

Chapter XIII - Borne Along by the Tide

In less than a week Maggie was at St. Ogg's again, - outwardly in much the same position as when her visit there had just begun. It was easy for her to fill her mornings apart from Lucy without any obvious effort; for she had her promised visits to pay to her aunt Glegg, and it was natural that she should give her mother more than usual of her companionship in these last weeks, especially as there were preparations to be thought of for Tom's housekeeping. But Lucy would hear of no pretext for her remaining away in the evenings; she must always come from aunt Glegg's before dinner, - 'else what shall I have of you?' said Lucy, with a tearful pout that could not be resisted.

And Mr Stephen Guest had unaccountably taken to dining at Mr Deane's as often as possible, instead of avoiding that, as he used to do. At first he began his mornings with a resolution that he would not dine there, not even go in the evening, till Maggie was away. He had even devised a plan of starting off on a journey in this agreeable June weather; the headaches which he had constantly been alleging as a ground for stupidity and silence were a sufficient ostensible motive. But the journey was not taken, and by the fourth morning no distinct resolution was formed about the evenings; they were only foreseen as times when Maggie would still be present for a little while, - when one more touch, one more glance, might be snatched. For why not? There was nothing to conceal between them; they knew, they had confessed their love, and they had renounced each other; they were going to part. Honor and conscience were going to divide them; Maggie, with that appeal from her inmost soul, had decided it; but surely they might cast a lingering look at each other across the gulf, before they turned away never to look again till that strange light had forever faded out of their eyes.

Maggie, all this time, moved about with a quiescence and even torpor of manner, so contrasted with her usual fitful brightness and ardor, that Lucy would have had to seek some other cause for such a change, if she had not been convinced that the position in which Maggie stood between Philip and her brother, and the prospect of her self-imposed wearisome banishment, were quite enough to account for a large amount of depression. But under this torpor there was a fierce battle of emotions, such as Maggie in all her life of struggle had never known or foreboded; it seemed to her as if all the worst evil in her had lain in ambush till now, and had suddenly started up full-armed, with hideous, overpowering strength! There were moments in which a cruel selfishness seemed to be getting possession of her; why should not Lucy, why should not Philip, suffer? *She* had had to suffer through many years of her life; and who had renounced anything for her? And when something like that fulness of existence - love, wealth, ease, refinement, all that her nature craved - was brought within her reach,

why was she to forego it, that another might have it, - another, who perhaps needed it less? But amidst all this new passionate tumult there were the old voices making themselves heard with rising power, till, from time to time, the tumult seemed quelled. *Was* that existence which tempted her the full existence she dreamed? Where, then, would be all the memories of early striving; all the deep pity for another's pain, which had been nurtured in her through years of affection and hardship; all the divine presentiment of something higher than mere personal enjoyment, which had made the sacredness of life? She might as well hope to enjoy walking by maiming her feet, as hope to enjoy an existence in which she set out by maiming the faith and sympathy that were the best organs of her soul. And then, if pain were so hard to *her*, what was it to others? 'Ah, God! preserve me from inflicting - give me strength to bear it.' How had she sunk into this struggle with a temptation that she would once have thought herself as secure from as from deliberate crime? When was that first hateful moment in which she had been conscious of a feeling that clashed with her truth, affection, and gratitude, and had not shaken it from her with horror, as if it had been a loathsome thing? And yet, since this strange, sweet, subduing influence did not, should not, conquer her, - since it was to remain simply her own suffering, - her mind was meeting Stephen's in that thought of his, that they might still snatch moments of mute confession before the parting came. For was not he suffering too? She saw it daily - saw it in the sickened look of fatigue with which, as soon as he was not compelled to exert himself, he relapsed into indifference toward everything but the possibility of watching her. Could she refuse sometimes to answer that beseeching look which she felt to be following her like a low murmur of love and pain? She refused it less and less, till at last the evening for them both was sometimes made of a moment's mutual gaze; they thought of it till it came, and when it had come, they thought of nothing else.

