

**THE DESCENDANT;
A NOVEL**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649383412

The descendant; a novel by Ellen Glasgow

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Edited by Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd.
Cover @ 2017

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ELLEN GLASGOW

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A NOVEL**

THE DESCENDANT

Over 1897—

A Novel

By Ellen Glasgow

"Man is not above Nature, but in Nature"

HAECKEL



NEW YORK AND LONDON
HARPER & BROTHERS PUBLISHERS

1897

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BOOK I
VARIATION FROM TYPE
OMNE VIVUM EX OVO

THE DESCENDANT

CHAPTER I

THE child sat upon the roadside. A stiff wind was rising westward, blowing over stretches of meadow-land that had long since run to waste, a scarlet tangle of sumac and sassafras. In the remote West, from whose heart the wind had risen, the death-bed of the Sun showed bloody after the carnage, and nearer at hand naked branches of poplar and sycamore were silhouetted against the shattered horizon, like skeletons of human arms that had withered in the wrath of God.

Over the meadows the amber light of the afterglow fell like rain. It warmed the spectres of dead carrot flowers, and they awoke to reflect its glory; it dabbled in the blood of sumac and pokeberry; and it set its fiery torch to the goldenrod till it ignited and burst into bloom, flashing a subtle flame from field to field, a glorious bonfire from the hand of Nature.

The open road wound lazily along, crossing transversely the level meadow-land and leading from the small town of Plaguesville to somewhere. Nobody—at least nobody thereabouts—knew exactly where, for it was seldom that a native left Plaguesville, and when he did it was only to go to Arlington, a few miles farther on, where the road dropped him, stretching southward.

The child sat restlessly upon the rotten rails that were

once a fence. He was lithe and sinewy, with a sharp brown face and eyes that were narrow and shrewd—a small, wild animal of the wood come out from the underbrush to bask in the shifting sunshine.

Occasionally a laborer passed along the road from his field work, his scythe upon his shoulder, the pail in which his dinner was brought swinging at his side. Once a troop of boys had gone by with a dog, and then a beggar hobbling on his crutch. They were following in the wake of the circus, which was moving to Plaguesville from a neighboring town. The child had seen the caravan go by. He had seen the mustang ponies and the cowboys who rode them; he had seen the picture of the fat lady painted upon the outside of her tent; and he had even seen the elephant as it passed in its casings.

Presently the child rose, stooping to pick the blackberry briers from his bare legs. He wore nankeen trousers somewhat worn in the seat and a nankeen shirt somewhat worn at the elbows. His hand was rough and brier-pricked, his feet stained with the red clay of the cornfield. Then, as he turned to move onward, there was a sound of footsteps, and a man's figure appeared suddenly around a bend in the road, breaking upon the glorified landscape like an ill-omened shadow.

It was the minister from the church near the town. He was a small man with a threadbare coat, a large nose, and no chin to speak of. Indeed, the one attribute of saintliness in which he was found lacking was a chin. An inch the more of chin, and he might have been held as a saint; an inch the less, and he passed as a simpleton. Such is the triumph of Matter over Mind.

"Who is it?" asked the minister. He always inquired for a passport, not that he had any curiosity upon the subject, but that he believed it to be his duty. As yet he had only attained that middle state of sanctity where duty and pleasure are clearly defined. The next stage is the one in which, from excessive cultivation of the senses or atrophy

of the imagination, the distinction between the things we ought to do and the things we want to do becomes obliterated.

The child came forward.

"It's me," he said. "Little Mike Akershem, as minds the pigs."

"Ah!" said the minister. "The boy that Farmer Watkins is bringing up. Why, bless my soul, boy, you've been fighting!"

The child whimpered. He drew his shirt sleeve across his eyes.

"I—I warn't doin' nothin'," he wailed. "Leastways, nothin' but mindin' the pigs, when Jake Johnson knocked me down, he did."

"He's a wicked boy," commented the minister, "and should be punished. And what did *you* do when Jake Johnson knocked you down?"

"I—I fell," whimpered the child.

