

Chapter XIV - Waking

When Maggie was gone to sleep, Stephen, weary too with his unaccustomed amount of rowing, and with the intense inward life of the last twelve hours, but too restless to sleep, walked and lounged about the deck with his cigar far on into midnight, not seeing the dark water, hardly conscious there were stars, living only in the near and distant future. At last fatigue conquered restlessness, and he rolled himself up in a piece of tarpaulin on the deck near Maggie's feet.

She had fallen asleep before nine, and had been sleeping for six hours before the faintest hint of a midsummer daybreak was discernible. She awoke from that vivid dreaming which makes the margin of our deeper rest. She was in a boat on the wide water with Stephen, and in the gathering darkness something like a star appeared, that grew and grew till they saw it was the Virgin seated in St. Ogg's boat, and it came nearer and nearer, till they saw the Virgin was Lucy and the boatman was Philip, - no, not Philip, but her brother, who rowed past without looking at her; and she rose to stretch out her arms and call to him, and their own boat turned over with the movement, and they began to sink, till with one spasm of dread she seemed to awake, and find she was a child again in the parlor at evening twilight, and Tom was not really angry. From the soothed sense of that false waking she passed to the real waking, - to the splash of water against the vessel, and the sound of a footstep on the deck, and the awful starlit sky. There was a moment of utter bewilderment before her mind could get disentangled from the confused web of dreams; but soon the whole terrible truth urged itself upon her. Stephen was not by her now; she was alone with her own memory and her own dread. The irrevocable wrong that must blot her life had been committed; she had brought sorrow into the lives of others, - into the lives that were knit up with hers by trust and love. The feeling of a few short weeks had hurried her into the sins her nature had most recoiled from, - breach of faith and cruel selfishness; she had rent the ties that had given meaning to duty, and had made herself an outlawed soul, with no guide but the wayward choice of her own passion. And where would that lead her? Where had it led her now? She had said she would rather die than fall into that temptation. She felt it now, - now that the consequences of such a fall had come before the outward act was completed. There was at least this fruit from all her years of striving after the highest and best, - that her soul though betrayed, beguiled, ensnared, could never deliberately consent to a choice of the lower. And a choice of what? O God! not a choice of joy, but of conscious cruelty and hardness; for could she ever cease to see before her Lucy and Philip, with their murdered trust and hopes? Her life with Stephen could have no sacredness; she must forever sink and wander vaguely, driven by uncertain impulse; for she had let go the clue of life, - that clue which once in the far-off years her young need had clutched so strongly. She

had renounced all delights then, before she knew them, before they had come within her reach. Philip had been right when he told her that she knew nothing of renunciation; she had thought it was quiet ecstasy; she saw it face to face now, - that sad, patient, loving strength which holds the clue of life, - and saw that the thorns were forever pressing on its brow. The yesterday, which could never be revoked, - if she could have changed it now for any length of inward silent endurance, she would have bowed beneath that cross with a sense of rest.

Day break came and the reddening eastern light, while her past life was grasping her in this way, with that tightening clutch which comes in the last moments of possible rescue. She could see Stephen now lying on the deck still fast asleep, and with the sight of him there came a wave of anguish that found its way in a long-suppressed sob. The worst bitterness of parting - the thought that urged the sharpest inward cry for help - was the pain it must give to *him*. But surmounting everything was the horror at her own possible failure, the dread lest her conscience should be benumbed again, and not rise to energy till it was too late. Too late! it was too late already not to have caused misery; too late for everything, perhaps, but to rush away from the last act of baseness, - the tasting of joys that were wrung from crushed hearts.

The sun was rising now, and Maggie started up with the sense that a day of resistance was beginning for her. Her eyelashes were still wet with tears, as, with her shawl over her head, she sat looking at the slowly rounding sun. Something roused Stephen too, and getting up from his hard bed, he came to sit beside her. The sharp instinct of anxious love saw something to give him alarm in the very first glance. He had a hovering dread of some resistance in Maggie's nature that he would be unable to overcome. He had the uneasy consciousness that he had robbed her of perfect freedom yesterday; there was too much native honor in him, for him not to feel that, if her will should recoil, his conduct would have been odious, and she would have a right to reproach him.

