Chapter IV - Another Love-Scene

Early in the following April, nearly a year after that dubious parting you have just witnessed, you may, if you like, again see Maggie entering the Red Deeps through the group of Scotch firs. But it is early afternoon and not evening, and the edge of sharpness in the spring air makes her draw her large shawl close about her and trip along rather quickly; though she looks round, as usual, that she may take in the sight of her beloved trees. There is a more eager, inquiring look in her eyes than there was last June, and a smile is hovering about her lips, as if some playful speech were awaiting the right hearer. The hearer was not long in appearing.

'Take back your *Corinne*,' said Maggie, drawing a book from under her shawl. 'You were right in telling me she would do me no good; but you were wrong in thinking I should wish to be like her.'

'Wouldn't you really like to be a tenth Muse, then, Maggie?' said Philip looking up in her face as we look at a first parting in the clouds that promises us a bright heaven once more.

'Not at all,' said Maggie, laughing. 'The Muses were uncomfortable goddesses, I think, - obliged always to carry rolls and musical instruments about with them. If I carried a harp in this climate, you know, I must have a green baize cover for it; and I should be sure to leave it behind me by mistake.'

'You agree with me in not liking Corinne, then?'

'I didn't finish the book,' said Maggie. 'As soon as I came to the blond-haired young lady reading in the park, I shut it up, and determined to read no further. I foresaw that that light-complexioned girl would win away all the love from Corinne and make her miserable. I'm determined to read no more books where the blond-haired women carry away all the happiness. I should begin to have a prejudice against them. If you could give me some story, now, where the dark woman triumphs, it would restore the balance. I want to avenge Rebecca and Flora MacIvor and Minna, and all the rest of the dark unhappy ones. Since you are my tutor, you ought to preserve my mind from prejudices; you are always arguing against prejudices.'

'Well, perhaps you will avenge the dark women in your own person, and carry away all the love from your cousin Lucy. She is sure to have some handsome young man of St. Ogg's at her feet now; and you have only to shine upon him - your fair little cousin will be quite quenched in your beams.'

'Philip, that is not pretty of you, to apply my nonsense to anything real,' said Maggie, looking hurt. 'As if I, with my old gowns and want of all accomplishments, could be a rival of dear little Lucy, - who knows and does all sorts of charming things, and is ten times prettier than I am, - even if I were odious and base enough to wish to be her rival. Besides, I never go to aunt Deane's when any one is there; it is only because dear Lucy is good, and loves me, that she comes to see me, and will have me go to see her sometimes.'

'Maggie,' said Philip, with surprise, 'it is not like you to take playfulness literally. You must have been in St. Ogg's this morning, and brought away a slight infection of dulness.'

'Well,' said Maggie, smiling, 'if you meant that for a joke, it was a poor one; but I thought it was a very good reproof. I thought you wanted to remind me that I am vain, and wish every one to admire me most. But it isn't for that that I'm jealous for the dark women, - not because I'm dark myself; it's because I always care the most about the unhappy people. If the blond girl were forsaken, I should like *her* best. I always take the side of the rejected lover in the stories.'

'Then you would never have the heart to reject one yourself, should you, Maggie?' said Philip, flushing a little.

'I don't know,' said Maggie, hesitatingly. Then with a bright smile, 'I think perhaps I could if he were very conceited; and yet, if he got extremely humiliated afterward, I should relent.'

'I've often wondered, Maggie,' Philip said, with some effort, 'whether you wouldn't really be more likely to love a man that other women were not likely to love.'

'That would depend on what they didn't like him for,' said Maggie, laughing. 'He might be very disagreeable. He might look at me through an eye-glass stuck in his eye, making a hideous face, as young Torry does. I should think other women are not fond of that; but I never felt any pity for young Torry. I've never any pity for conceited people, because I think they carry their comfort about with them.'

'But suppose, Maggie, - suppose it was a man who was not conceited, who felt he had nothing to be conceited about; who had been marked from childhood for a peculiar kind of suffering, and to whom you were the day-star of his life; who loved you, worshipped you, so entirely that he felt it happiness enough for him if you would let him see you at rare moments - - '

Philip paused with a pang of dread lest his confession should cut short this very happiness, - a pang of the same dread that had kept

his love mute through long months. A rush of self-consciousness told him that he was besotted to have said all this. Maggie's manner this morning had been as unconstrained and indifferent as ever.

But she was not looking indifferent now. Struck with the unusual emotion in Philip's tone, she had turned quickly to look at him; and as he went on speaking, a great change came over her face, - a flush and slight spasm of the features, such as we see in people who hear some news that will require them to readjust their conceptions of the past. She was quite silent, and walking on toward the trunk of a fallen tree, she sat down, as if she had no strength to spare for her muscles. She was trembling.

'Maggie,' said Philip, getting more and more alarmed in every fresh moment of silence, 'I was a fool to say it; forget that I've said it. I shall be contented if things can be as they were.'

The distress with which he spoke urged Maggie to say something. 'I am so surprised, Philip; I had not thought of it.' And the effort to say this brought the tears down too.