"A praiseworthy spirit, Michael, and I am glad to see it in one so young and with such a heritage. You know the good book says: 'Do good unto them that persecute you and despitefully use you.' Now, you would like to do good unto Jake Johnson, wouldn't you, Michael?"

"I—I'd like to bus' him open," sobbed the child. Tears were streaming from his eyes. When he put up his hand to wipe them away it left dirty smears upon his cheeks.

The minister smiled and then frowned.

"You've forgotten your Catechism, Michael," he said. "I'm afraid you don't study it as you should."

The boy bubbled with mirth. Smiles chased across his face like gleams of sunshine across a cloud.

"I do," he rejoined, righteously. "Jake, he fought me on o'count o' it."

"The Catechism!" exclaimed the minister. "Jake fought you because of the Catechism?"

"It war a word," said the child. "Jake said it war con-sarnin' me an' I—"

"What word?" the minister demanded. "What did the word mean?"

"It war an ugly word." The boy's eyes were dry. He looked up inquiringly from beneath blinking lids. "It war dam—damni—"

"Ah!" said the minister, in the tone in which he said "Amen" upon a Sabbath, "damnation."

"Air it consarning me?" asked the child with anxious uncertainty.

The minister looked down into the sharp face where the gleams of sunshine had vanished, and only the cloud remained. He saw the wistful eyes beneath the bushy hair, the soiled, sunburned face, the traces of a dirty hand that had wiped tears away—the whole pitiful littleness of the lad. The nervous blinking of the lids dazzled him. They opened and shut like a flame that flickers and revives in a darkened room.

"No," he said, gently, "you have nothing to do with that, so help me God."

Again the boy bubbled with life. Then, with a swift, tremulous change, he grew triumphant. He looked up hopefully, an eager anxiety breaking his voice.

"It might be consarning Jake hisself," he prompted.

But the minister had stretched the mantle of his creed sufficiently.

"Go home," he said; "the pigs are needing their supper. What? Eh? Hold on a bit!" For the boy had leaped off like laughter. "What about the circus? There's to be no gadding into such evil places, I hope."

The boy's face fell. "No, sir," he said. "It's a quarter, an' I 'ain't got it."

"And the other boys?"

"Jake Johnson war looking through a hole in the fence an' he wouldn't let me peep never so little."

"Oh!" said the minister, slowly. He looked down at his boots. The road was dusty and they were quite gray. Then he blushed and looked at the boy. He was thinking

of the night when he had welcomed him into the world—a little brown bundle of humanity, unclaimed at the great threshold of life. Then he thought of the mother, an awkward woman of the fields, with a strapping figure and a coarse beauty of face. He thought of the hour when the woman lay dying in the little shanty beyond the mill. Something in the dark, square face startled him. The look in the eyes was not the look of a woman of the fields, the strength in the bulging brow was more than the strength of a peasant.

His code of life was a stern one, and it had fallen upon stern soil. As the chosen ones of Israel beheld in Moab a wash-pot, so he and his people saw in the child only an embodied remnant of Jehovah's wrath.

But beneath the code of righteousness there quivered a germ of human kindness.

"Er—er, that's all," he said, his nose growing larger and his chin shorter. "You may go—but—how much have you? Money, I mean—"

"Eight cents," replied the child; "three for blackberrying, an' five for findin' Deacon Joskins's speckled pig as war lost. Five and three air eight—"

"And seventeen more," added the minister. "Well, here they are. Mind, now, learn your Catechism, and no gadding into evil places, remember that."

And he walked down the road with a blush on his face and a smile in his heart.

The child stood in the white dust of the road. A pale finger of sunshine struggled past him to the ditch beside the way, where a crimson blackberry-vine palpitated like a vein leading to the earth's throbbing heart. About him the glory waned upon the landscape and went out; the goldenrod had burned itself to ashes. A whippoorwill, somewhere upon the rotten fence rails, called out sharply, its cry rising in a low, distressful wail upon the air and losing itself among the brushwood. Then another answered from away in the meadow, and another from the glimmering cornfield.