One other thing Stephen seemed now and then to care for, and that was to sing; it was a way of speaking to Maggie. Perhaps he was not distinctly conscious that he was impelled to it by a secret longing - running counter to all his self-confessed resolves - to deepen the hold he had on her. Watch your own speech, and notice how it is guided by your less conscious purposes, and you will understand that contradiction in Stephen.

Philip Wakem was a less frequent visitor, but he came occasionally in the evening, and it happened that he was there when Lucy said, as they sat out on the lawn, near sunset, -

'Now Maggie's tale of visits to aunt Glegg is completed, I mean that we shall go out boating every day until she goes. She has not had half

enough boating because of these tiresome visits, and she likes it better than anything. Don't you, Maggie?'

'Better than any sort of locomotion, I hope you mean,' said Philip, smiling at Maggie, who was lolling backward in a low garden-chair; 'else she will be selling her soul to that ghostly boatman who haunts the Floss, only for the sake of being drifted in a boat forever.'

'Should you like to be her boatman?' said Lucy. 'Because, if you would, you can come with us and take an oar. If the Floss were but a quiet lake instead of a river, we should be independent of any gentleman, for Maggie can row splendidly. As it is, we are reduced to ask services of knights and squires, who do not seem to offer them with great alacrity.'

She looked playful reproach at Stephen, who was sauntering up and down, and was just singing in pianissimo falsetto, -

'The thirst that from the soul doth rise Doth ask a drink divine.'

He took no notice, but still kept aloof; he had done so frequently during Philip's recent visits.

'You don't seem inclined for boating,' said Lucy, when he came to sit down by her on the bench. 'Doesn't rowing suit you now?'

'Oh, I hate a large party in a boat,' he said, almost irritably. 'I'll come when you have no one else.'

Lucy colored, fearing that Philip would be hurt; it was quite a new thing for Stephen to speak in that way; but he had certainly not been well of late. Philip colored too, but less from a feeling of personal offence than from a vague suspicion that Stephen's moodiness had some relation to Maggie, who had started up from her chair as he spoke, and had walked toward the hedge of laurels to look at the descending sunlight on the river.

'As Miss Deane didn't know she was excluding others by inviting me,' said Philip, 'I am bound to resign.'

'No, indeed, you shall not,' said Lucy, much vexed. 'I particularly wish for your company to-morrow. The tide will suit at half-past ten; it will be a delicious time for a couple of hours to row to Luckreth and walk back, before the sun gets too hot. And how can you object to four people in a boat?' she added, looking at Stephen.

'I don't object to the people, but the number,' said Stephen, who had recovered himself, and was rather ashamed of his rudeness. 'If I voted

for a fourth at all, of course it would be you, Phil. But we won't divide the pleasure of escorting the ladies; we'll take it alternately. I'll go the next day.'

This incident had the effect of drawing Philip's attention with freshened solicitude toward Stephen and Maggie; but when they re-entered the house, music was proposed, and Mrs Tulliver and Mr Deane being occupied with cribbage, Maggie sat apart near the table where the books and work were placed, doing nothing, however, but listening abstractedly to the music. Stephen presently turned to a duet which he insisted that Lucy and Philip should sing; he had often done the same thing before; but this evening Philip thought he divined some double intention in every word and look of Stephen's, and watched him keenly, angry with himself all the while for this clinging suspicion. For had not Maggie virtually denied any ground for his doubts on her side? And she was truth itself; it was impossible not to believe her word and glance when they had last spoken together in the garden. Stephen might be strongly fascinated by her (what was more natural?), but Philip felt himself rather base for intruding on what must be his friend's painful secret. Still he watched. Stephen, moving away from the piano, sauntered slowly toward the table near which Maggie sat, and turned over the newspapers, apparently in mere idleness. Then he seated himself with his back to the piano, dragging a newspaper under his elbow, and thrusting his hand through his hair, as if he had been attracted by some bit of local news in the 'Laceham Courier.' He was in reality looking at Maggie who had not taken the slightest notice of his approach. She had always additional strength of resistance when Philip was present, just as we can restrain our speech better in a spot that we feel to be hallowed. But at last she heard the word 'dearest' uttered in the softest tone of pained entreaty, like that of a patient who asks for something that ought to have been given without asking. She had never heard that word since the moments in the lane at Basset, when it had come from Stephen again and again, almost as involuntarily as if it had been an inarticulate cry. Philip could hear no word, but he had moved to the opposite side of the piano, and could see Maggie start and blush, raise her eyes an instant toward Stephen's face, but immediately look apprehensively toward himself. It was not evident to her that Philip had observed her; but a pang of shame, under the sense of this concealment, made her move from her chair and walk to her mother's side to watch the game at cribbage.

