

Book VI - The Great Temptation

Chapter I - A Duet In Paradise

The well-furnished drawing-room, with the open grand piano, and the pleasant outlook down a sloping garden to a boat-house by the side of the Floss, is Mr Deane's. The neat little lady in mourning, whose light-brown ringlets are falling over the colored embroidery with which her fingers are busy, is of course Lucy Deane; and the fine young man who is leaning down from his chair to snap the scissors in the extremely abbreviated face of the 'King Charles' lying on the young lady's feet is no other than Mr Stephen Guest, whose diamond ring, attar of roses, and air of *nonchalant* leisure, at twelve o'clock in the day, are the graceful and odoriferous result of the largest oil-mill and the most extensive wharf in St. Ogg's. There is an apparent triviality in the action with the scissors, but your discernment perceives at once that there is a design in it which makes it eminently worthy of a large-headed, long-limbed young man; for you see that Lucy wants the scissors, and is compelled, reluctant as she may be, to shake her ringlets back, raise her soft hazel eyes, smile playfully down on the face that is so very nearly on a level with her knee, and holding out her little shell-pink palm, to say, -

'My scissors, please, if you can renounce the great pleasure of persecuting my poor Minny.'

The foolish scissors have slipped too far over the knuckles, it seems, and Hercules holds out his entrapped fingers hopelessly.

'Confound the scissors! The oval lies the wrong way. Please draw them off for me.'

'Draw them off with your other hand,' says Miss Lucy, roguishly.

'Oh, but that's my left hand; I'm not left-handed.'

Lucy laughs, and the scissors are drawn off with gentle touches from tiny tips, which naturally dispose Mr Stephen for a repetition *da capo*. Accordingly, he watches for the release of the scissors, that he may get them into his possession again.

'No, no,' said Lucy, sticking them in her band, 'you shall not have my scissors again, - you have strained them already. Now don't set Minny growling again. Sit up and behave properly, and then I will tell you some news.'

'What is that?' said Stephen, throwing himself back and hanging his right arm over the corner of his chair. He might have been sitting for

his portrait, which would have represented a rather striking young man of five-and-twenty, with a square forehead, short dark-brown hair, standing erect, with a slight wave at the end, like a thick crop of corn, and a half-ardent, half-sarcastic glance from under his well-marked horizontal eyebrows. 'Is it very important news?'

'Yes, very. Guess.'

'You are going to change Minny's diet, and give him three ratafias soaked in a dessert-spoonful of cream daily?'

'Quite wrong.'

'Well, then, Dr. Kenn has been preaching against buckram, and you ladies have all been sending him a roundrobin, saying, 'This is a hard doctrine; who can bear it?''

'For shame!' said Lucy, adjusting her little mouth gravely. 'It is rather dull of you not to guess my news, because it is about something I mentioned to you not very long ago.'

'But you have mentioned many things to me not long ago. Does your feminine tyranny require that when you say the thing you mean is one of several things, I should know it immediately by that mark?'

'Yes, I know you think I am silly.'

'I think you are perfectly charming.'

'And my silliness is part of my charm?'

'I didn't say *that*.'

'But I know you like women to be rather insipid. Philip Wakem betrayed you; he said so one day when you were not here.'

'Oh, I know Phil is fierce on that point; he makes it quite a personal matter. I think he must be love-sick for some unknown lady, - some exalted Beatrice whom he met abroad.'

'By the by,' said Lucy, pausing in her work, 'it has just occurred to me that I never found out whether my cousin Maggie will object to see Philip, as her brother does. Tom will not enter a room where Philip is, if he knows it; perhaps Maggie may be the same, and then we sha'n't be able to sing our glees, shall we?'

'What! is your cousin coming to stay with you?' said Stephen, with a look of slight annoyance.

'Yes; that was my news, which you have forgotten. She's going to leave her situation, where she has been nearly two years, poor thing, - ever since her father's death; and she will stay with me a month or two, - many months, I hope.'

