

# The Awakening of Maggie Taverner

*An Irish Love Story which is Different*

By ROBERT CHICHESTER

"THREE weeks! Do you really mean it? To me it has been like three days or less."

Captain O'Hagan turned and looked into little Maggie Taverner's violet eyes. "I feel as if I had always known you," he ended softly. She blushed.

"Staying in the same house, especially here in Galway, where everything is so nice and unconventional, one seems to know people more quickly than in England," the girl said quietly.

"And you—you have been so good to me," he said.

"Good? How do you mean?" and she laughed a little. "I have enjoyed it all so much!"

But deep shadow lay over the man's face. "When I say 'good,' I mean sweet and dear and charming!" he said; "so sweet that I—that I—don't know how to thank you for my peep at Paradise!" She was so close to him; a strand of her hair had blown across his lips; her cool pink cheek was so tempting, and he bent and kissed it, ever so gently.

"Thank me? Why should you?" she said at last.

"Because—of what I must say." He rose from the low seat in the tangled flower-decked garden as he spoke, and pressed his thin brown hand across his eyes. A shadow lay between them—between him and the little girl in the plain holland gown. The tragedy of their little comedy was so old. He was not free to woo—not free to have won. And he knew that he *had* won her, and the grief was exquisite.

Oh for honesty, for bravery, for strength that moment! Just in that last fortnight, staying at his cousin Mrs. Murphy's house among the hills of Galway, O'Hagan had met Maggie—the only woman he had ever loved.

And he had been engaged for years. What was the good of waiting? There were but a couple of hours, even less, in which to confess all. He turned to her, and his face was white. "We have been such friends, Meg," he began lamely.

"Oh, yes!" She looked away, as she spoke, across the violet and purple hills.

"That it is, perhaps, presumption on my part, to think—to have thought—we could ever be anything more—"

Her eyes were on the grass, for Love is shy and timid, and she did not see the drawn grey look on his face.

"Well?" she said quietly. He looked at her, and suddenly his self-possession and calm deserted him. Quick and hot the blood leapt into his face, and he threw himself on the grass beside her. There was no one to see—no one but the robin peeping at them, and the big red and yellow dahlias nodding their heavy heads by the fuchsia trees.

"Oh, my sweet, my darling little girl! What a low cad and hound I am!" he burst out. "How can I tell you? How can I ever explain?" She put out her hand, cold and trembling as it had suddenly grown, and touched the dark hair of the bowed head. What had happened to spoil her dream? What rude awakening was about to overtake her? "You and I were left so much together—I *must* think out my excuses first!" he went on huskily, "and this glorious weather led us out to the woods and hills—and Mrs. Murphy was so busy with her tennis. Oh, I have been so wrong—so wicked, Meg! But I have been so happy with you." He rose, and suddenly grew calm. Somehow his five and thirty years seemed to fall heavily upon him; he seemed aged and tired.

"I must tell you it all, straight out," he went on dully. "I saw you here, and cared for you, oh so much, before I knew what I was doing. I have never cared for any woman before—not like this! All my life I must have been seeking you. Then I saw you, found you, loved you. Loved your true heart, your pure innocent soul, your simple life. To myself I said, 'I must have one week—only one week of glory.' And now, if I could give my whole life back for this past fortnight's work, God knows that I would give it."

Her eyes watched a lark up in the still amethyst sky. Dimly her eyes followed it, till it was lost to sight, and she wished that her soul could fly with it—away, away. She sat so still, almost motionless. Had the gates of her little Paradise clanged to all of a sudden? Her heart seemed sick with anxiety and dread and pain.

"Go on," she said at last. "Please tell me all."

"I ought to have told you weeks ago. Only—'she does not care!' I told myself, and I half hoped that it was so. Maggie, I could not altogether hope

it!" He turned his face to hers, with the lines of suffering in it. "I have been engaged to be married for years," he said in a flat, toneless voice. "Ever since I joined my regiment. It is to Lady Derwent; she is a cousin, a widow, Mrs. Murphy's sister. She is coming down here—to-day." The words came haltingly through his dry lips. "I never cared, for her, not in that way; she is a rattling good sort, and all that—but we were never really *lovers*. She has plenty of money—but she was lonely. She is like a sister to me." He turned to the shrinking girl beside him with passionate appeal. "She didn't really care—she doesn't now, I know! When her husband died, she turned to me for comfort; she wanted sympathy—and gradually we slipped into an engagement! Oh, can you ever forgive me?"

Maggie sat so mutely looking at him. All the colour in her small, pretty face had died away.

"I have—nothing to forgive," she stammered.

"Nothing? Oh, my love, my dear—I!" he began. She turned her burning eyes upon his face. "Be silent! How dare you? What am I to you—"

He covered his face with his hands. Never, through all his life, would he forget the bitterness, the agony of that hour. He caught her cold hands, kissing them again and again, and she felt a hot tear fall on them. It was too much for her bursting heart.

"Oh, why did you not tell me?" she sobbed. In a moment she was in his arms.

NEITHER of them, lost to the world as they were, heard a step; but Cecilia Derwent, disdaining the outside car that had been sent to meet her, had walked up from the station. She had taken the garden path, through the shrubbery to the house; and, as she passed the dahlia bed, hidden as the path was from the garden seat, she saw and heard—all.

For a moment she stood, fixed to the spot. What was this?

Her fiancée, Timothy O'Hagan, with a little strange girl in a holland frock, clasped tightly in his arms! If she had not wished to pass unheeded, Lady Derwent would have given one of her long, low whistles at the sight—but as it was, her light steps quickened, and she hurried on. A bright, happy light was in her soft eyes.

