

Chapter XI - In the Lane

Maggie had been four days at her aunt Moss's giving the early June sunshine quite a new brightness in the care-dimmed eyes of that affectionate woman, and making an epoch for her cousins great and small, who were learning her words and actions by heart, as if she had been a transient avatar of perfect wisdom and beauty.

She was standing on the causeway with her aunt and a group of cousins feeding the chickens, at that quiet moment in the life of the farmyards before the afternoon milking-time. The great buildings round the hollow yard were as dreary and tumbledown as ever, but over the old garden-wall the straggling rose-bushes were beginning to toss their summer weight, and the gray wood and old bricks of the house, on its higher level, had a look of sleepy age in the broad afternoon sunlight, that suited the quiescent time. Maggie, with her bonnet over her arm, was smiling down at the hatch of small fluffy chickens, when her aunt exclaimed, -

'Goodness me! who is that gentleman coming in at the gate?'

It was a gentleman on a tall bay horse; and the flanks and neck of the horse were streaked black with fast riding. Maggie felt a beating at head and heart, horrible as the sudden leaping to life of a savage enemy who had feigned death.

'Who is it, my dear?' said Mrs Moss, seeing in Maggie's face the evidence that she knew.

'It is Mr Stephen Guest,' said Maggie, rather faintly. 'My cousin Lucy's - a gentleman who is very intimate at my cousin's.'

Stephen was already close to them, had jumped off his horse, and now raised his hat as he advanced.

'Hold the horse, Willy,' said Mrs Moss to the twelve-year-old boy.

'No, thank you,' said Stephen, pulling at the horse's impatiently tossing head. 'I must be going again immediately. I have a message to deliver to you, Miss Tulliver, on private business. May I take the liberty of asking you to walk a few yards with me?'

He had a half-jaded, half-irritated look, such as a man gets when he has been dogged by some care or annoyance that makes his bed and his dinner of little use to him. He spoke almost abruptly, as if his errand were too pressing for him to trouble himself about what would be thought by Mrs Moss of his visit and request. Good Mrs Moss, rather nervous in the presence of this apparently haughty gentleman,

was inwardly wondering whether she would be doing right or wrong to invite him again to leave his horse and walk in, when Maggie, feeling all the embarrassment of the situation, and unable to say anything, put on her bonnet, and turned to walk toward the gate.

Stephen turned too, and walked by her side, leading his horse.

Not a word was spoken till they were out in the lane, and had walked four or five yards, when Maggie, who had been looking straight before her all the while, turned again to walk back, saying, with haughty resentment, -

'There is no need for me to go any farther. I don't know whether you consider it gentlemanly and delicate conduct to place me in a position that forced me to come out with you, or whether you wished to insult me still further by thrusting an interview upon me in this way.'

'Of course you are angry with me for coming,' said Stephen, bitterly. 'Of course it is of no consequence what a man has to suffer; it is only your woman's dignity that you care about.'

Maggie gave a slight start, such as might have come from the slightest possible electric shock.

'As if it were not enough that I'm entangled in this way; that I'm mad with love for you; that I resist the strongest passion a man can feel, because I try to be true to other claims; but you must treat me as if I were a coarse brute, who would willingly offend you. And when, if I had my own choice, I should ask you to take my hand and my fortune and my whole life, and do what you liked with them! I know I forgot myself. I took an unwarrantable liberty. I hate myself for having done it. But I repented immediately; I've been repenting ever since. You ought not to think it unpardonable; a man who loves with his whole soul, as I do you, is liable to be mastered by his feelings for a moment; but you know - you must believe - that the worst pain I could have is to have pained you; that I would give the world to recall the error.'

Maggie dared not speak, dared not turn her head. The strength that had come from resentment was all gone, and her lips were quivering visibly. She could not trust herself to utter the full forgiveness that rose in answer to that confession.

They were come nearly in front of the gate again, and she paused, trembling.

'You must not say these things; I must not hear them,' she said, looking down in misery, as Stephen came in front of her, to prevent

her from going farther toward the gate. 'I'm very sorry for any pain you have to go through; but it is of no use to speak.'

'Yes, it is of use,' said Stephen, impetuously. 'It would be of use if you would treat me with some sort of pity and consideration, instead of doing me vile injustice in your mind. I could bear everything more quietly if I knew you didn't hate me for an insolent coxcomb. Look at me; see what a hunted devil I am; I've been riding thirty miles every day to get away from the thought of you.'

Maggie did not - dared not - look. She had already seen the harassed face. But she said gently, -

'I don't think any evil of you.'

'Then, dearest, look at me,' said Stephen, in deepest, tenderest tones of entreaty. 'Don't go away from me yet. Give me a moment's happiness; make me feel you've forgiven me.'

'Yes, I do forgive you,' said Maggie, shaken by those tones, and all the more frightened at herself. 'But pray let me go in again. Pray go away.'

A great tear fell from under her lowered eyelids.

'I can't go away from you; I can't leave you,' said Stephen, with still more passionate pleading. 'I shall come back again if you send me away with this coldness; I can't answer for myself. But if you will go with me only a little way I can live on that. You see plainly enough that your anger has only made me ten times more unreasonable.'

Maggie turned. But Tancred, the bay horse, began to make such spirited remonstrances against this frequent change of direction, that Stephen, catching sight of Willy Moss peeping through the gate, called out, 'Here! just come and hold my horse for five minutes.'

'Oh, no,' said Maggie, hurriedly, 'my aunt will think it so strange.'

'Never mind,' Stephen answered impatiently; 'they don't know the people at St. Ogg's. Lead him up and down just here for five minutes,' he added to Willy, who was now close to them; and then he turned to Maggie's side, and they walked on. It was clear that she *must* go on now.