'And am I bound to be pleased at that news?'

'Oh no, not at all,' said Lucy, with a little air of pique. 'I am pleased, but that, of course, is no reason why *you* should be pleased. There is no girl in the world I love so well as my cousin Maggie.'

'And you will be inseparable I suppose, when she comes. There will be no possibility of a *tete-a-tete* with you any more, unless you can find an admirer for her, who will pair off with her occasionally. What is the ground of dislike to Philip? He might have been a resource.'

'It is a family quarrel with Philip's father. There were very painful circumstances, I believe. I never quite understood them, or knew them all. My uncle Tulliver was unfortunate and lost all his property, and I think he considered Mr Wakem was somehow the cause of it. Mr Wakem bought Dorlcote Mill, my uncle's old place, where he always lived. You must remember my uncle Tulliver, don't you?'

'No,' said Stephen, with rather supercilious indifference. 'I've always known the name, and I dare say I knew the man by sight, apart from his name. I know half the names and faces in the neighborhood in that detached, disjointed way.'

'He was a very hot-tempered man. I remember, when I was a little girl and used to go to see my cousins, he often frightened me by talking as if he were angry. Papa told me there was a dreadful quarrel, the very day before my uncle's death, between him and Mr Wakem, but it was hushed up. That was when you were in London. Papa says my uncle was quite mistaken in many ways; his mind had become embittered. But Tom and Maggie must naturally feel it very painful to be reminded of these things. They have had so much, so very much trouble. Maggie was at school with me six years ago, when she was fetched away because of her father's misfortunes, and she has hardly had any pleasure since, I think. She has been in a dreary situation in a school since uncle's death, because she is determined to be independent, and not live with aunt Pullet; and I could hardly wish her to come to me then, because dear mamma was ill, and everything was so sad. That is why I want her to come to me now, and have a long, long holiday.'

'Very sweet and angelic of you,' said Stephen, looking at her with an admiring smile; 'and all the more so if she has the conversational qualities of her mother.'

'Poor aunty! You are cruel to ridicule her. She is very valuable to *me*, I know. She manages the house beautifully, - much better than any stranger would, - and she was a great comfort to me in mamma's illness.'

'Yes, but in point of companionship one would prefer that she should be represented by her brandy-cherries and cream-cakes. I think with a shudder that her daughter will always be present in person, and have no agreeable proxies of that kind, - a fat, blond girl, with round blue eyes, who will stare at us silently.'

'Oh yes!' exclaimed Lucy, laughing wickedly, and clapping her hands, 'that is just my cousin Maggie. You must have seen her!'

'No, indeed; I'm only guessing what Mrs Tulliver's daughter must be; and then if she is to banish Philip, our only apology for a tenor, that will be an additional bore.'

'But I hope that may not be. I think I will ask you to call on Philip and tell him Maggie is coming to-morrow. He is quite aware of Tom's feeling, and always keeps out of his way; so he will understand, if you tell him, that I asked you to warn him not to come until I write to ask him.'

'I think you had better write a pretty note for me to take; Phil is so sensitive, you know, the least thing might frighten him off coming at all, and we had hard work to get him. I can never induce him to come to the park; he doesn't like my sisters, I think. It is only your faery touch that can lay his ruffled feathers.'

Stephen mastered the little hand that was straying toward the table, and touched it lightly with his lips. Little Lucy felt very proud and happy. She and Stephen were in that stage of courtship which makes the most exquisite moment of youth, the freshest blossom-time of passion, - when each is sure of the other's love, but no formal declaration has been made, and all is mutual divination, exalting the most trivial word, the lightest gesture, into thrills delicate and delicious as wafted jasmine scent. The explicitness of an engagement wears off this finest edge of susceptibility; it is jasmine gathered and presented in a large bouquet.

'But it is really odd that you should have hit so exactly on Maggie's appearance and manners,' said the cunning Lucy, moving to reach her desk, 'because she might have been like her brother, you know; and Tom has not round eyes; and he is as far as possible from staring at people.'

