

Chapter IX - Charity in Full-Dress

The culmination of Maggie's career as an admired member of society in St. Ogg's was certainly the day of the bazaar, when her simple noble beauty, clad in a white muslin of some soft-floating kind, which I suspect must have come from the stores of aunt Pullet's wardrobe, appeared with marked distinction among the more adorned and conventional women around her. We perhaps never detect how much of our social demeanor is made up of artificial airs until we see a person who is at once beautiful and simple; without the beauty, we are apt to call simplicity awkwardness. The Miss Guests were much too well-bred to have any of the grimaces and affected tones that belong to pretentious vulgarity; but their stall being next to the one where Maggie sat, it seemed newly obvious to-day that Miss Guest held her chin too high, and that Miss Laura spoke and moved continually with a view to effect.

All well-dressed St. Ogg's and its neighborhood were there; and it would have been worth while to come even from a distance, to see the fine old hall, with its open roof and carved oaken rafters, and great oaken folding-doors, and light shed down from a height on the many-colored show beneath; a very quaint place, with broad faded stripes painted on the walls, and here and there a show of heraldic animals of a bristly, long-snouted character, the cherished emblems of a noble family once the seigniors of this now civic hall. A grand arch, cut in the upper wall at one end, surmounted an oaken orchestra, with an open room behind it, where hothouse plants and stalls for refreshments were disposed; an agreeable resort for gentlemen disposed to loiter, and yet to exchange the occasional crush down below for a more commodious point of view. In fact, the perfect fitness of this ancient building for an admirable modern purpose, that made charity truly elegant, and led through vanity up to the supply of a deficit, was so striking that hardly a person entered the room without exchanging the remark more than once. Near the great arch over the orchestra was the stone oriel with painted glass, which was one of the venerable inconsistencies of the old hall; and it was close by this that Lucy had her stall, for the convenience of certain large plain articles which she had taken charge of for Mrs Kenn. Maggie had begged to sit at the open end of the stall, and to have the sale of these articles rather than of bead-mats and other elaborate products of which she had but a dim understanding. But it soon appeared that the gentlemen's dressing-gowns, which were among her commodities, were objects of such general attention and inquiry, and excited so troublesome a curiosity as to their lining and comparative merits, together with a determination to test them by trying on, as to make her post a very conspicuous one. The ladies who had commodities of their own to sell, and did not want dressing-gowns, saw at once the frivolity and bad taste of this masculine preference for goods which

any tailor could furnish; and it is possible that the emphatic notice of various kinds which was drawn toward Miss Tulliver on this public occasion, threw a very strong and unmistakable light on her subsequent conduct in many minds then present. Not that anger, on account of spurned beauty can dwell in the celestial breasts of charitable ladies, but rather that the errors of persons who have once been much admired necessarily take a deeper tinge from the mere force of contrast; and also, that to-day Maggie's conspicuous position, for the first time, made evident certain characteristics which were subsequently felt to have an explanatory bearing. There was something rather bold in Miss Tulliver's direct gaze, and something undefinably coarse in the style of her beauty, which placed her, in the opinion of all feminine judges, far below her cousin Miss Deane; for the ladies of St. Ogg's had now completely ceded to Lucy their hypothetical claims on the admiration of Mr Stephen Guest.

As for dear little Lucy herself, her late benevolent triumph about the Mill, and all the affectionate projects she was cherishing for Maggie and Philip, helped to give her the highest spirits to-day, and she felt nothing but pleasure in the evidence of Maggie's attractiveness. It is true, she was looking very charming herself, and Stephen was paying her the utmost attention on this public occasion; jealously buying up the articles he had seen under her fingers in the process of making, and gayly helping her to cajole the male customers into the purchase of the most effeminate futilities. He chose to lay aside his hat and wear a scarlet fez of her embroidering; but by superficial observers this was necessarily liable to be interpreted less as a compliment to Lucy than as a mark of coxcombry. 'Guest is a great coxcomb,' young Torry observed; 'but then he is a privileged person in St. Ogg's - he carries all before him; if another fellow did such things, everybody would say he made a fool of himself.'

And Stephen purchased absolutely nothing from Maggie, until Lucy said, in rather a vexed undertone, -

'See, now; all the things of Maggie's knitting will be gone, and you will not have bought one. There are those deliciously soft warm things for the wrists, - do buy them.'

