

Chapter X - The Spell Seems Broken

The suite of rooms opening into each other at Park House looked duly brilliant with lights and flowers and the personal splendors of sixteen couples, with attendant parents and guardians. The focus of brilliancy was the long drawing-room, where the dancing went forward, under the inspiration of the grand piano; the library, into which it opened at one end, had the more sober illumination of maturity, with caps and cards; and at the other end the pretty sitting-room, with a conservatory attached, was left as an occasional cool retreat. Lucy, who had laid aside her black for the first time, and had her pretty slimness set off by an abundant dress of white crape, was the acknowledged queen of the occasion; for this was one of the Miss Guests' thoroughly condescending parties, including no member of any aristocracy higher than that of St. Ogg's, and stretching to the extreme limits of commercial and professional gentility.

Maggie at first refused to dance, saying that she had forgotten all the figures - it was so many years since she had danced at school; and she was glad to have that excuse, for it is ill dancing with a heavy heart. But at length the music wrought in her young limbs, and the longing came; even though it was the horrible young Torry, who walked up a second time to try and persuade her. She warned him that she could not dance anything but a country-dance; but he, of course, was willing to wait for that high felicity, meaning only to be complimentary when he assured her at several intervals that it was a 'great bore' that she couldn't waltz, he would have liked so much to waltz with her. But at last it was the turn of the good old-fashioned dance which has the least of vanity and the most of merriment in it, and Maggie quite forgot her troublous life in a childlike enjoyment of that half-rustic rhythm which seems to banish pretentious etiquette. She felt quite charitably toward young Torry, as his hand bore her along and held her up in the dance; her eyes and cheeks had that fire of young joy in them which will flame out if it can find the least breath to fan it; and her simple black dress, with its bit of black lace, seemed like the dim setting of a jewel.

Stephen had not yet asked her to dance; had not yet paid her more than a passing civility. Since yesterday, that inward vision of her which perpetually made part of his consciousness, had been half screened by the image of Philip Wakem, which came across it like a blot; there was some attachment between her and Philip; at least there was an attachment on his side, which made her feel in some bondage. Here, then, Stephen told himself, was another claim of honor which called on him to resist the attraction that was continually threatening to overpower him. He told himself so; and yet he had once or twice felt a certain savage resistance, and at another moment a shuddering repugnance, to this intrusion of Philip's image, which

almost made it a new incitement to rush toward Maggie and claim her for himself. Nevertheless, he had done what he meant to do this evening, - he had kept aloof from her; he had hardly looked at her; and he had been gayly assiduous to Lucy. But now his eyes were devouring Maggie; he felt inclined to kick young Torry out of the dance, and take his place. Then he wanted the dance to end that he might get rid of his partner. The possibility that he too should dance with Maggie, and have her hand in his so long, was beginning to possess him like a thirst. But even now their hands were meeting in the dance, - were meeting still to the very end of it, though they were far off each other.

Stephen hardly knew what happened, or in what automatic way he got through the duties of politeness in the interval, until he was free and saw Maggie seated alone again, at the farther end of the room. He made his way toward her round the couples that were forming for the waltz; and when Maggie became conscious that she was the person he sought, she felt, in spite of all the thoughts that had gone before, a glowing gladness at heart. Her eyes and cheeks were still brightened with her childlike enthusiasm in the dance; her whole frame was set to joy and tenderness; even the coming pain could not seem bitter, - she was ready to welcome it as a part of life, for life at this moment seemed a keen, vibrating consciousness poised above pleasure or pain. This one, this last night, she might expand unrestrainedly in the warmth of the present, without those chill, eating thoughts of the past and the future.

‘They’re going to waltz again,’ said Stephen, bending to speak to her, with that glance and tone of subdued tenderness which young dreams create to themselves in the summer woods when low, cooing voices fill the air. Such glances and tones bring the breath of poetry with them into a room that is half stifling with glaring gas and hard flirtation.

‘They are going to waltz again. It is rather dizzy work to look on, and the room is very warm; shall we walk about a little?’

He took her hand and placed it within his arm, and they walked on into the sitting-room, where the tables were strewn with engravings for the accommodation of visitors who would not want to look at them. But no visitors were here at this moment. They passed on into the conservatory.

‘How strange and unreal the trees and flowers look with the lights among them!’ said Maggie, in a low voice. ‘They look as if they belonged to an enchanted land, and would never fade away; I could fancy they were all made of jewels.’

She was looking at the tier of geraniums as she spoke, and Stephen made no answer; but he was looking at her; and does not a supreme poet blend light and sound into one, calling darkness mute, and light eloquent? Something strangely powerful there was in the light of Stephen's long gaze, for it made Maggie's face turn toward it and look upward at it, slowly, like a flower at the ascending brightness. And they walked unsteadily on, without feeling that they were walking; without feeling anything but that long, grave, mutual gaze which has the solemnity belonging to all deep human passion. The hovering thought that they must and would renounce each other made this moment of mute confession more intense in its rapture.

But they had reached the end of the conservatory, and were obliged to pause and turn. The change of movement brought a new consciousness to Maggie; she blushed deeply, turned away her head, and drew her arm from Stephen's, going up to some flowers to smell them. Stephen stood motionless, and still pale.

'Oh, may I get this rose?' said Maggie, making a great effort to say something, and dissipate the burning sense of irretrievable confession. 'I think I am quite wicked with roses; I like to gather them and smell them till they have no scent left.'

