

Chapter XI - Maggie Tries To Run Away From Her Shadow

Maggie's intentions, as usual, were on a larger scale than Tom imagined. The resolution that gathered in her mind, after Tom and Lucy had walked away, was not so simple as that of going home. No! she would run away and go to the gypsies, and Tom should never see her any more. That was by no means a new idea to Maggie; she had been so often told she was like a gypsy, and 'half wild,' that when she was miserable it seemed to her the only way of escaping opprobrium, and being entirely in harmony with circumstances, would be to live in a little brown tent on the commons; the gypsies, she considered, would gladly receive her and pay her much respect on account of her superior knowledge. She had once mentioned her views on this point to Tom and suggested that he should stain his face brown, and they should run away together; but Tom rejected the scheme with contempt, observing that gypsies were thieves, and hardly got anything to eat and had nothing to drive but a donkey. To-day however, Maggie thought her misery had reached a pitch at which gypsydom was her refuge, and she rose from her seat on the roots of the tree with the sense that this was a great crisis in her life; she would run straight away till she came to Dunlow Common, where there would certainly be gypsies; and cruel Tom, and the rest of her relations who found fault with her, should never see her any more. She thought of her father as she ran along, but she reconciled herself to the idea of parting with him, by determining that she would secretly send him a letter by a small gypsy, who would run away without telling where she was, and just let him know that she was well and happy, and always loved him very much.

Maggie soon got out of breath with running, but by the time Tom got to the pond again she was at the distance of three long fields, and was on the edge of the lane leading to the highroad. She stopped to pant a little, reflecting that running away was not a pleasant thing until one had got quite to the common where the gypsies were, but her resolution had not abated; she presently passed through the gate into the lane, not knowing where it would lead her, for it was not this way that they came from Dorlcote Mill to Garum Firs, and she felt all the safer for that, because there was no chance of her being overtaken. But she was soon aware, not without trembling, that there were two men coming along the lane in front of her; she had not thought of meeting strangers, she had been too much occupied with the idea of her friends coming after her. The formidable strangers were two shabby-looking men with flushed faces, one of them carrying a bundle on a stick over his shoulder; but to her surprise, while she was dreading their disapprobation as a runaway, the man with the bundle stopped, and in a half-whining, half-coaxing tone asked her if she had a copper to give a poor man. Maggie had a sixpence in her pocket, - her uncle Glegg's present, - which she immediately drew out and gave

this poor man with a polite smile, hoping he would feel very kindly toward her as a generous person. 'That's the only money I've got,' she said apologetically. 'Thank you, little miss,' said the man, in a less respectful and grateful tone than Maggie anticipated, and she even observed that he smiled and winked at his companion. She walked on hurriedly, but was aware that the two men were standing still, probably to look after her, and she presently heard them laughing loudly. Suddenly it occurred to her that they might think she was an idiot; Tom had said that her cropped hair made her look like an idiot, and it was too painful an idea to be readily forgotten. Besides, she had no sleeves on, - only a cape and bonnet. It was clear that she was not likely to make a favorable impression on passengers, and she thought she would turn into the fields again, but not on the same side of the lane as before, lest they should still be uncle Pullet's fields. She turned through the first gate that was not locked, and felt a delightful sense of privacy in creeping along by the hedgerows, after her recent humiliating encounter. She was used to wandering about the fields by herself, and was less timid there than on the highroad. Sometimes she had to climb over high gates, but that was a small evil; she was getting out of reach very fast, and she should probably soon come within sight of Dunlow Common, or at least of some other common, for she had heard her father say that you couldn't go very far without coming to a common. She hoped so, for she was getting rather tired and hungry, and until she reached the gypsies there was no definite prospect of bread and butter. It was still broad daylight, for aunt Pullet, retaining the early habits of the Dodson family, took tea at half-past four by the sun, and at five by the kitchen clock; so, though it was nearly an hour since Maggie started, there was no gathering gloom on the fields to remind her that the night would come. Still, it seemed to her that she had been walking a very great distance indeed, and it was really surprising that the common did not come within sight. Hitherto she had been in the rich parish of Garum, where was a great deal of pasture-land, and she had only seen one laborer at a distance. That was fortunate in some respects, as laborers might be too ignorant to understand the propriety of her wanting to go to Dunlow Common; yet it would have been better if she could have met some one who would tell her the way without wanting to know anything about her private business. At last, however, the green fields came to an end, and Maggie found herself looking through the bars of a gate into a lane with a wide margin of grass on each side of it. She had never seen such a wide lane before, and, without her knowing why, it gave her the impression that the common could not be far off; perhaps it was because she saw a donkey with a log to his foot feeding on the grassy margin, for she had seen a donkey with that pitiable encumbrance on Dunlow Common when she had been across it in her father's gig. She crept through the bars of the gate and walked on with new spirit, though not without haunting images of Apollyon, and a highwayman with a pistol, and a blinking dwarf in yellow with a

