled quickly, it seemed, as soon as they’d been given the chance. Even those who had first obeyed the command of the prophet had quickly turned against him after seeing there were those who would fight.

 “Thank God!” Melinda said as they finished packing and headed to the stables. There were actually four horses that had been left behind—one for Timmy, one for each of them with a girl in tow, and one to use as a pack horse.

 There were animals out in the fields beyond the woods, but they would make it on their own. The vegetation in the area was rich, and they could munch on the long grasses from here ‘til eternity—or until a farmer or rancher came upon them and added them to their herd.

 David didn’t care anymore; he wanted to be away. Far away.

 And it was good because his brother had warned him against unusual prophets. He would be glad to help them attain their own home. A home in which they lived and worked and loved one another. And their new family. A boy, two girls, and soon, an infant.

 But it was all right.

 Just as the journey was all right.

 They slept in the woods, Melinda telling the children fun stories, assuring them no demons would be coming to get them. They’d curl up all together and it would be warm and safe!

 And they did reach Rhode Island where his brother was ready to help him, just as he’d hoped.

 Within a year, they’d constructed a new home. The baby was born, another little girl.

 They named her Hope.

 And she was loved. But never more than the children they had taken into their hearts.

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1710

Rhode Island

 David sat one night by the fire, just staring at the flames, and thinking sadly about the years they had wasted in Abel’s strange religious compound.

 They hadn’t quit going to church. They respected others for their beliefs, and found where they belonged themselves, always remembering that man had been given free will, and they now knew how to use that will intelligently.

 He felt Melinda’s hands on his shoulders.

 “Children all in bed, sleeping peacefully. Even our little Hope!” she told him.

 “Ah, nice,” he told her.

 “David, you must not sit here being so sad about the past!” She told him.

 “I wasn’t—”

 “You were,” she assured him, coming around to stand in front of him.

 He shrugged. “It’s just . . . well. My love! In all honesty, I’m not sad. I’m thinking about us. You are a mighty warrior, you know! I can’t imagine what might have happened—”

 She laughed softly. “You’re the mighty warrior. You kept me from being hanged!” She paused, wincing. “How did that go on without us knowing? How did we fall for such a horrible person when we were younger and married, what? A year or so?”

 “We grew up with those who had witnessed the horrors of the witch trials. We were looking for something new and good and . . . looking back, the first time he suggested that a couple could give themselves more fully to service by living apart, we should have known, we should have seen. And when he kept splitting people and people disappeared, we should have known. But that night—even that night! I’d no idea that the man had ‘disappeared’ a few people through a hanging tree. But you! I love you so much. And your love was not to be shaken!”

 “Well, of course not!”

 He smiled, shaking his head. “Maybe . . .”

 “Maybe,” she said, “maybe we went through what we went through because we needed to learn we really needed to use our senses, our intelligence, and our knowledge of right and wrong to build a good life. Thankfully, we finally did, like many of the others. Maybe what we went through makes our world, our family, so beautiful now.”

 “You know,” he told her, “You are one magnificent wife—and mother!”

 She laughed softly.

 “You are one magnificent mother, too!” she told him.

 “What?” he demanded indignantly.

 Truly amused she told him, “Think about it, my love. You gave those kids a home when they’d been deserted. You love them every day; you work to feed them. You play with them, laugh with them, and very importantly, teach them right from wrong. You let them see the beauty of the world and teach them about their own minds, decency, and . . . well, keep them from falling for lies and tricks and all that we needed to learn through a much more difficult lesson. Yes, you are a great mom!”

 He groaned again but she sank into his lap.

 And the kids were asleep, and . . .

 “Hm. I’ll take it, but you are the magnificent0 mom, you know! And . . .”

 He hesitated.

 “Those kids all love you so much.”

 “They do! Biology is great. But what a mother really is . . . well . . .”

 “Love,” David said simply. “Love, and care, and nurturing. As you said!”

 “Yes, and the little darlings are all asleep,” she reminded him.

 “So, they are! Oh, yes, and right! I did say you were a magnificent wife, too!”

 She grinned.

 “I mean, you know. Action, along with beautiful words.”

 “Action it is!” she promised.

 And as the fire burned in the stone hearth in brilliant colors of red and gold, he no longer thought about the past.

He thought about just how lucky he was.