'Take my arm,' said Stephen, entreatingly; and she took it, feeling all the while as if she were sliding downward in a nightmare.

'There is no end to this misery,' she began, struggling to repel the influence by speech. 'It is wicked - base - ever allowing a word or look that Lucy - that others might not have seen. Think of Lucy.'

'I do think of her - bless her. If I didn't - - ' Stephen had laid his hand on Maggie's that rested on his arm, and they both felt it difficult to speak.

'And I have other ties,' Maggie went on, at last, with a desperate effort, 'even if Lucy did not exist.'

'You are engaged to Philip Wakem?' said Stephen, hastily. 'Is it so?'

'I consider myself engaged to him; I don't mean to marry any one else.'

Stephen was silent again until they had turned out of the sun into a side lane, all grassy and sheltered. Then he burst out impetuously, -

'It is unnatural, it is horrible. Maggie, if you loved me as I love you, we should throw everything else to the winds for the sake of belonging to each other. We should break all these mistaken ties that were made in blindness, and determine to marry each other.'

'I would rather die than fall into that temptation,' said Maggie, with deep, slow distinctness, all the gathered spiritual force of painful years coming to her aid in this extremity. She drew her arm from his as she spoke.

'Tell me, then, that you don't care for me,' he said, almost violently. 'Tell me that you love some one else better.'

It darted through Maggie's mind that here was a mode of releasing herself from outward struggle, - to tell Stephen that her whole heart was Philip's. But her lips would not utter that, and she was silent.

'If you do love me, dearest,' said Stephen, gently, taking her hand again and laying it within his arm, 'it is better - it is right that we should marry each other. We can't help the pain it will give. It is come upon us without our seeking; it is natural; it has taken hold of me in spite of every effort I have made to resist it. God knows, I've been trying to be faithful to tacit engagements, and I've only made things worse; I'd better have given way at first.'

Maggie was silent. If it were *not* wrong - if she were once convinced of that, and need no longer beat and struggle against this current, soft and yet strong as the summer stream!

'Say've s' dearest,' said Stephen, leaning to look entreatingly in her face. 'What could we care about in the whole world beside, if we belonged to each other?'

Her breath was on his face, his lips were very near hers, but there was a great dread dwelling in his love for her.

Her lips and eyelids quivered; she opened her eyes full on his for an instant, like a lovely wild animal timid and struggling under caresses, and then turned sharp round toward home again.

'And after all,' he went on, in an impatient tone, trying to defeat his own scruples as well as hers, 'I am breaking no positive engagement; if Lucy's affections had been withdrawn from me and given to some one else, I should have felt no right to assert a claim on her. If you are not absolutely pledged to Philip, we are neither of us bound.'

'You don't believe that; it is not your real feeling,' said Maggie, earnestly. 'You feel, as I do, that the real tie lies in the feelings and expectations we have raised in other minds. Else all pledges might be broken, when there was no outward penalty. There would be no such thing as faithfulness.'

Stephen was silent; he could not pursue that argument; the opposite conviction had wrought in him too strongly through his previous time of struggle. But it soon presented itself in a new form.

'The pledge *can't* be fulfilled,' he said, with impetuous insistence. 'It is unnatural; we can only pretend to give ourselves to any one else. There is wrong in that too; there may be misery in it for *them* as well as for us. Maggie, you must see that; you do see that.'

He was looking eagerly at her face for the least sign of compliance; his large, firm, gentle grasp was on her hand. She was silent for a few moments, with her eyes fixed on the ground; then she drew a deep breath, and said, looking up at him with solemn sadness, -

'Oh, it is difficult, - life is very difficult! It seems right to me sometimes that we should follow our strongest feeling; but then, such feelings continually come across the ties that all our former life has made for us, - the ties that have made others dependent on us, - and would cut them in two. If life were quite easy and simple, as it might have been in Paradise, and we could always see that one being first toward whom - I mean, if life did not make duties for us before love comes, love would be a sign that two people ought to belong to each other. But I see - I feel it is not so now; there are things we must renounce in life; some of us must resign love. Many things are difficult and dark to me; but I see one thing quite clearly, - that I must not, cannot, seek

my own happiness by sacrificing others. Love is natural; but surely pity and faithfulness and memory are natural too. And they would live in me still, and punish me if I did not obey them. I should be haunted by the suffering I had caused. Our love would be poisoned. Don't urge me; help me, - help me, *because* I love you.'

Maggie had become more and more earnest as she went on; her face had become flushed, and her eyes fuller and fuller of appealing love. Stephen had the fibre of nobleness in him that vibrated to her appeal; but in the same moment - how could it be otherwise? - that pleading beauty gained new power over him.

'Dearest,' he said, in scarcely more than a whisper, while his arm stole round her, 'I'll do, I'll bear anything you wish. But - one kiss - one - the last - before we part.'

One kiss, and then a long look, until Maggie said tremulously, 'Let me go, - let me make haste back.'

She hurried along, and not another word was spoken. Stephen stood still and beckoned when they came within sight of Willy and the horse, and Maggie went on through the gate. Mrs Moss was standing alone at the door of the old porch; she had sent all the cousins in, with kind thoughtfulness. It might be a joyful thing that Maggie had a rich and handsome lover, but she would naturally feel embarrassed at coming in again; and it might *not* be joyful. In either case Mrs Moss waited anxiously to receive Maggie by herself. The speaking face told plainly enough that, if there was joy, it was of a very agitating, dubious sort.

'Sit down here a bit, my dear.' She drew Maggie into the porch, and sat down on the bench by her; there was no privacy in the house.

'Oh, aunt Gritty, I'm very wretched! I wish I could have died when I was fifteen. It seemed so easy to give things up then; it is so hard now.'

The poor child threw her arms round her aunt's neck, and fell into long, deep sobs.