mouth from ear to ear, and other miscellaneous dangers. For poor little Maggie had at once the timidity of an active imagination and the daring that comes from overmastering impulse. She had rushed into the adventure of seeking her unknown kindred, the gypsies; and now she was in this strange lane, she hardly dared look on one side of her, lest she should see the diabolical blacksmith in his leathern apron grinning at her with arms akimbo. It was not without a leaping of the heart that she caught sight of a small pair of bare legs sticking up, feet uppermost, by the side of a hillock; they seemed something hideously preternatural, - a diabolical kind of fungus; for she was too much agitated at the first glance to see the ragged clothes and the dark shaggy head attached to them. It was a boy asleep, and Maggie trotted along faster and more lightly, lest she should wake him; it did not occur to her that he was one of her friends the gypsies, who in all probability would have very genial manners. But the fact was so, for at the next bend in the lane Maggie actually saw the little semicircular black tent with the blue smoke rising before it, which was to be her refuge from all the blighting obloquy that had pursued her in civilized life. She even saw a tall female figure by the column of smoke, doubtless the gypsy-mother, who provided the tea and other groceries; it was astonishing to herself that she did not feel more delighted. But it was startling to find the gypsies in a lane, after all, and not on a common; indeed, it was rather disappointing; for a mysterious illimitable common, where there were sand-pits to hide in, and one was out of everybody's reach, had always made part of Maggie's picture of gypsy life. She went on, however, and thought with some comfort that gypsies most likely knew nothing about idiots, so there was no danger of their falling into the mistake of setting her down at the first glance as an idiot. It was plain she had attracted attention; for the tall figure, who proved to be a young woman with a baby on her arm, walked slowly to meet her. Maggie looked up in the new face rather tremblingly as it approached, and was reassured by the thought that her aunt Pullet and the rest were right when they called her a gypsy; for this face, with the bright dark eyes and the long hair, was really something like what she used to see in the glass before she cut her hair off.

'My little lady, where are you going to?' the gypsy said, in a tone of coaxing deference.

It was delightful, and just what Maggie expected; the gypsies saw at once that she was a little lady, and were prepared to treat her accordingly.

'Not any farther,' said Maggie, feeling as if she were saying what she had rehearsed in a dream. 'I'm come to stay with *you*, please.'

'That's pretty; come, then. Why, what a nice little lady you are, to be sure!' said the gypsy, taking her by the hand. Maggie thought her very agreeable, but wished she had not been so dirty.

There was quite a group round the fire when she reached it. An old gypsy woman was seated on the ground nursing her knees, and occasionally poking a skewer into the round kettle that sent forth an odorous steam; two small shock-headed children were lying prone and resting on their elbows something like small sphinxes; and a placid donkey was bending his head over a tall girl, who, lying on her back, was scratching his nose and indulging him with a bite of excellent stolen hay. The slanting sunlight fell kindly upon them, and the scene was really very pretty and comfortable, Maggie thought, only she hoped they would soon set out the tea-cups. Everything would be quite charming when she had taught the gypsies to use a washing-basin, and to feel an interest in books. It was a little confusing, though, that the young woman began to speak to the old one in a language which Maggie did not understand, while the tall girl, who was feeding the donkey, sat up and stared at her without offering any salutation. At last the old woman said, -

'What! my pretty lady, are you come to stay with us? Sit ye down and tell us where you come from.'

It was just like a story; Maggie liked to be called pretty lady and treated in this way. She sat down and said, -

'I'm come from home because I'm unhappy, and I mean to be a gypsy. I'll live with you if you like, and I can teach you a great many things.'