Philip went home soon after in a state of hideous doubt mingled with wretched certainty. It was impossible for him now to resist the conviction that there was some mutual consciousness between Stephen and Maggie; and for half the night his irritable, susceptible nerves were pressed upon almost to frenzy by that one wretched fact; he could attempt no explanation that would reconcile it with her

words and actions. When, at last, the need for belief in Maggie rose to its habitual predominance, he was not long in imagining the truth, - she was struggling, she was banishing herself; this was the clue to all he had seen since his return. But athwart that belief there came other possibilities that would not be driven out of sight. His imagination wrought out the whole story; Stephen was madly in love with her; he must have told her so; she had rejected him, and was hurrying away. But would he give her up, knowing - Philip felt the fact with heart-crushing despair - that she was made half helpless by her feeling toward him?

When the morning came, Philip was too ill to think of keeping his engagement to go in the boat. In his present agitation he could decide on nothing; he could only alternate between contradictory intentions. First, he thought he must have an interview with Maggie, and entreat her to confide in him; then, again, he distrusted his own interference. Had he not been thrusting himself on Maggie all along? She had uttered words long ago in her young ignorance; it was enough to make her hate him that these should be continually present with her as a bond. And had he any right to ask her for a revelation of feelings which she had evidently intended to withhold from him? He would not trust himself to see her, till he had assured himself that he could act from pure anxiety for her, and not from egoistic irritation. He wrote a brief note to Stephen, and sent it early by the servant, saying that he was not well enough to fulfil his engagement to Miss Deane. Would Stephen take his excuse, and fill his place?

Lucy had arranged a charming plan, which had made her quite content with Stephen's refusal to go in the boat. She discovered that her father was to drive to Lindum this morning at ten; Lindum was the very place she wanted to go to, to make purchases, - important purchases, which must by no means be put off to another opportunity; and aunt Tulliver must go too, because she was concerned in some of the purchases.

'You will have your row in the boat just the same, you know,' she said to Maggie when they went out of the breakfast-room and upstairs together; 'Philip will be here it half-past ten, and it is a delicious morning. Now don't say a word against it, you dear dolorous thing. What is the use of my being a fairy godmother, if you set your face against all the wonders I work for you? Don't think of awful cousin Tom; you may disobey him a little.'

Maggie did not persist in objecting. She was almost glad of the plan, for perhaps it would bring her some strength and calmness to be alone with Philip again; it was like revisiting the scene of a quieter life, in which the very struggles were repose, compared with the daily

tumult of the present. She prepared herself for the boat and at half-past ten sat waiting in the drawing-room.

The ring of the door-bell was punctual, and she was thinking with half-sad, affectionate pleasure of the surprise Philip would have in finding that he was to be with her alone, when she distinguished a firm, rapid step across the hall, that was certainly not Philip's; the door opened, and Stephen Guest entered.

In the first moment they were both too much agitated to speak; for Stephen had learned from the servant that the others were gone out. Maggie had started up and sat down again, with her heart beating violently; and Stephen, throwing down his cap and gloves, came and sat by her in silence. She thought Philip would be coming soon; and with great effort - for she trembled visibly - she rose to go to a distant chair.

'He is not coming,' said Stephen, in a low tone. 'I am going in the boat.'

'Oh, we can't go,' said Maggie, sinking into her chair again. 'Lucy did not expect - she would be hurt. Why is not Philip come?'

'He is not well; he asked me to come instead.'

'Lucy is gone to Lindum,' said Maggie, taking off her bonnet with hurried, trembling fingers. 'We must not go.'