'Oh no,' said Stephen, 'they must be intended for imaginative persons, who can chill themselves on this warm day by thinking of the frosty Caucasus. Stern reason is my forte, you know. You must get Philip to buy those. By the way, why doesn't he come?'

'He never likes going where there are many people, though I enjoined him to come. He said he would buy up any of my goods that the rest of the world rejected. But now, do go and buy something of Maggie.'

'No, no; see, she has got a customer; there is old Wakem himself just coming up.'

Lucy's eyes turned with anxious interest toward Maggie to see how she went through this first interview, since a sadly memorable time, with a man toward whom she must have so strange a mixture of feelings; but she was pleased to notice that Wakem had tact enough to enter at once into talk about the bazaar wares, and appear interested in purchasing, smiling now and then kindly at Maggie, and not calling on her to speak much, as if he observed that she was rather pale and tremulous.

'Why, Wakem is making himself particularly amiable to your cousin,' said Stephen, in an undertone to Lucy; 'is it pure magnanimity? You talked of a family quarrel.'

'Oh, that will soon be quite healed, I hope,' said Lucy, becoming a little indiscreet in her satisfaction, and speaking with an air of significance. But Stephen did not appear to notice this, and as some lady-purchasers came up, he lounged on toward Maggie's end, handling trifles and standing aloof until Wakem, who had taken out his purse, had finished his transactions.

'My son came with me,' he overheard Wakem saying, 'but he has vanished into some other part of the building, and has left all these charitable gallantries to me. I hope you'll reproach him for his shabby conduct.'

She returned his smile and bow without speaking, and he turned away, only then observing Stephen and nodding to him. Maggie, conscious that Stephen was still there, busied herself with counting money, and avoided looking up. She had been well pleased that he had devoted himself to Lucy to-day, and had not come near her. They had begun the morning with an indifferent salutation, and both had rejoiced in being aloof from each other, like a patient who has actually done without his opium, in spite of former failures in resolution. And during the last few days they had even been making up their minds to failures, looking to the outward events that must soon come to separate them, as a reason for dispensing with self-conquest in detail.

Stephen moved step by step as if he were being unwillingly dragged, until he had got round the open end of the stall, and was half hidden by a screen of draperies. Maggie went on counting her money till she suddenly heard a deep gentle voice saying, 'Aren't you very tired? Do let me bring you something, - some fruit or jelly, mayn't I?'

The unexpected tones shook her like a sudden accidental vibration of a harp close by her.

'Oh no, thank you,' she said faintly, and only half looking up for an instant.

'You look so pale,' Stephen insisted, in a more entreating tone. 'I'm sure you're exhausted. I must disobey you, and bring something.'

'No, indeed, I couldn't take it.'

'Are you angry with me? What have I done? *Do* look at me.'

'Pray, go away,' said Maggie, looking at him helplessly, her eyes glancing immediately from him to the opposite corner of the orchestra, which was half hidden by the folds of the old faded green curtain. Maggie had no sooner uttered this entreaty than she was wretched at the admission it implied; but Stephen turned away at once, and following her upward glance, he saw Philip Wakem seated in the half-hidden corner, so that he could command little more than that angle of the hall in which Maggie sat. An entirely new thought occurred to Stephen, and linking itself with what he had observed of Wakem's manner, and with Lucy's reply to his observation, it convinced him that there had been some former relation between Philip and Maggie beyond that childish one of which he had heard. More than one impulse made him immediately leave the hall and go upstairs to the refreshment-room, where, walking up to Philip, he sat down behind him, and put his hand on his shoulder.

'Are you studying for a portrait, Phil,' he said, 'or for a sketch of that oriel window? By George, it makes a capital bit from this dark corner, with the curtain just marking it off.'

'I have been studying expression,' said Philip, curtly.

'What! Miss Tulliver's? It's rather of the savage-moody order to-day, I think, - something of the fallen princess serving behind a counter. Her cousin sent me to her with a civil offer to get her some refreshment, but I have been snubbed, as usual. There's natural antipathy between us, I suppose; I have seldom the honor to please her.'

'What a hypocrite you are!' said Philip, flushing angrily.

'What! because experience must have told me that I'm universally pleasing? I admit the law, but there's some disturbing force here.'

'I am going,' said Philip, rising abruptly.

'So am I - to get a breath of fresh air; this place gets oppressive. I think I have done suit and service long enough.'