'Oh, I suppose he is like the father; he seems to be as proud as Lucifer. Not a brilliant companion, though, I should think.'

'I like Tom. He gave me my Minny when I lost Lolo; and papa is very fond of him: he says Tom has excellent principles. It was through him that his father was able to pay all his debts before he died.'

'Oh, ah; I've heard about that. I heard your father and mine talking about it a little while ago, after dinner, in one of their interminable discussions about business. They think of doing something for young Tulliver; he saved them from a considerable loss by riding home in some marvellous way, like Turpin, to bring them news about the stoppage of a bank, or something of that sort. But I was rather drowsy at the time.'

Stephen rose from his seat, and sauntered to the piano, humming in falsetto, 'Graceful Consort,' as he turned over the volume of 'The Creation,' which stood open on the desk.

'Come and sing this,' he said, when he saw Lucy rising.

'What, 'Graceful Consort'? I don't think it suits your voice.'

'Never mind; it exactly suits my feeling, which, Philip will have it, is the grand element of good singing. I notice men with indifferent voices are usually of that opinion.'

'Philip burst into one of his invectives against 'The Creation' the other day,' said Lucy, seating herself at the piano. 'He says it has a sort of sugared complacency and flattering make-believe in it, as if it were written for the birthday *fete* of a German Grand-Duke.'

'Oh, pooh! He is the fallen Adam with a soured temper. We are Adam and Eve unfallen, in Paradise. Now, then, - the recitative, for the sake of the moral. You will sing the whole duty of woman, - 'And from obedience grows my pride and happiness.'

'Oh no, I shall not respect an Adam who drags the *tempo*, as you will,' said Lucy, beginning to play the duet.

Surely the only courtship unshaken by doubts and fears must be that in which the lovers can sing together. The sense of mutual fitness that springs from the two deep notes fulfilling expectation just at the right moment between the notes of the silvery soprano, from the perfect accord of descending thirds and fifths, from the preconcerted loving chase of a fugue, is likely enough to supersede any immediate demand for less impassioned forms of agreement. The contralto will not care to catechise the bass; the tenor will foresee no embarrassing dearth of

remark in evenings spent with the lovely soprano. In the provinces, too, where music was so scarce in that remote time, how could the musical people avoid falling in love with each other? Even political principle must have been in danger of relaxation under such circumstances; and the violin, faithful to rotten boroughs, must have been tempted to fraternize in a demoralizing way with a reforming violoncello. In that case, the linnethroated soprano and the full-toned bass singing, -

'With thee delight is ever new, With thee is life incessant bliss,'

believed what they sang all the more *because* they sang it.

'Now for Raphael's great song,' said Lucy, when they had finished the duet. 'You do the 'heavy beasts' to perfection.'

'That sounds complimentary,' said Stephen, looking at his watch. 'By Jove, it's nearly half-past one! Well, I can just sing this.'

Stephen delivered with admirable ease the deep notes representing the tread of the heavy beasts; but when a singer has an audience of two, there is room for divided sentiments. Minny's mistress was charmed; but Minny, who had intrenched himself, trembling, in his basket as soon as the music began, found this thunder so little to his taste that he leaped out and scampered under the remotest *chiffonnier*, as the most eligible place in which a small dog could await the crack of doom.

'Adieu, 'graceful consort,' said Stephen, buttoning his coat across when he had done singing, and smiling down from his tall height, with the air of rather a patronizing lover, at the little lady on the musicstool. 'My bliss is not incessant, for I must gallop home. I promised to be there at lunch.'

'You will not be able to call on Philip, then? It is of no consequence; I have said everything in my note.'

'You will be engaged with your cousin to-morrow, I suppose?'

'Yes, we are going to have a little family-party. My cousin Tom will dine with us; and poor aunty will have her two children together for the first time. It will be very pretty; I think a great deal about it.'

