

Chapter X - Maggie Behaves Worse Than She Expected

The startling object which thus made an epoch for uncle Pullet was no other than little Lucy, with one side of her person, from her small foot to her bonnet-crown, wet and discolored with mud, holding out two tiny blackened hands, and making a very piteous face. To account for this unprecedented apparition in aunt Pullet's parlor, we must return to the moment when the three children went to play out of doors, and the small demons who had taken possession of Maggie's soul at an early period of the day had returned in all the greater force after a temporary absence. All the disagreeable recollections of the morning were thick upon her, when Tom, whose displeasure toward her had been considerably refreshed by her foolish trick of causing him to upset his cowslip wine, said, 'Here, Lucy, you come along with me,' and walked off to the area where the toads were, as if there were no Maggie in existence. Seeing this, Maggie lingered at a distance looking like a small Medusa with her snakes cropped. Lucy was naturally pleased that cousin Tom was so good to her, and it was very amusing to see him tickling a fat toad with a piece of string when the toad was safe down the area, with an iron grating over him. Still Lucy wished Maggie to enjoy the spectacle also, especially as she would doubtless find a name for the toad, and say what had been his past history; for Lucy had a delighted semibelief in Maggie's stories about the live things they came upon by accident, - how Mrs Earwig had a wash at home, and one of her children had fallen into the hot copper, for which reason she was running so fast to fetch the doctor. Tom had a profound contempt for this nonsense of Maggie's, smashing the earwig at once as a superfluous yet easy means of proving the entire unreality of such a story; but Lucy, for the life of her, could not help fancying there was something in it, and at all events thought it was very pretty make-believe. So now the desire to know the history of a very portly toad, added to her habitual affectionateness, made her run back to Maggie and say, 'Oh, there is such a big, funny toad, Maggie! Do come and see!'

Maggie said nothing, but turned away from her with a deeper frown. As long as Tom seemed to prefer Lucy to her, Lucy made part of his unkindness. Maggie would have thought a little while ago that she could never be cross with pretty little Lucy, any more than she could be cruel to a little white mouse; but then, Tom had always been quite indifferent to Lucy before, and it had been left to Maggie to pet and make much of her. As it was, she was actually beginning to think that she should like to make Lucy cry by slapping or pinching her, especially as it might vex Tom, whom it was of no use to slap, even if she dared, because he didn't mind it. And if Lucy hadn't been there, Maggie was sure he would have got friends with her sooner.

Tickling a fat toad who is not highly sensitive is an amusement that it is possible to exhaust, and Tom by and by began to look round for some other mode of passing the time. But in so prim a garden, where they were not to go off the paved walks, there was not a great choice of sport. The only great pleasure such a restriction suggested was the pleasure of breaking it, and Tom began to meditate an insurrectionary visit to the pond, about a field's length beyond the garden.

'I say, Lucy,' he began, nodding his head up and down with great significance, as he coiled up his string again, 'what do you think I mean to do?'

'What, Tom?' said Lucy, with curiosity.

'I mean to go to the pond and look at the pike. You may go with me if you like,' said the young sultan.

'Oh, Tom, *dare* you?' said Lucy. 'Aunt said we mustn't go out of the garden.'

'Oh, I shall go out at the other end of the garden,' said Tom. 'Nobody 'ull see us. Besides, I don't care if they do, - I'll run off home.'

'But *I* couldn't run,' said Lucy, who had never before been exposed to such severe temptation.

'Oh, never mind; they won't be cross with *you*,' said Tom. 'You say I took you.'

Tom walked along, and Lucy trotted by his side, timidly enjoying the rare treat of doing something naughty, - excited also by the mention of that celebrity, the pike, about which she was quite uncertain whether it was a fish or a fowl.

Maggie saw them leaving the garden, and could not resist the impulse to follow. Anger and jealousy can no more bear to lose sight of their objects than love, and that Tom and Lucy should do or see anything of which she was ignorant would have been an intolerable idea to Maggie. So she kept a few yards behind them, unobserved by Tom, who was presently absorbed in watching for the pike, - a highly interesting monster; he was said to be so very old, so very large, and to have such a remarkable appetite. The pike, like other celebrities, did not show when he was watched for, but Tom caught sight of something in rapid movement in the water, which attracted him to another spot on the brink of the pond.

'Here, Lucy!' he said in a loud whisper, 'come here! take care! keep on the grass! - don't step where the cows have been!' he added, pointing

to a peninsula of dry grass, with trodden mud on each side of it; for Tom's contemptuous conception of a girl included the attribute of being unfit to walk in dirty places.

Lucy came carefully as she was bidden, and bent down to look at what seemed a golden arrow-head darting through the water. It was a water-snake, Tom told her; and Lucy at last could see the serpentine wave of its body, very much wondering that a snake could swim. Maggie had drawn nearer and nearer; she *must* see it too, though it was bitter to her, like everything else, since Tom did not care about her seeing it. At last she was close by Lucy; and Tom, who had been aware of her approach, but would not notice it till he was obliged, turned round and said, -

'Now, get away, Maggie; there's no room for you on the grass here. Nobody asked *you* to come.'

There were passions at war in Maggie at that moment to have made a tragedy, if tragedies were made by passion only; but the essential [Greek text] which was present in the passion was wanting to the action; the utmost Maggie could do, with a fierce thrust of her small brown arm, was to push poor little pink-and-white Lucy into the cow-trodden mud.

Then Tom could not restrain himself, and gave Maggie two smart slaps on the arm as he ran to pick up Lucy, who lay crying helplessly. Maggie retreated to the roots of a tree a few yards off, and looked on impenitently. Usually her repentance came quickly after one rash deed, but now Tom and Lucy had made her so miserable, she was glad to spoil their happiness, - glad to make everybody uncomfortable. Why should she be sorry? Tom was very slow to forgive *her*, however sorry she might have been.