Stephen was mute; he was incapable of putting a sentence together, and Maggie bent her arm a little upward toward the large half-opened rose that had attracted her. Who has not felt the beauty of a woman's arm? The unspeakable suggestions of tenderness that lie in the dimpled elbow, and all the varied gently lessening curves, down to the delicate wrist, with its tiniest, almost imperceptible nicks in the firm softness. A woman's arm touched the soul of a great sculptor two thousand years ago, so that he wrought an image of it for the Parthenon which moves us still as it clasps lovingly the timeworn marble of a headless trunk. Maggie's was such an arm as that, and it had the warm tints of life.

A mad impulse seized on Stephen; he darted toward the arm, and showered kisses on it, clasping the wrist.

But the next moment Maggie snatched it from him, and glared at him like a wounded war-goddess, quivering with rage and humiliation.

'How dare you?' She spoke in a deeply shaken, half-smothered voice. 'What right have I given you to insult me?'

She darted from him into the adjoining room, and threw herself on the sofa, panting and trembling.

A horrible punishment was come upon her for the sin of allowing a moment's happiness that was treachery to Lucy, to Philip, to her own better soul. That momentary happiness had been smitten with a blight, a leprosy; Stephen thought more lightly of *her* than he did of Lucy.

As for Stephen, he leaned back against the framework of the conservatory, dizzy with the conflict of passions, - love, rage, and confused despair; despair at his want of self-mastery, and despair that he had offended Maggie.

The last feeling surmounted every other; to be by her side again and entreat forgiveness was the only thing that had the force of a motive for him, and she had not been seated more than a few minutes when he came and stood humbly before her. But Maggie's bitter rage was unspent.

'Leave me to myself, if you please,' she said, with impetuous haughtiness, 'and for the future avoid me.'

Stephen turned away, and walked backward and forward at the other end of the room. There was the dire necessity of going back into the dancing-room again, and he was beginning to be conscious of that. They had been absent so short a time, that when he went in again the waltz was not ended.

Maggie, too, was not long before she re-entered. All the pride of her nature was stung into activity; the hateful weakness which had dragged her within reach of this wound to her self-respect had at least wrought its own cure. The thoughts and temptations of the last month should all be flung away into an unvisited chamber of memory. There was nothing to allure her now; duty would be easy, and all the old calm purposes would reign peacefully once more. She re-entered the drawing-room still with some excited brightness in her face, but with a sense of proud self-command that defied anything to agitate her. She refused to dance again, but she talked quite readily and calmly with every one who addressed her. And when they got home that night, she kissed Lucy with a free heart, almost exulting in this scorching moment, which had delivered her from the possibility of another word or look that would have the stamp of treachery toward that gentle, unsuspecting sister.

The next morning Maggie did not set off to Basset quite so soon as she had expected. Her mother was to accompany her in the carriage, and household business could not be dispatched hastily by Mrs Tulliver. So Maggie, who had been in a hurry to prepare herself, had to sit waiting, equipped for the drive, in the garden. Lucy was busy in the house wrapping up some bazaar presents for the younger ones at

Basset, and when there was a loud ring at the door-bell, Maggie felt some alarm lest Lucy should bring out Stephen to her; it was sure to be Stephen.

But presently the visitor came out into the garden alone, and seated himself by her on the garden-chair. It was not Stephen.

'We can just catch the tips of the Scotch firs, Maggie, from this seat,' said Philip.

They had taken each other's hands in silence, but Maggie had looked at him with a more complete revival of the old childlike affectionate smile than he had seen before, and he felt encouraged.

'Yes,' she said, 'I often look at them, and wish I could see the low sunlight on the stems again. But I have never been that way but once, - to the churchyard with my mother.'

'I have been there, I go there, continually,' said Philip. 'I have nothing but the past to live upon.'

A keen remembrance and keen pity impelled Maggie to put her hand in Philip's. They had so often walked hand in hand!

'I remember all the spots,' she said, - 'just where you told me of particular things, beautiful stories that I had never heard of before.'

'You will go there again soon, won't you, Maggie?' said Philip, getting timid. 'The Mill will soon be your brother's home again.'

'Yes; but I shall not be there,' said Maggie. 'I shall only hear of that happiness. I am going away again; Lucy has not told you, perhaps?'

'Then the future will never join on to the past again, Maggie? That book is quite closed?'

The gray eyes that had so often looked up at her with entreating worship, looked up at her now, with a last struggling ray of hope in them, and Maggie met them with her large sincere gaze.

'That book never will be closed, Philip,' she said, with grave sadness; 'I desire no future that will break the ties of the past. But the tie to my brother is one of the strongest. I can do nothing willingly that will divide me always from him.'

'Is that the only reason that would keep us apart forever, Maggie?' said Philip, with a desperate determination to have a definite answer.

'The only reason,' said Maggie, with calm decision. And she believed it. At that moment she felt as if the enchanted cup had been dashed to the ground. The reactionary excitement that gave her a proud self-mastery had not subsided, and she looked at the future with a sense of calm choice.

They sat hand in hand without looking at each other or speaking for a few minutes; in Maggie's mind the first scenes of love and parting were more present than the actual moment, and she was looking at Philip in the Red Deeps.

Philip felt that he ought to have been thoroughly happy in that answer of hers; she was as open and transparent as a rock-pool. Why was he not thoroughly happy? Jealousy is never satisfied with anything short of an omniscience that would detect the subtlest fold of the heart.