Hurrah! Here was exactly what would help her! She had never cared for O'Hagan as a wife should, but the engagement had been a long one, and she had grown so used to it that she scarcely ever thought about it at all. Scarcely ever—until that summer. Something had happened, however—the young widow had met and fallen in love with a certain Jim Dene, with a little house near Limerick; and she had arrived in Blane with the intention of seeing how the land lay with her cousin, and how best to free them both.

Now, practically, the difficult business was done. It was with a gay laugh, and a bright colour in her cheeks, that she pushed open the long French windows of her sister's drawing-room and went in.

"Hullo! Here I am! Earlier than I was expected!" she cried. "So jolly of you to ask me, Sis!" Mrs. Murphy ran and kissed her heartily.

"Awfully glad to see you, dear! Run along and take off your things, and then come out and see the new tennis-court! Geoff is marking it out now." And to herself she added, "It is high time she is here, I fancy. Tim was beginning to be a wee bit sentimental. Dear little Maggie, too. I would not have her warm heart hurt for a kingdom." Lady Derwent threw her elegant little travelling hat on the pink satin quilt as she reached her bedroom; and then sat down, with her usual boyish bonhomie, right on top of it, so lost in thought was she. "It will all be so jolly if Tim and his little friend are *really* in love. It's almost too good to be true. But he must have his lesson—and a sound one, too. He has behaved horribly—disgracefully!" And she began to sing an old Irish air. "Yes; he must be punished, poor Tim. And then we will all be happy."

EVENING had fallen over the land. Maggie, in her little white frock, sat at the window of her bedroom, thinking. There was no anger in her heart—only a great pity. She had seen the face of the man she loved as he had appealed to her for forgiveness, and the look on it had cut her to the heart. She must go away and at once. She wished she had never come—never met him. She would go away in the early morning, leaving Mrs. Murphy an excuse, and none need guess, none need ever know that her life

was all over, as far as happiness was concerned. She would keep her secret, guard it at all costs. Down her pale face the tears ran unheeded, until she scolded herself for crying for another woman's lover. So that it was with a quiet, composed little face that she went down, presently, to the others.

The dinner table was gay with pink and white lilies, ferns and leaves. Far away, through the open windows, the gentle blue of the hills merged into the fainter blue of the sky. Now and then an owl hooted from the elms, or a bat flitted silently from the eaves.

Captain O'Hagan was white and ill at ease, though he never seemed to stop talking. Cecilia Derwent talked, too—she always did—and her loud gay laugh came floating into Maggie's aching heart, as she sat mute and still, listening to her host's platitudes.

"You will go to the tennis tournament to-morrow? Sophy is playing, of course. She always does." He chattered on about a thousand things, but she found she could take no heed. Her eyes were dutifully on his face, but her ears were alert for the other end of the table. "Men are such flirts, my dear," Mrs. Murphy was saying; "they must have a regular library of love affairs to their credit. Naughty things. But I suppose they put in a very good time."

"I'm not so sure," Cecilia said; and Captain O'Hagan's sad eyes were on her face as she spoke. "I'm not so certain they enjoy their flirtations—these ardent flirts, I mean—as much as *we* do. Now, poor Derwent was always so solemn about his. Took them to heart, and all that, while I"—she shrugged her shoulders—"I think very few men worth losing a day's hunting about, much less getting a grey hair."

"You have too good a heart to really lead men on, Cecil," said Mrs. Murphy, in her vague way.

"Oh, well—" Cecilia's soft eyes fell upon O'Hagan's ashen face. He must have his lesson, and it were time to begin.

"Oh, well," she began lightly, "I would not be coward or cruel enough to take anyone *in*, and make a fool of them! Would you, Tim? I *know* you wouldn't. There is no *fun* in that, Heaven knows! And the man who loves and rides away—will live to do it again, doubtless; but will he find any savour in it?"

O'Hagan's eyes were on the cloth. He did not look at Maggie. Something within him bade him not. But he felt he must say something.

"He—he may have some sort of excuse—" he began. "The fellow may be very young, or very passionate, or easily led, or—or—"

"Anything, I grant you, except *honourable*." Lady Derwent's fine eyes shot a little arrow into his burning ones.

"I don't see what he finds in such behaviour, save dead sea fruit. 'Be true—or die,' as my dad used to say. But that is a bit strong, Tim, eh? The world's too rough a place for such hard and fast rules. We cannot all keep straight."

She was beginning to be sorry for him, she did not wish to punish him too far, and she saw that he had had more than enough of it. There was a hollow, jaded look about his face that hurt her. She did not think to look at Maggie—Maggie, sitting so dumb, with her eyes like those of a stricken animal, fixed on O'Hagan's face. What did Lady Derwent mean, she wondered? Could she mean anything—to do with them? What did she, could she know?

The table, with its load of silver and glass, swam suddenly before her eyes; a wild humming was in her ears, a heavy throbbing in her breaking heart.

"Oh, Lady Derwent!" she heard herself saying, and her voice sounded a long way off. "Surely the men and women who deceive are able to find forgiveness? Even if honour is lost for a while—can't it ever be found again? Nothing, surely, is so bad but that sorrow and repentance will wipe it all away—"

Cecilia turned and looked at her. The lights were shining in the girl's wet eyes, and on her small face, grown suddenly so strange and white.

"My dear, of course," she said, ever so tenderly, "I was only talking nonsense."

"I WANT to speak to you, Tim," said Lady Derwent, as she swept through the window to the lawn. "Come and look at the stars."

With a sinking heart, O'Hagan followed her. She slipped her warm bare arm into his. "Tim," she

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