But Maggie did not feel that right; she was too conscious of fatal weakness in herself, too full of the tenderness that comes with the foreseen need for inflicting a wound. She let him take her hand when he came to sit down beside her, and smiled at him, only with rather a sad glance; she could say nothing to pain him till the moment of possible parting was nearer. And so they drank their cup of coffee together, and walked about the deck, and heard the captain's assurance that they should be in at Mudport by five o'clock, each with an inward burthen; but in him it was an undefined fear, which he trusted to the coming hours to dissipate; in her it was a definite resolve on which she was trying silently to tighten her hold. Stephen

was continually, through the morning, expressing his anxiety at the fatigue and discomfort she was suffering, and alluded to landing and to the change of motion and repose she would have in a carriage, wanting to assure himself more completely by presupposing that everything would be as he had arranged it. For a long while Maggie contented herself with assuring him that she had had a good night's rest, and that she didn't mind about being on the vessel, - it was not like being on the open sea, it was only a little less pleasant than being in a boat on the Floss. But a suppressed resolve will betray itself in the eyes, and Stephen became more and more uneasy as the day advanced, under the sense that Maggie had entirely lost her passiveness. He longed, but did not dare, to speak of their marriage, of where they would go after it, and the steps he would take to inform his father, and the rest, of what had happened. He longed to assure himself of a tacit assent from her. But each time he looked at her, he gathered a stronger dread of the new, quiet sadness with which she met his eyes. And they were more and more silent.

'Here we are in sight of Mudport,' he said at last. 'Now, dearest,' he added, turning toward her with a look that was half beseeching, 'the worst part of your fatigue is over. On the land we can command swiftness. In another hour and a half we shall be in a chaise together, and that will seem rest to you after this.'

Maggie felt it was time to speak; it would only be unkind now to assent by silence. She spoke in the lowest tone, as he had done, but with distinct decision.

'We shall not be together; we shall have parted.'

The blood rushed to Stephen's face.

'We shall not,' he said. 'I'll die first.'

It was as he had dreaded - there was a struggle coming. But neither of them dared to say another word till the boat was let down, and they were taken to the landing-place. Here there was a cluster of gazers and passengers awaiting the departure of the steamboat to St. Ogg's. Maggie had a dim sense, when she had landed, and Stephen was hurrying her along on his arm, that some one had advanced toward her from that cluster as if he were coming to speak to her. But she was hurried along, and was indifferent to everything but the coming trial.

A porter guided them to the nearest inn and posting-house, and Stephen gave the order for the chaise as they passed through the yard. Maggie took no notice of this, and only said, 'Ask them to show us into a room where we can sit down.'

When they entered, Maggie did not sit down, and Stephen, whose face had a desperate determination in it, was about to ring the bell, when she said, in a firm voice, -

'I'm not going; we must part here.'

'Maggie,' he said, turning round toward her, and speaking in the tones of a man who feels a process of torture beginning, 'do you mean to kill me? What is the use of it now? The whole thing is done.'

'No, it is not done,' said Maggie. 'Too much is done, - more than we can ever remove the trace of. But I will go no farther. Don't try to prevail with me again. I couldn't choose yesterday.'

What was he to do? He dared not go near her; her anger might leap out, and make a new barrier. He walked backward and forward in maddening perplexity.

'Maggie,' he said at last, pausing before her, and speaking in a tone of imploring wretchedness, 'have some pity - hear me - forgive me for what I did yesterday. I will obey you now; I will do nothing without your full consent. But don't blight our lives forever by a rash perversity that can answer no good purpose to any one, that can only create new evils. Sit down, dearest; wait - think what you are going to do. Don't treat me as if you couldn't trust me.'

He had chosen the most effective appeal; but Maggie's will was fixed unswervingly on the coming wrench. She had made up her mind to suffer.

'We must not wait,' she said, in a low but distinct voice; 'we must part at once.'

'We *can't* part, Maggie,' said Stephen, more impetuously. 'I can't bear it. What is the use of inflicting that misery on me? The blow - whatever it may have been - has been struck now. Will it help any one else that you should drive me mad?'

'I will not begin any future, even for you,' said Maggie, tremulously, 'with a deliberate consent to what ought not to have been. What I told you at Basset I feel now; I would rather have died than fall into this temptation. It would have been better if we had parted forever then. But we must part now.'

'We will *not* part,' Stephen burst out, instinctively placing his back against the door, forgetting everything he had said a few moments before; 'I will not endure it. You'll make me desperate; I sha'n't know what I do.'

Maggie trembled. She felt that the parting could not be effected suddenly. She must rely on a slower appeal to Stephen's better self; she must be prepared for a harder task than that of rushing away while resolution was fresh. She sat down. Stephen, watching her with that look of desperation which had come over him like a lurid light, approached slowly from the door, seated himself close beside her, and grasped her hand. Her heart beat like the heart of a frightened bird; but this direct opposition helped her. She felt her determination growing stronger.

'Remember what you felt weeks ago,' she began, with beseeching earnestness; 'remember what we both felt, - that we owed ourselves to others, and must conquer every inclination which could make us false to that debt. We have failed to keep our resolutions; but the wrong remains the same.'