'Has it made you hate me, Maggie?' said Philip, impetuously. 'Do you think I'm a presumptuous fool?'

'Oh, Philip!' said Maggie, 'how can you think I have such feelings? As if I were not grateful for *any* love. But - but I had never thought of your being my lover. It seemed so far off - like a dream - only like one of the stories one imagines - that I should ever have a lover.'

'Then can you bear to think of me as your lover, Maggie?' said Philip, seating himself by her, and taking her hand, in the elation of a sudden hope. '*Do* you love me?'

Maggie turned rather pale; this direct question seemed not easy to answer. But her eyes met Philip's, which were in this moment liquid and beautiful with beseeching love. She spoke with hesitation, yet with sweet, simple, girlish tenderness.

'I think I could hardly love any one better; there is nothing but what I love you for.' She paused a little while, and then added: 'But it will be better for us not to say any more about it, won't it, dear Philip? You know we couldn't even be friends, if our friendship were discovered. I have never felt that I was right in giving way about seeing you, though it has been so precious to me in some ways; and now the fear comes upon me strongly again, that it will lead to evil.'

‘But no evil has come, Maggie; and if you had been guided by that fear before, you would only have lived through another dreary, benumbing year, instead of reviving into your real self.’

Maggie shook her head. ‘It has been very sweet, I know, - all the talking together, and the books, and the feeling that I had the walk to look forward to, when I could tell you the thoughts that had come into my head while I was away from you. But it has made me restless; it has made me think a great deal about the world; and I have impatient thoughts again, - I get weary of my home; and then it cuts me to the heart afterward, that I should ever have felt weary of my father and mother. I think what you call being benumbed was better - better for me - for then my selfish desires were benumbed.’

Philip had risen again, and was walking backward and forward impatiently.

‘No, Maggie, you have wrong ideas of self-conquest, as I've often told you. What you call self-conquest - binding and deafening yourself to all but one train of impressions - is only the culture of monomania in a nature like yours.’

He had spoken with some irritation, but now he sat down by her again and took her hand.

‘Don't think of the past now, Maggie; think only of our love. If you can really cling to me with all your heart, every obstacle will be overcome in time; we need only wait. I can live on hope. Look at me, Maggie; tell me again it is possible for you to love me. Don't look away from me to that cloven tree; it is a bad omen.’

She turned her large dark glance upon him with a sad smile.

‘Come, Maggie, say one kind word, or else you were better to me at Lorton. You asked me if I should like you to kiss me, - don't you remember? - and you promised to kiss me when you met me again. You never kept the promise.’

The recollection of that childish time came as a sweet relief to Maggie. It made the present moment less strange to her. She kissed him almost as simply and quietly as she had done when she was twelve years old. Philip's eyes flashed with delight, but his next words were words of discontent.

‘You don't seem happy enough, Maggie; you are forcing yourself to say you love me, out of pity.’

'No, Philip,' said Maggie, shaking her head, in her old childish way; 'I'm telling you the truth. It is all new and strange to me; but I don't think I could love any one better than I love you. I should like always to live with you - to make you happy. I have always been happy when I have been with you. There is only one thing I will not do for your sake; I will never do anything to wound my father. You must never ask that from me.'

'No, Maggie, I will ask nothing; I will bear everything; I'll wait another year only for a kiss, if you will only give me the first place in your heart.'

'No,' said Maggie, smiling, 'I won't make you wait so long as that.' But then, looking serious again, she added, as she rose from her seat, -

'But what would your own father say, Philip? Oh, it is quite impossible we can ever be more than friends, - brother and sister in secret, as we have been. Let us give up thinking of everything else.'

'No, Maggie, I can't give you up, - unless you are deceiving me; unless you really only care for me as if I were your brother. Tell me the truth.'

'Indeed I do, Philip. What happiness have I ever had so great as being with you, - since I was a little girl, - the days Tom was good to me? And your mind is a sort of world to me; you can tell me all I want to know. I think I should never be tired of being with you.'

They were walking hand in hand, looking at each other; Maggie, indeed, was hurrying along, for she felt it time to be gone. But the sense that their parting was near made her more anxious lest she should have unintentionally left some painful impression on Philip's mind. It was one of those dangerous moments when speech is at once sincere and deceptive; when feeling, rising high above its average depth, leaves floodmarks which are never reached again.

They stopped to part among the Scotch firs.

'Then my life will be filled with hope, Maggie, and I shall be happier than other men, in spite of all? We *do* belong to each other - for always - whether we are apart or together?'

'Yes, Philip; I should like never to part; I should like to make your life very happy.'

'I am waiting for something else. I wonder whether it will come.'

Maggie smiled, with glistening tears, and then stooped her tall head to kiss the pale face that was full of pleading, timid love, - like a woman's.

She had a moment of real happiness then, - a moment of belief that, if there were sacrifice in this love, it was all the richer and more satisfying.

She turned away and hurried home, feeling that in the hour since she had trodden this road before, a new era had begun for her. The tissue of vague dreams must now get narrower and narrower, and all the threads of thought and emotion be gradually absorbed in the woof of her actual daily life.