

Later, since the evening was fine, Maggie threw on a shawl and settled comfortably into her favorite rocking chair on the corner of the porch. She welcomed Eli as he took the chair beside hers. Smiling, he told her that he had a gift and then passed her a small book.

Maggie read the cover. *Woman in the Nineteenth Century and Kindred Papers Relating to the Sphere, Condition and Duties, of Woman.*

The author was Margaret Fuller Ossoli. Maggie opened the book and noticed that it had been reprinted in 1855. As she turned a page, she saw that Horace Greeley had written the introduction. This mildly surprised her – that so many had read a book by a woman and that a famous publisher had deigned to take notice of her.

“Besides sharing a first name,” Eli said, “you and Margaret Ossoli also share an independent spirit. Unfortunately, she died in a shipwreck in ’49.”

“Oh, how sad.”

“Yes. I guess you’ll just have to carry on for her.”

Maggie chuckled at this. “I’m hardly a radical, Eli. Tell me, where did you find this book?”

He sat back in his chair. “My sister Becky.”

Eli had five sisters. He was located somewhere in the middle of the group. Maggie knew that Becky, his eldest sister, lived in New York City. She was unmarried and made her living by writing. Maggie had always been fascinated by Becky and hoped to have a chance to talk with her one day.

“Becky’s very keen on the woman question,” Eli was saying.

Maggie turned the book over in her hands. “I wasn’t aware that there *was* a question about us.”

“Oh, yes. It’s called the emancipation of woman. Becky’s been telling me all about it and sending me books and papers to read. Do you know, twenty years ago, she tried to address a group at an abolition meeting and got booed off the stage! They told her it wasn’t proper for a woman to speak to a group made up of both men and women. Women, yes. But men? Outrage and horror!”

Maggie knew all about restrictions. She had heard stern-faced men silence women who dared to exhort a bit too much at mixed prayer meetings. Too much exhortation was considered preaching, and preaching was reserved for men. *But*, Maggie wondered, *what if a woman believed that the Holy Ghost compelled her to speak?* She believed that such a thing was possible, but knew that most men and many women believed it to be impossible, if not outright evil. “Why are women speaking in public is so wrong?” she mused aloud.

“I don’t know. But that little set-to did something to Becky. It made her realize something. You see, when she tried to get involved in freeing slaves, she discovered that *she* wasn’t free, either. She says women may not be held captive by iron chains, but they’re certainly held captive by laws and customs.”

Maggie rocked back and forth, thinking about Eli’s comments. The chair creaked comfortably. She could hear the murmur of Lydia, Edgar, and Frankie’s voices at the other end of the porch. A slight breeze stirred and whispered past her. It was nice to sit and talk. In fact, it was heaven to have someone with whom she could share ideas and feelings.

Eli sat back in his chair and rocked, too. “I agree with Becky. I think women ought to be free to pursue their lives as they see fit. I think all people ought to be free, regardless of color or sex.”

That made Maggie smile. “*You* are a radical thinker, Elijah Smith.”

“And proud of it.” He watched her intently. “So tell me. What do *you* think?” His tone was serious. He really wanted to know.

What did she think? Maggie realized that she seldom had been asked that question. She stopped rocking. “Well...” she ventured, wondering what to say and how Eli would respond. “I think it’s good for a woman to have a skill and it is good for her to use her talents. Why not? Did not God give these things to us? Using our skills and talents may even be a matter of survival. Life is uncertain, after all. For instance, when John died and then Aunt Letty, I had nothing but this home and two little girls. All I could do was start a rooming house. Had I been able to find another sort of employment, had I been able to find someone to help me with Lydia and Frankie...” The thought hovered in front of her, shimmering, beautiful, and at the same time unattainable. She felt a twinge of sadness, a pang of regret. “Anyway, it irks me that Samuel and others in this town feel I’ve degraded myself by running this rooming house. Especially since I don’t feel in the least bit degraded – at least not until someone tells me that I ought to feel that way.”

“If you hadn’t started the rooming house,” Eli asked, “what would you have liked to have done?”

She blushed and stared down at her hands. Maggie was glad that it was growing dark and Eli couldn’t see her color.

“You’re blushing.”

She looked up in surprise, suddenly feeling exposed as if he could see through her clothing.

“Are you embarrassed?” He laid a hand on the arm of her rocking chair and teased, “Maggie Blaine, you didn’t want to do something *shameful*, did you?”

“No,” she murmured. “Of course not. It’s nothing. Never mind.”

“No, I will mind because it’s quite obviously something. Tell me. I won’t laugh. I promise I won’t even be shocked.”

Maggie took a deep breath. “All right. I should have liked to have been a writer. I’ve kept a journal for years. Writing is different. My work each day is rather repetitious.” She laughed tiredly. “No, make that boring and back breaking. Being able to write gives me relief. It helps me think things through. And I find joy and satisfaction in it, too. I could have written stories, had I the time. I might even have been a journalist for a newspaper.” She smiled wryly. “Except no one would have hired me. I’m afraid that, like your sister, I am handicapped by my sex.”

Eli snorted. “Nonsense! Did you ever try to get a job?”

“Well, no.”

“Then how do you know that no one would’ve hired you?”

He had thrown down a challenge. Maggie stared steadily into his eyes. “All right, Elijah Smith. Would *you* have hired me?”

He hesitated. It was obvious that he had never considered hiring a woman. Not even Maggie. After a few seconds, though, he said, slowly, “Hire you, eh? Write me a story first, and then we’ll talk.”

That broke the tension. They both began to laugh. “Anyway,” Maggie said as she stared into the dark street, “it’s too late for me. But I believe that *Frankie* could have a career. She’s very intelligent. She could teach. She could support herself and contribute something important to society. She wouldn’t need to...” At this, she trailed off, a bit embarrassed at what she had almost said, for what she was thinking would strike at the heart of the social order.

But Eli finished the sentence for her. “Get married?”

Maggie took a breath. "Does that sound awful? I don't want her to stay single forever, but Frankie is so independent-minded. I just can't see her tending hearth and home, the way I can with Lydia."

"I agree. I think Frankie's just like her mother."

She felt her cheeks redden again. "Maybe. But I strongly feel that a woman should marry only if she wants to marry, not because she has no other choice."

"There! See? You *are* a radical. And I love you." Grinning, Eli leaned in, but Maggie put a hand to his chest to stop the on-coming kiss, whispering, "No. Not here."

"Come on, you're a free-thinker and you know it." Eli leaned into her hand, which made her giggle like a schoolgirl and try to push him away.