The two friends walked downstairs together without speaking. Philip turned through the outer door into the court-yard; but Stephen, saying, 'Oh, by the by, I must call in here,' went on along the passage to one of the rooms at the other end of the building, which were appropriated to the town library. He had the room all to himself, and a man requires nothing less than this when he wants to dash his cap on the table, throw himself astride a chair, and stare at a high brick wall with a frown which would not have been beneath the occasion if he had been slaying 'the giant Python.' The conduct that issues from a moral conflict has often so close a resemblance to vice that the distinction escapes all outward judgments founded on a mere comparison of actions. It is clear to you, I hope, that Stephen was not a hypocrite, - capable of deliberate doubleness for a selfish end; and yet his fluctuations between the indulgence of a feeling and the systematic concealment of it might have made a good case in support of Philip's accusation.

Meanwhile, Maggie sat at her stall cold and trembling, with that painful sensation in the eyes which comes from resolutely repressed tears. Was her life to be always like this, - always bringing some new source of inward strife? She heard confusedly the busy, indifferent voices around her, and wished her mind could flow into that easy babbling current. It was at this moment that Dr. Kenn, who had quite lately come into the hall, and was now walking down the middle with his hands behind him, taking a general view, fixed his eyes on Maggie for the first time, and was struck with the expression of pain on her beautiful face. She was sitting quite still, for the stream of customers had lessened at this late hour in the afternoon; the gentlemen had chiefly chosen the middle of the day, and Maggie's stall was looking rather bare. This, with her absent, pained expression, finished the contrast between her and her companions, who were all bright, eager, and busy. He was strongly arrested. Her face had naturally drawn his attention as a new and striking one at church, and he had been introduced to her during a short call on business at Mr Deane's, but he had never spoken more than three words to her. He walked toward her now, and Maggie, perceiving some one approaching, roused herself to look up and be prepared to speak. She felt a childlike, instinctive relief from the sense of uneasiness in this exertion, when she saw it was Dr. Kenn's face that was looking at her; that plain, middle-aged face, with a grave, penetrating kindness in it, seeming to tell of a human being who had reached a firm, safe strand, but was looking with helpful pity toward the strugglers still tossed by the waves, had an effect on Maggie at this moment which was afterward remembered by her as if it had been a promise. The middle-aged, who have lived through their strongest emotions, but are yet in the time when memory is still half passionate and not merely contemplative, should surely be a sort of natural priesthood, whom life has disciplined and consecrated to be the refuge and rescue of early

stumblers and victims of self-despair. Most of us, at some moment in our young lives, would have welcomed a priest of that natural order in any sort of canonicals or uncanonicals, but had to scramble upward into all the difficulties of nineteen entirely without such aid, as Maggie did.

'You find your office rather a fatiguing one, I fear, Miss Tulliver,' said Dr. Kenn.

'It is, rather,' said Maggie, simply, not being accustomed to simpler amiable denials of obvious facts.

'But I can tell Mrs Kenn that you have disposed of her goods very quickly,' he added; 'she will be very much obliged to you.'

'Oh, I have done nothing; the gentlemen came very fast to buy the dressing-gowns and embroidered waistcoats, but I think any of the other ladies would have sold more; I didn't know what to say about them.'

Dr. Kenn smiled. 'I hope I'm going to have you as a permanent parishioner now, Miss Tulliver; am I? You have been at a distance from us hitherto.'

'I have been a teacher in a school, and I'm going into another situation of the same kind very soon.'

'Ah? I was hoping you would remain among your friends, who are all in this neighborhood, I believe.'

'Oh, *I must go*,' said Maggie, earnestly, looking at Dr. Kenn with an expression of reliance, as if she had told him her history in those three words. It was one of those moments of implicit revelation which will sometimes happen even between people who meet quite transiently, - on a mile's journey, perhaps, or when resting by the wayside. There is always this possibility of a word or look from a stranger to keep alive the sense of human brotherhood.

Dr. Kenn's ear and eye took in all the signs that this brief confidence of Maggie's was charged with meaning.

'I understand,' he said; 'you feel it right to go. But that will not prevent our meeting again, I hope; it will not prevent my knowing you better, if I can be of any service to you.'

He put out his hand and pressed hers kindly before he turned away.

'She has some trouble or other at heart,' he thought. 'Poor child! she looks as if she might turn out to be one of

'The souls by nature pitched too high, By suffering plunged too low.'

'There's something wonderfully honest in those beautiful eyes.'