'But I may come the next day?'

'Oh yes! Come and be introduced to my cousin Maggie; though you can hardly be said not to have seen her, you have described her so well.'

'Good-bye, then.' And there was that slight pressure of the hands, and momentary meeting of the eyes, which will often leave a little lady with a slight flush and smile on her face that do not subside immediately when the door is closed, and with an inclination to walk up and down the room rather than to seat herself quietly at her embroidery, or other rational and improving occupation. At least this was the effect on Lucy; and you will not, I hope, consider it an indication of vanity predominating over more tender impulses, that she just glanced in the chimney-glass as her walk brought her near it. The desire to know that one has not looked an absolute fright during a few hours of conversation may be construed as lying within the bounds of a laudable benevolent consideration for others. And Lucy had so much of this benevolence in her nature that I am inclined to think her small egoisms were impregnated with it, just as there are people not altogether unknown to you whose small benevolences have a predominant and somewhat rank odor of egoism. Even now, that she is walking up and down with a little triumphant flutter of her girlish heart at the sense that she is loved by the person of chief consequence in her small world, you may see in her hazel eyes an ever-present sunny benignity, in which the momentary harmless flashes of personal vanity are quite lost; and if she is happy in thinking of her lover, it is because the thought of him mingles readily with all the gentle affections and good-natured offices with which she fills her peaceful days. Even now, her mind, with that instantaneous alternation which makes two currents of feeling or imagination seem simultaneous, is glancing continually from Stephen to the preparations she has only half finished in Maggie's room. Cousin Maggie should be treated as well as the grandest lady-visitor, - nay, better, for she should have Lucy's best prints and drawings in her bedroom, and the very finest bouquet of spring flowers on her table. Maggie would enjoy all that, she was so fond of pretty things! And there was poor aunt Tulliver, that no one made any account of, she was to be surprised with the present of a cap of superlative quality, and to have her health drunk in a gratifying manner, for which Lucy was going to lay a plot with her father this evening. Clearly, she had not time to indulge in long reveries about her own happy love-affairs. With this thought she walked toward the door, but paused there.

'What's the matter, then, Minny?' she said, stooping in answer to some whimpering of that small quadruped, and lifting his glossy head against her pink cheek. 'Did you think I was going without you? Come, then, let us go and see Sinbad.'

Sinbad was Lucy's chestnut horse, that she always fed with her own hand when he was turned out in the paddock. She was fond of feeding dependent creatures, and knew the private tastes of all the animals about the house, delighting in the little rippling sounds of her canaries when their beaks were busy with fresh seed, and in the small

nibbling pleasures of certain animals which, lest she should appear too trivial, I will here call 'the more familiar rodents.'

Was not Stephen Guest right in his decided opinion that this slim maiden of eighteen was quite the sort of wife a man would not be likely to repent of marrying, - a woman who was loving and thoughtful for other women, not giving them Judas-kisses with eyes askance on their welcome defects, but with real care and vision for their half-hidden pains and mortifications, with long ruminating enjoyment of little pleasures prepared for them? Perhaps the emphasis of his admiration did not fall precisely on this rarest quality in her; perhaps he approved his own choice of her chiefly because she did not strike him as a remarkable rarity. A man likes his wife to be pretty; well, Lucy was pretty, but not to a maddening extent. A man likes his wife to be accomplished, gentle, affectionate, and not stupid; and Lucy had all these qualifications. Stephen was not surprised to find himself in love with her, and was conscious of excellent judgment in preferring her to Miss Leyburn, the daughter of the county member, although Lucy was only the daughter of his father's subordinate partner; besides, he had had to defy and overcome a slight unwillingness and disappointment in his father and sisters, - a circumstance which gives a young man an agreeable consciousness of his own dignity. Stephen was aware that he had sense and independence enough to choose the wife who was likely to make him happy, unbiassed by any indirect considerations. He meant to choose Lucy; she was a little darling, and exactly the sort of woman he had always admired.