'Such a clever little lady,' said the woman with the baby sitting down by Maggie, and allowing baby to crawl; 'and such a pretty bonnet and frock,' she added, taking off Maggie's bonnet and looking at it while she made an observation to the old woman, in the unknown language. The tall girl snatched the bonnet and put it on her own head hind-foremost with a grin; but Maggie was determined not to show any weakness on this subject, as if she were susceptible about her bonnet.

'I don't want to wear a bonnet,' she said; 'I'd rather wear a red handkerchief, like yours' (looking at her friend by her side). 'My hair was quite long till yesterday, when I cut it off; but I dare say it will grow again very soon,' she added apologetically, thinking it probable the gypsies had a strong prejudice in favor of long hair. And Maggie had forgotten even her hunger at that moment in the desire to conciliate gypsy opinion.

'Oh, what a nice little lady! - and rich, I'm sure,' said the old woman. 'Didn't you live in a beautiful house at home?'

'Yes, my home is pretty, and I'm very fond of the river, where we go fishing, but I'm often very unhappy. I should have liked to bring my books with me, but I came away in a hurry, you know. But I can tell you almost everything there is in my books, I've read them so many times, and that will amuse you. And I can tell you something about Geography too, - that's about the world we live in, - very useful and interesting. Did you ever hear about Columbus?'

Maggie's eyes had begun to sparkle and her cheeks to flush, - she was really beginning to instruct the gypsies, and gaining great influence over them. The gypsies themselves were not without amazement at this talk, though their attention was divided by the contents of Maggie's pocket, which the friend at her right hand had by this time emptied without attracting her notice.

'Is that where you live, my little lady?' said the old woman, at the mention of Columbus.

'Oh, no!' said Maggie, with some pity; 'Columbus was a very wonderful man, who found out half the world, and they put chains on him and treated him very badly, you know; it's in my Catechism of Geography, but perhaps it's rather too long to tell before tea - *I want my tea so.*'

The last words burst from Maggie, in spite of herself, with a sudden drop from patronizing instruction to simple peevishness.

'Why, she's hungry, poor little lady,' said the younger woman. 'Give her some o' the cold victual. You've been walking a good way, I'll be bound, my dear. Where's your home?'

'It's Dorlcote Mill, a good way off,' said Maggie. 'My father is Mr Tulliver, but we mustn't let him know where I am, else he'll fetch me home again. Where does the queen of the gypsies live?'

'What! do you want to go to her, my little lady?' said the younger woman. The tall girl meanwhile was constantly staring at Maggie and grinning. Her manners were certainly not agreeable.

'No,' said Maggie, 'I'm only thinking that if she isn't a very good queen you might be glad when she died, and you could choose another. If I was a queen, I'd be a very good queen, and kind to everybody.'

'Here's a bit o' nice victual, then,' said the old woman, handing to Maggie a lump of dry bread, which she had taken from a bag of scraps, and a piece of cold bacon.

'Thank you,' said Maggie, looking at the food without taking it; 'but will you give me some bread-and-butter and tea instead? I don't like bacon.'

'We've got no tea nor butter,' said the old woman, with something like a scowl, as if she were getting tired of coaxing.

'Oh, a little bread and treacle would do,' said Maggie.

'We han't got no treacle,' said the old woman, crossly, whereupon there followed a sharp dialogue between the two women in their unknown tongue, and one of the small sphinxes snatched at the bread-and-bacon, and began to eat it. At this moment the tall girl, who had gone a few yards off, came back, and said something which produced a strong effect. The old woman, seeming to forget Maggie's hunger, poked the skewer into the pot with new vigor, and the younger crept under the tent and reached out some platters and spoons. Maggie trembled a little, and was afraid the tears would come into her eyes. Meanwhile the tall girl gave a shrill cry, and presently came running up the boy whom Maggie had passed as he was sleeping, - a rough urchin about the age of Tom. He stared at Maggie, and there ensued much incomprehensible chattering. She felt very lonely, and was quite sure she should begin to cry before long; the gypsies didn't seem to mind her at all, and she felt quite weak among them. But the springing tears were checked by new terror, when two men came up, whose approach had been the cause of the sudden excitement. The elder of the two carried a bag, which he flung down, addressing the women in a loud and scolding tone, which they answered by a shower of treble sauciness; while a black cur ran barking up to Maggie, and threw her into a tremor that only found a new cause in the curses with which the younger man called the dog off, and gave him a rap with a great stick he held in his hand.