It may be surprising that Maggie, among whose many imperfections an excessive delight in admiration and acknowledged supremacy were not absent now, any more than when she was instructing the gypsies with a view toward achieving a royal position among them, was not more elated on a day when she had had the tribute of so many looks and smiles, together with that satisfactory consciousness which had necessarily come from being taken before Lucy's chevalglass, and made to look at the full length of her tall beauty, crowned by the night of her massy hair. Maggie had smiled at herself then, and for the moment had forgotten everything in the sense of her own beauty. If that state of mind could have lasted, her choice would have been to have Stephen Guest at her feet, offering her a life filled with all luxuries, with daily incense of adoration near and distant, and with all possibilities of culture at her command. But there were things in her stronger than vanity, - passion and affection, and long, deep memories of early discipline and effort, of early claims on her love and pity; and the stream of vanity was soon swept along and mingled imperceptibly with that wider current which was at its highest force today, under the double urgency of the events and inward impulses brought by the last week.

Philip had not spoken to her himself about the removal of obstacles between them on his father's side, - he shrank from that; but he had told everything to Lucy, with the hope that Maggie, being informed through her, might give him some encouraging sign that their being brought thus much nearer to each other was a happiness to her. The rush of conflicting feelings was too great for Maggie to say much when Lucy, with a face breathing playful joy, like one of Correggio's cherubs, poured forth her triumphant revelation; and Lucy could hardly be surprised that she could do little more than cry with gladness at the thought of her father's wish being fulfilled, and of Tom's getting the Mill again in reward for all his hard striving. The details of preparation for the bazaar had then come to usurp Lucy's attention for the next few days, and nothing had been said by the cousins on subjects that were likely to rouse deeper feelings. Philip had been to the house more than once, but Maggie had had no private conversation with him, and thus she had been left to fight her inward battle without interference.

But when the bazaar was fairly ended, and the cousins were alone again, resting together at home, Lucy said, -

'You must give up going to stay with your aunt Moss the day after tomorrow, Maggie; write a note to her, and tell her you have put it off at my request, and I'll send the man with it. She won't be displeased; you'll have plenty of time to go by-and-by; and I don't want you to go out of the way just now.'

'Yes, indeed I must go, dear; I can't put it off. I wouldn't leave aunt Gritty out for the world. And I shall have very little time, for I'm going away to a new situation on the 25th of June.'

'Maggie!' said Lucy, almost white with astonishment.

'I didn't tell you, dear,' said Maggie, making a great effort to command herself, 'because you've been so busy. But some time ago I wrote to our old governess, Miss Firniss, to ask her to let me know if she met with any situation that I could fill, and the other day I had a letter from her telling me that I could take three orphan pupils of hers to the coast during the holidays, and then make trial of a situation with her as teacher. I wrote yesterday to accept the offer.'

Lucy felt so hurt that for some moments she was unable to speak.

'Maggie,' she said at last, 'how could you be so unkind to me - not to tell me - to take *such* a step - and now!' She hesitated a little, and then added, 'And Philip? I thought everything was going to be so happy. Oh, Maggie, what is the reason? Give it up; let me write. There is nothing now to keep you and Philip apart.'

'Yes,' said Maggie, faintly. 'There is Tom's feeling. He said I must give him up if I married Philip. And I know he will not change - at least not for a long while - unless something happened to soften him.'

'But I will talk to him; he's coming back this week. And this good news about the Mill will soften him. And I'll talk to him about Philip. Tom's always very compliant to me; I don't think he's so obstinate.'

'But I must go,' said Maggie, in a distressed voice. 'I must leave some time to pack. Don't press me to stay, dear Lucy.'

Lucy was silent for two or three minutes, looking away and ruminating. At length she knelt down by her cousin, and looking up in her face with anxious seriousness, said, -

'Maggie, is it that you don't love Philip well enough to marry him? Tell me - trust me.'

Maggie held Lucy's hands tightly in silence a little while. Her own hands were quite cold. But when she spoke, her voice was quite clear and distinct.

'Yes, Lucy, I would choose to marry him. I think it would be the best and highest lot for me, - to make his life happy. He loved me first. No one else could be quite what he is to me. But I can't divide myself from my brother for life. I must go away, and wait. Pray don't speak to me again about it.'

Lucy obeyed in pain and wonder. The next word she said was, -

'Well, dear Maggie, at least you will go to the dance at Park House tomorrow, and have some music and brightness, before you go to pay these dull dutiful visits. Ah! here come aunty and the tea.'