'Very well,' said Stephen, dreamily, looking at her, as he rested his arm on the back of his chair. 'Then we'll stay here.'

He was looking into her deep, deep eyes, far off and mysterious at the starlit blackness, and yet very near, and timidly loving. Maggie sat perfectly still - perhaps for moments, perhaps for minutes - until the helpless trembling had ceased, and there was a warm glow on her cheek.

'The man is waiting; he has taken the cushions,' she said. 'Will you go and tell him?'

'What shall I tell him?' said Stephen, almost in a whisper. He was looking at the lips now.

Maggie made no answer.

'Let us go,' Stephen murmured entreatingly, rising, and taking her hand to raise her too. 'We shall not be long together.'

And they went. Maggie felt that she was being led down the garden among the roses, being helped with firm, tender care into the boat, having the cushion and cloak arranged for her feet, and her parasol opened for her (which she had forgotten), all by this stronger presence that seemed to bear her along without any act of her own will, like the added self which comes with the sudden exalting influence of a strong tonic, and she felt nothing else. Memory was excluded.

They glided rapidly along, Stephen rowing, helped by the backward-flowing tide, past the Tofton trees and houses; on between the silent sunny fields and pastures, which seemed filled with a natural joy that had no reproach for theirs. The breath of the young, unwearied day, the delicious rhythmic dip of the oars, the fragmentary song of a passing bird heard now and then, as if it were only the overflowing of brimful gladness, the sweet solitude of a twofold consciousness that was mingled into one by that grave, untiring gaze which need not be averted, - what else could there be in their minds for the first hour? Some low, subdued, languid exclamation of love came from Stephen from time to time, as he went on rowing idly, half automatically; otherwise they spoke no word; for what could words have been but an inlet to thought? and thought did not belong to that enchanted haze in which they were enveloped, - it belonged to the past and the future that lay outside the haze. Maggie was only dimly conscious of the banks, as they passed them, and dwelt with no recognition on the villages; she knew there were several to be passed before they reached Luckreth, where they always stopped and left the boat. At all times she was so liable to fits of absence, that she was likely enough to let her waymarks pass unnoticed.

But at last Stephen, who had been rowing more and more idly, ceased to row, laid down the oars, folded his arms, and looked down on the water as if watching the pace at which the boat glided without his help. This sudden change roused Maggie. She looked at the far-stretching fields, at the banks close by, and felt that they were entirely strange to her. A terrible alarm took possession of her.

'Oh, have we passed Luckreth, where we were to stop?' she exclaimed, looking back to see if the place were out of sight. No village was to be seen. She turned around again, with a look of distressed questioning at Stephen.

He went on watching the water, and said, in a strange, dreamy, absent tone, 'Yes, a long way.'

'Oh, what shall I do?' cried Maggie, in an agony. 'We shall not get home for hours, and Lucy? O God, help me!'

She clasped her hands and broke into a sob, like a frightened child; she thought of nothing but of meeting Lucy, and seeing her look of pained surprise and doubt, perhaps of just upbraiding.

Stephen moved and sat near her, and gently drew down the clasped hands.

‘Maggie,’ he said, in a deep tone of slow decision, ‘let us never go home again, till no one can part us, - till we are married.’

The unusual tone, the startling words, arrested Maggie's sob, and she sat quite still, wondering; as if Stephen might have seen some possibilities that would alter everything, and annul the wretched facts.

‘See, Maggie, how everything has come without our seeking, - in spite of all our efforts. We never thought of being alone together again; it has all been done by others. See how the tide is carrying us out, away from all those unnatural bonds that we have been trying to make faster round us, and trying in vain. It will carry us on to Torby, and we can land there, and get some carriage, and hurry on to York and then to Scotland, - and never pause a moment till we are bound to each other, so that only death can part us. It is the only right thing, dearest; it is the only way of escaping from this wretched entanglement. Everything has concurred to point it out to us. We have contrived nothing, we have thought of nothing ourselves.’