Maggie felt that it was impossible she should ever be queen of these people, or ever communicate to them amusing and useful knowledge.

Both the men now seemed to be inquiring about Maggie, for they looked at her, and the tone of the conversation became of that pacific kind which implies curiosity on one side and the power of satisfying it on the other. At last the younger woman said in her previous deferential, coaxing tone, -

'This nice little lady's come to live with us; aren't you glad?'

'Ay, very glad,' said the younger man, who was looking at Maggie's silver thimble and other small matters that had been taken from her pocket. He returned them all except the thimble to the younger woman, with some observation, and she immediately restored them to

Maggie's pocket, while the men seated themselves, and began to attack the contents of the kettle, - a stew of meat and potatoes, - which had been taken off the fire and turned out into a yellow platter.

Maggie began to think that Tom must be right about the gypsies; they must certainly be thieves, unless the man meant to return her thimble by and by. She would willingly have given it to him, for she was not at all attached to her thimble; but the idea that she was among thieves prevented her from feeling any comfort in the revival of deference and attention toward her; all thieves, except Robin Hood, were wicked people. The women saw she was frightened.

'We've got nothing nice for a lady to eat,' said the old woman, in her coaxing tone. 'And she's so hungry, sweet little lady.'

'Here, my dear, try if you can eat a bit o' this,' said the younger woman, handing some of the stew on a brown dish with an iron spoon to Maggie, who, remembering that the old woman had seemed angry with her for not liking the bread-and-bacon, dared not refuse the stew, though fear had chased away her appetite. If her father would but come by in the gig and take her up! Or even if Jack the Giantkiller, or Mr Greatheart, or St. George who slew the dragon on the half-pennies, would happen to pass that way! But Maggie thought with a sinking heart that these heroes were never seen in the neighborhood of St. Ogg's; nothing very wonderful ever came there.

Maggie Tulliver, you perceive, was by no means that well trained, well-informed young person that a small female of eight or nine necessarily is in these days; she had only been to school a year at St. Ogg's, and had so few books that she sometimes read the dictionary; so that in travelling over her small mind you would have found the most unexpected ignorance as well as unexpected knowledge. She could have informed you that there was such a word as 'polygamy,' and being also acquainted with 'polysyllable,' she had deduced the conclusion that 'poly' mean 'many'; but she had had no idea that gypsies were not well supplied with groceries, and her thoughts generally were the oddest mixture of clear-eyed acumen and blind dreams.

Her ideas about the gypsies had undergone a rapid modification in the last five minutes. From having considered them very respectful companions, amenable to instruction, she had begun to think that they meant perhaps to kill her as soon as it was dark, and cut up her body for gradual cooking; the suspicion crossed her that the fierce-eyed old man was in fact the Devil, who might drop that transparent disguise at any moment, and turn either into the grinning blacksmith, or else a fiery-eyed monster with dragon's wings. It was no use trying to eat the stew, and yet the thing she most dreaded was to offend the

gypsies, by betraying her extremely unfavorable opinion of them; and she wondered, with a keenness of interest that no theologian could have exceeded, whether, if the Devil were really present, he would know her thoughts.

'What! you don't like the smell of it, my dear,' said the young woman, observing that Maggie did not even take a spoonful of the stew. 'Try a bit, come.'

'No, thank you,' said Maggie, summoning all her force for a desperate effort, and trying to smile in a friendly way. 'I haven't time, I think; it seems getting darker. I think I must go home now, and come again another day, and then I can bring you a basket with some jam-tarts and things.'

Maggie rose from her seat as she threw out this illusory prospect, devoutly hoping that Apollyon was gullible; but her hope sank when the old gypsy-woman said, 'Stop a bit, stop a bit, little lady; we'll take you home, all safe, when we've done supper; you shall ride home, like a lady.'

Maggie sat down again, with little faith in this promise, though she presently saw the tall girl putting a bridle on the donkey, and throwing a couple of bags on his back.

'Now, then, little missis,' said the younger man, rising, and leading the donkey forward, 'tell us where you live; what's the name o' the place?'

'Dorlcote Mill is my home,' said Maggie, eagerly. 'My father is Mr Tulliver; he lives there.'