'No, it does *not* remain the same,' said Stephen. 'We have proved that it was impossible to keep our resolutions. We have proved that the feeling which draws us toward each other is too strong to be overcome. That natural law surmounts every other; we can't help what it clashes with.'

'It is not so, Stephen; I'm quite sure that is wrong. I have tried to think it again and again; but I see, if we judged in that way, there would be a warrant for all treachery and cruelty; we should justify breaking the most sacred ties that can ever be formed on earth. If the past is not to bind us, where can duty lie? We should have no law but the inclination of the moment.'

'But there are ties that can't be kept by mere resolution,' said Stephen, starting up and walking about again. 'What is outward faithfulness? Would they have thanked us for anything so hollow as constancy without love?'

Maggie did not answer immediately. She was undergoing an inward as well as an outward contest. At last she said, with a passionate assertion of her conviction, as much against herself as against him, -

'That seems right - at first; but when I look further, I'm sure it is *not* right. Faithfulness and constancy mean something else besides doing what is easiest and pleasantest to ourselves. They mean renouncing whatever is opposed to the reliance others have in us, - whatever would cause misery to those whom the course of our lives has made dependent on us. If we - if I had been better, nobler, those claims would have been so strongly present with me, - I should have felt them pressing on my heart so continually, just as they do now in the moments when my conscience is awake, - that the opposite feeling would never have grown in me, as it has done; it would have been

quenched at once, I should have prayed for help so earnestly, I should have rushed away as we rush from hideous danger. I feel no excuse for myself, none. I should never have failed toward Lucy and Philip as I have done, if I had not been weak, selfish, and hard, - able to think of their pain without a pain to myself that would have destroyed all temptation. Oh, what is Lucy feeling now? She believed in me - she loved me - she was so good to me. Think of her - - '

Maggie's voice was getting choked as she uttered these last words.

'I *can't* think of her,' said Stephen, stamping as if with pain. 'I can think of nothing but you, Maggie. You demand of a man what is impossible. I felt that once; but I can't go back to it now. And where is the use of *your* thinking of it, except to torture me? You can't save them from pain now; you can only tear yourself from me, and make my life worthless to me. And even if we could go back, and both fulfil our engagements, - if that were possible now, - it would be hateful, horrible, to think of your ever being Philip's wife, - of your ever being the wife of a man you didn't love. We have both been rescued from a mistake.'

A deep flush came over Maggie's face, and she couldn't speak. Stephen saw this. He sat down again, taking her hand in his, and looking at her with passionate entreaty.

'Maggie! Dearest! If you love me, you are mine. Who can have so great a claim on you as I have? My life is bound up in your love. There is nothing in the past that can annul our right to each other; it is the first time we have either of us loved with our whole heart and soul.'

Maggie was still silent for a little while, looking down. Stephen was in a flutter of new hope; he was going to triumph. But she raised her eyes and met his with a glance that was filled with the anguish of regret, not with yielding.

'No, not with my whole heart and soul, Stephen,' she said with timid resolution. 'I have never consented to it with my whole mind. There are memories, and affections, and longings after perfect goodness, that have such a strong hold on me; they would never quit me for long; they would come back and be pain to me - repentance. I couldn't live in peace if I put the shadow of a wilful sin between myself and God. I have caused sorrow already - I know - I feel it; but I have never deliberately consented to it; I have never said, 'They shall suffer, that I may have joy.' It has never been my will to marry you; if you were to win consent from the momentary triumph of my feeling for you, you would not have my whole soul. If I could wake back again into the time before yesterday, I would choose to be true to my calmer affections, and live without the joy of love.'

Stephen loosed her hand, and rising impatiently, walked up and down the room in suppressed rage.

‘Good God!’ he burst out at last, ‘what a miserable thing a woman's love is to a man's! I could commit crimes for you, - and you can balance and choose in that way. But you *don't* love me; if you had a tithe of the feeling for me that I have for you, it would be impossible to you to think for a moment of sacrificing me. But it weighs nothing with you that you are robbing me of *my* life's happiness.’

Maggie pressed her fingers together almost convulsively as she held them clasped on her lap. A great terror was upon her, as if she were ever and anon seeing where she stood by great flashes of lightning, and then again stretched forth her hands in the darkness.

‘No, I don't sacrifice you - I couldn't sacrifice you,’ she said, as soon as she could speak again; ‘but I can't believe in a good for you, that I feel, that we both feel, is a wrong toward others. We can't choose happiness either for ourselves or for another; we can't tell where that will lie. We can only choose whether we will indulge ourselves in the present moment, or whether we will renounce that, for the sake of obeying the divine voice within us, - for the sake of being true to all the motives that sanctify our lives. I know this belief is hard; it has slipped away from me again and again; but I have felt that if I let it go forever, I should have no light through the darkness of this life.’