Stephen spoke with deep, earnest pleading. Maggie listened, passing from her startled wonderment to the yearning after that belief that the tide was doing it all, that she might glide along with the swift, silent stream, and not struggle any more. But across that stealing influence came the terrible shadow of past thoughts; and the sudden horror lest now, at last, the moment of fatal intoxication was close upon her, called up feelings of angry resistance toward Stephen.

‘Let me go!’ she said, in an agitated tone, flashing an indignant look at him, and trying to get her hands free. ‘You have wanted to deprive me of any choice. You knew we were come too far; you have dared to take advantage of my thoughtlessness. It is unmanly to bring me into such a position.’

Stung by this reproach, he released her hands, moved back to his former place, and folded his arms, in a sort of desperation at the difficulty Maggie's words had made present to him. If she would not consent to go on, he must curse himself for the embarrassment he had led her into. But the reproach was the unendurable thing; the one thing worse than parting with her was, that she should feel he had acted unworthily toward her. At last he said, in a tone of suppressed rage, -

'I didn't notice that we had passed Luckreth till we had got to the next village; and then it came into my mind that we would go on. I can't justify it; I ought to have told you. It is enough to make you hate me, since you don't love me well enough to make everything else indifferent to you, as I do you. Shall I stop the boat and try to get you out here? I'll tell Lucy that I was mad, and that you hate me; and you shall be clear of me forever. No one can blame you, because I have behaved unpardonably to you.'

Maggie was paralyzed; it was easier to resist Stephen's pleading than this picture he had called up of himself suffering while she was vindicated; easier even to turn away from his look of tenderness than from this look of angry misery, that seemed to place her in selfish isolation from him. He had called up a state of feeling in which the reasons which had acted on her conscience seemed to be transmitted into mere self-regard. The indignant fire in her eyes was quenched, and she began to look at him with timid distress. She had reproached him for being hurried into irrevocable trespass, - she, who had been so weak herself.

'As if I shouldn't feel what happened to you - just the same,' she said, with reproach of another kind, - the reproach of love, asking for more trust. This yielding to the idea of Stephen's suffering was more fatal than the other yielding, because it was less distinguishable from that sense of others' claims which was the moral basis of her resistance.

He felt all the relenting in her look and tone; it was heaven opening again. He moved to her side, and took her hand, leaning his elbow on the back of the boat, and saying nothing. He dreaded to utter another word, he dreaded to make another movement, that might provoke another reproach or denial from her. Life hung on her consent; everything else was hopeless, confused, sickening misery. They glided along in this way, both resting in that silence as in a haven, both dreading lest their feelings should be divided again, - till they became aware that the clouds had gathered, and that the slightest perceptible freshening of the breeze was growing and growing, so that the whole character of the day was altered.

'You will be chill, Maggie, in this thin dress. Let me raise the cloak over your shoulders. Get up an instant, dearest.'

Maggie obeyed; there was an unspeakable charm in being told what to do, and having everything decided for her. She sat down again covered with the cloak, and Stephen took to his oars again, making haste; for they must try to get to Torby as fast as they could. Maggie was hardly conscious of having said or done anything decisive. All yielding is attended with a less vivid consciousness than resistance; it is the partial sleep of thought; it is the submergence of our own personality

by another. Every influence tended to lull her into acquiescence. That dreamy gliding in the boat which had lasted for four hours, and had brought some weariness and exhaustion; the recoil of her fatigued sensations from the impracticable difficulty of getting out of the boat at this unknown distance from home, and walking for long miles, - all helped to bring her into more complete subjection to that strong, mysterious charm which made a last parting from Stephen seem the death of all joy, and made the thought of wounding him like the first touch of the torturing iron before which resolution shrank. And then there was the present happiness of being with him, which was enough to absorb all her languid energy.

Presently Stephen observed a vessel coming after them. Several vessels, among them the steamer to Mudport, had passed them with the early tide, but for the last hour they had seen none. He looked more and more eagerly at this vessel, as if a new thought had come into his mind along with it, and then he looked at Maggie hesitatingly.