'What! a big mill a little way this side o' St. Ogg's?' 'Yes,' said Maggie. 'Is it far off? I think I should like to walk there, if you please.'

'No, no, it'll be getting dark, we must make haste. And the donkey'll carry you as nice as can be; you'll see.'

He lifted Maggie as he spoke, and set her on the donkey. She felt relieved that it was not the old man who seemed to be going with her, but she had only a trembling hope that she was really going home.

'Here's your pretty bonnet,' said the younger woman, putting that recently despised but now welcome article of costume on Maggie's head; 'and you'll say we've been very good to you, won't you? and what a nice little lady we said you was.'

'Oh yes, thank you,' said Maggie, 'I'm very much obliged to you. But I wish you'd go with me too.' She thought anything was better than

going with one of the dreadful men alone; it would be more cheerful to be murdered by a larger party.

‘Ah, you're fondest o' *me*, aren't you?’ said the woman. ‘But I can't go; you'll go too fast for me.’

It now appeared that the man also was to be seated on the donkey, holding Maggie before him, and she was as incapable of remonstrating against this arrangement as the donkey himself, though no nightmare had ever seemed to her more horrible. When the woman had patted her on the back, and said ‘Good-by,’ the donkey, at a strong hint from the man's stick, set off at a rapid walk along the lane toward the point Maggie had come from an hour ago, while the tall girl and the rough urchin, also furnished with sticks, obligingly escorted them for the first hundred yards, with much screaming and thwacking.

Not Leonore, in that preternatural midnight excursion with her phantom lover, was more terrified than poor Maggie in this entirely natural ride on a short-paced donkey, with a gypsy behind her, who considered that he was earning half a crown. The red light of the setting sun seemed to have a portentous meaning, with which the alarming bray of the second donkey with the log on its foot must surely have some connection. Two low thatched cottages - the only houses they passed in this lane - seemed to add to its dreariness; they had no windows to speak of, and the doors were closed; it was probable that they were inhabited by witches, and it was a relief to find that the donkey did not stop there.

At last - oh, sight of joy! - this lane, the longest in the world, was coming to an end, was opening on a broad highroad, where there was actually a coach passing! And there was a finger-post at the corner, - she had surely seen that finger-post before, - ‘To St. Ogg's, 2 miles.’ The gypsy really meant to take her home, then; he was probably a good man, after all, and might have been rather hurt at the thought that she didn't like coming with him alone. This idea became stronger as she felt more and more certain that she knew the road quite well, and she was considering how she might open a conversation with the injured gypsy, and not only gratify his feelings but efface the impression of her cowardice, when, as they reached a cross-road, Maggie caught sight of some one coming on a white-faced horse.

‘Oh, stop, stop!’ she cried out. ‘There's my father! Oh, father, father!’

The sudden joy was almost painful, and before her father reached her, she was sobbing. Great was Mr Tulliver's wonder, for he had made a round from Basset, and had not yet been home.

'Why, what's the meaning o' this?' he said, checking his horse, while Maggie slipped from the donkey and ran to her father's stirrup.

'The little miss lost herself, I reckon,' said the gypsy. 'She'd come to our tent at the far end o' Dunlow Lane, and I was bringing her where she said her home was. It's a good way to come after being on the tramp all day.'

'Oh yes, father, he's been very good to bring me home,' said Maggie, - 'a very kind, good man!'

'Here, then, my man,' said Mr Tulliver, taking out five shillings. 'It's the best day's work *you* ever did. I couldn't afford to lose the little wench; here, lift her up before me.'

'Why, Maggie, how's this, how's this?' he said, as they rode along, while she laid her head against her father and sobbed. 'How came you to be rambling about and lose yourself?'

'Oh, father,' sobbed Maggie, 'I ran away because I was so unhappy; Tom was so angry with me. I couldn't bear it.'

'Pooh, pooh,' said Mr Tulliver, soothingly, 'you mustn't think o' running away from father. What 'ud father do without his little wench?'

'Oh no, I never will again, father - never.'

Mr Tulliver spoke his mind very strongly when he reached home that evening; and the effect was seen in the remarkable fact that Maggie never heard one reproach from her mother, or one taunt from Tom, about this foolish business of her running away to the gypsies. Maggie was rather awe-stricken by this unusual treatment, and sometimes thought that her conduct had been too wicked to be alluded to.