'I shall tell mother, you know, Miss Mag,' said Tom, loudly and emphatically, as soon as Lucy was up and ready to walk away. It was not Tom's practice to 'tell,' but here justice clearly demanded that Maggie should be visited with the utmost punishment; not that Tom had learned to put his views in that abstract form; he never mentioned 'justice,' and had no idea that his desire to punish might be called by that fine name. Lucy was too entirely absorbed by the evil that had befallen her, - the spoiling of her pretty best clothes, and the discomfort of being wet and dirty, - to think much of the cause, which was entirely mysterious to her. She could never have guessed what she had done to make Maggie angry with her; but she felt that Maggie was very unkind and disagreeable, and made no magnanimous entreaties to Tom that he would not 'tell,' only running along by his side and crying piteously, while Maggie sat on the roots of the tree and looked after them with her small Medusa face.

'Sally,' said Tom, when they reached the kitchen door, and Sally looked at them in speechless amaze, with a piece of bread-and-butter in her mouth and a toasting-fork in her hand, - 'Sally, tell mother it was Maggie pushed Lucy into the mud.'

'But Lors ha' massy, how did you get near such mud as that?' said Sally, making a wry face, as she stooped down and examined the *corpus delicti*.

Tom's imagination had not been rapid and capacious enough to include this question among the foreseen consequences, but it was no sooner put than he foresaw whither it tended, and that Maggie would not be considered the only culprit in the case. He walked quietly away from the kitchen door, leaving Sally to that pleasure of guessing which active minds notoriously prefer to ready-made knowledge.

Sally, as you are aware, lost no time in presenting Lucy at the parlor door, for to have so dirty an object introduced into the house at Garum Firs was too great a weight to be sustained by a single mind.

'Goodness gracious!' aunt Pullet exclaimed, after precluding by an inarticulate scream; 'keep her at the door, Sally! Don't bring her off the oil-cloth, whatever you do.'

'Why, she's tumbled into some nasty mud,' said Mrs Tulliver, going up to Lucy to examine into the amount of damage to clothes for which she felt herself responsible to her sister Deane.

'If you please, 'um, it was Miss Maggie as pushed her in,' said Sally; 'Master Tom's been and said so, and they must ha' been to the pond, for it's only there they could ha' got into such dirt.'

'There it is, Bessy; it's what I've been telling you,' said Mrs Pullet, in a tone of prophetic sadness; 'it's your children, - there's no knowing what they'll come to.'

Mrs Tulliver was mute, feeling herself a truly wretched mother. As usual, the thought pressed upon her that people would think she had done something wicked to deserve her maternal troubles, while Mrs Pullet began to give elaborate directions to Sally how to guard the premises from serious injury in the course of removing the dirt. Meantime tea was to be brought in by the cook, and the two naughty children were to have theirs in an ignominious manner in the kitchen. Mrs Tulliver went out to speak to these naughty children, supposing them to be close at hand; but it was not until after some search that she found Tom leaning with rather a hardened, careless air against the white paling of the poultry-yard, and lowering his piece of string on the other side as a means of exasperating the turkey-cock.

'Tom, you naughty boy, where's your sister?' said Mrs Tulliver, in a distressed voice.

'I don't know,' said Tom; his eagerness for justice on Maggie had diminished since he had seen clearly that it could hardly be brought about without the injustice of some blame on his own conduct.

'Why, where did you leave her?' said the mother, looking round.

'Sitting under the tree, against the pond,' said Tom, apparently indifferent to everything but the string and the turkey-cock.

'Then go and fetch her in this minute, you naughty boy. And how could you think o' going to the pond, and taking your sister where there was dirt? You know she'll do mischief if there's mischief to be done.'

It was Mrs Tulliver's way, if she blamed Tom, to refer his misdemeanor, somehow or other, to Maggie.

The idea of Maggie sitting alone by the pond roused an habitual fear in Mrs Tulliver's mind, and she mounted the horse-block to satisfy herself by a sight of that fatal child, while Tom walked - not very quickly - on his way toward her.

'They're such children for the water, mine are,' she said aloud, without reflecting that there was no one to hear her; 'they'll be brought in dead and drowned some day. I wish that river was far enough.'

But when she not only failed to discern Maggie, but presently saw Tom returning from the pool alone, this hovering fear entered and took complete possession of her, and she hurried to meet him.

'Maggie's nowhere about the pond, mother,' said Tom; 'she's gone away.'

You may conceive the terrified search for Maggie, and the difficulty of convincing her mother that she was not in the pond. Mrs Pullet observed that the child might come to a worse end if she lived, there was no knowing; and Mr Pullet, confused and overwhelmed by this revolutionary aspect of things, - the tea deferred and the poultry alarmed by the unusual running to and fro, - took up his spud as an instrument of search, and reached down a key to unlock the goose-pen, as a likely place for Maggie to lie concealed in.

Tom, after a while, started the idea that Maggie was gone home (without thinking it necessary to state that it was what he should have

done himself under the circumstances), and the suggestion was seized as a comfort by his mother.

'Sister, for goodness' sake let 'em put the horse in the carriage and take me home; we shall perhaps find her on the road. Lucy can't walk in her dirty clothes,' she said, looking at that innocent victim, who was wrapped up in a shawl, and sitting with naked feet on the sofa.

Aunt Pullet was quite willing to take the shortest means of restoring her premises to order and quiet, and it was not long before Mrs Tulliver was in the chaise, looking anxiously at the most distant point before her. What the father would say if Maggie was lost, was a question that predominated over every other.