'Maggie, dearest,' he said at last, 'if this vessel should be going to Mudport, or to any convenient place on the coast northward, it would be our best plan to get them to take us on board. You are fatigued, and it may soon rain; it may be a wretched business, getting to Torby in this boat. It's only a trading vessel, but I dare say you can be made tolerably comfortable. We'll take the cushions out of the boat. It is really our best plan. They'll be glad enough to take us. I've got plenty of money about me. I can pay them well.'

Maggie's heart began to beat with reawakened alarm at this new proposition; but she was silent, - one course seemed as difficult as another.

Stephen hailed the vessel. It was a Dutch vessel going to Mudport, the English mate informed him, and, if this wind held, would be there in less than two days.

'We had got out too far with our boat,' said Stephen. 'I was trying to make for Torby. But I'm afraid of the weather; and this lady - my wife - will be exhausted with fatigue and hunger. Take us on board - will you? - and haul up the boat. I'll pay you well.'

Maggie, now really faint and trembling with fear, was taken on board, making an interesting object of contemplation to admiring Dutchmen. The mate feared the lady would have a poor time of it on board, for they had no accommodation for such entirely unlooked-for passengers, - no private cabin larger than an old-fashioned church-pew. But at least they had Dutch cleanliness, which makes all other inconveniences tolerable; and the boat cushions were spread into a couch for Maggie on the poop with all alacrity. But to pace up and

down the deck leaning on Stephen - being upheld by his strength - was the first change that she needed; then came food, and then quiet reclining on the cushions, with the sense that no new resolution *could* be taken that day. Everything must wait till to-morrow. Stephen sat beside her with her hand in his; they could only speak to each other in low tones; only look at each other now and then, for it would take a long while to dull the curiosity of the five men on board, and reduce these handsome young strangers to that minor degree of interest which belongs, in a sailor's regard, to all objects nearer than the horizon. But Stephen was triumphantly happy. Every other thought or care was thrown into unmarked perspective by the certainty that Maggie must be his. The leap had been taken now; he had been tortured by scruples, he had fought fiercely with overmastering inclination, he had hesitated; but repentance was impossible. He murmured forth in fragmentary sentences his happiness, his adoration, his tenderness, his belief that their life together must be heaven, that her presence with him would give rapture to every common day; that to satisfy her lightest wish was dearer to him than all other bliss; that everything was easy for her sake, except to part with her; and now they never *would* part; he would belong to her forever, and all that was his was hers, - had no value for him except as it was hers. Such things, uttered in low, broken tones by the one voice that has first stirred the fibre of young passion, have only a feeble effect - on experienced minds at a distance from them. To poor Maggie they were very near; they were like nectar held close to thirsty lips; there was, there *must* be, then, a life for mortals here below which was not hard and chill, - in which affection would no longer be self-sacrifice. Stephen's passionate words made the vision of such a life more fully present to her than it had ever been before; and the vision for the time excluded all realities, - all except the returning sun-gleams which broke out on the waters as the evening approached, and mingled with the visionary sunlight of promised happiness; all except the hand that pressed hers, and the voice that spoke to her, and the eyes that looked at her with grave, unspeakable love.

There was to be no rain, after all; the clouds rolled off to the horizon again, making the great purple rampart and long purple isles of that wondrous land which reveals itself to us when the sun goes down, - the land that the evening star watches over. Maggie was to sleep all night on the poop; it was better than going below; and she was covered with the warmest wrappings the ship could furnish. It was still early, when the fatigues of the day brought on a drowsy longing for perfect rest, and she laid down her head, looking at the faint, dying flush in the west, where the one golden lamp was getting brighter and brighter. Then she looked up at Stephen, who was still seated by her, hanging over her as he leaned his arm against the vessel's side. Behind all the delicious visions of these last hours, which had flowed over her like a soft stream, and made her entirely passive, there was

the dim consciousness that the condition was a transient one, and that the morrow must bring back the old life of struggle; that there were thoughts which would presently avenge themselves for this oblivion. But now nothing was distinct to her; she was being lulled to sleep with that soft stream still flowing over her, with those delicious visions melting and fading like the wondrous aerial land of the west.