‘But, Maggie,’ said Stephen, seating himself by her again, ‘is it possible you don't see that what happened yesterday has altered the whole position of things? What infatuation is it, what obstinate prepossession, that blinds you to that? It is too late to say what we might have done or what we ought to have done. Admitting the very worst view of what has been done, it is a fact we must act on now; our position is altered; the right course is no longer what it was before. We must accept our own actions and start afresh from them. Suppose we had been married yesterday? It is nearly the same thing. The effect on others would not have been different. It would only have made this difference to ourselves,’ Stephen added bitterly, ‘that you might have acknowledged then that your tie to me was stronger than to others.’

Again a deep flush came over Maggie's face, and she was silent. Stephen thought again that he was beginning to prevail, - he had never yet believed that he should *not* prevail; there are possibilities which our minds shrink from too completely for us to fear them.

‘Dearest,’ he said, in his deepest, tenderest tone, leaning toward her, and putting his arm round her, ‘you *are* mine now, - the world believes it; duty must spring out of that now.’

'In a few hours you will be legally mine, and those who had claims on us will submit, - they will see that there was a force which declared against their claims.'

Maggie's eyes opened wide in one terrified look at the face that was close to hers, and she started up, pale again.

'Oh, I can't do it,' she said, in a voice almost of agony; 'Stephen, don't ask me - don't urge me. I can't argue any longer, - I don't know what is wise; but my heart will not let me do it. I see, - I feel their trouble now; it is as if it were branded on my mind. *I* have suffered, and had no one to pity me; and now I have made others suffer. It would never leave me; it would embitter your love to me. I *do* care for Philip - in a different way; I remember all we said to each other; I know how he thought of me as the one promise of his life. He was given to me that I might make his lot less hard; and I have forsaken him. And Lucy - she has been deceived; she who trusted me more than any one. I cannot marry you; I cannot take a good for myself that has been wrung out of their misery. It is not the force that ought to rule us, - this that we feel for each other; it would rend me away from all that my past life has made dear and holy to me. I can't set out on a fresh life, and forget that; I must go back to it, and cling to it, else I shall feel as if there were nothing firm beneath my feet.'

'Good God, Maggie!' said Stephen, rising too and grasping her arm, 'you rave. How can you go back without marrying me? You don't know what will be said, dearest. You see nothing as it really is.'

'Yes, I do. But they will believe me. I will confess everything. Lucy will believe me - she will forgive you, and - and - oh, *some* good will come by clinging to the right. Dear, dear Stephen, let me go! - don't drag me into deeper remorse. My whole soul has never consented; it does not consent now.'

Stephen let go her arm, and sank back on his chair, half-stunned by despairing rage. He was silent a few moments, not looking at her; while her eyes were turned toward him yearningly, in alarm at this sudden change. At last he said, still without looking at her, -

'Go, then, - leave me; don't torture me any longer, - I can't bear it.'

Involuntarily she leaned toward him and put out her hand to touch his. But he shrank from it as if it had been burning iron, and said again, -

'Leave me.'

Maggie was not conscious of a decision as she turned away from that gloomy averted face, and walked out of the room; it was like an automatic action that fulfils a forgotten intention. What came after? A sense of stairs descended as if in a dream, of flagstones, of a chaise and horses standing, then a street, and a turning into another street where a stage-coach was standing, taking in passengers, and the darting thought that that coach would take her away, perhaps toward home. But she could ask nothing yet; she only got into the coach.

Home - where her mother and brother were, Philip, Lucy, the scene of her very cares and trials - was the haven toward which her mind tended; the sanctuary where sacred relics lay, where she would be rescued from more falling. The thought of Stephen was like a horrible throbbing pain, which yet, as such pains do, seemed to urge all other thoughts into activity. But among her thoughts, what others would say and think of her conduct was hardly present. Love and deep pity and remorseful anguish left no room for that.

The coach was taking her to York, farther away from home; but she did not learn that until she was set down in the old city at midnight. It was no matter; she could sleep there, and start home the next day. She had her purse in her pocket, with all her money in it, - a bank-note and a sovereign; she had kept it in her pocket from forgetfulness, after going out to make purchases the day before yesterday.

Did she lie down in the gloomy bedroom of the old inn that night with her will bent unwaveringly on the path of penitent sacrifice? The great struggles of life are not so easy as that; the great problems of life are not so clear. In the darkness of that night she saw Stephen's face turned toward her in passionate, reproachful misery; she lived through again all the tremulous delights of his presence with her that made existence an easy floating in a stream of joy, instead of a quiet resolved endurance and effort. The love she had renounced came back upon her with a cruel charm; she felt herself opening her arms to receive it once more; and then it seemed to slip away and fade and vanish, leaving only the dying sound of a deep, thrilling voice that said, 'Gone, forever gone.'