Chapter V - Tom Comes Home

Tom was to arrive early in the afternoon, and there was another fluttering heart besides Maggie's when it was late enough for the sound of the gig-wheels to be expected; for if Mrs Tulliver had a strong feeling, it was fondness for her boy. At last the sound came, - that quick light bowling of the gig-wheels, - and in spite of the wind, which was blowing the clouds about, and was not likely to respect Mrs Tulliver's curls and cap-strings, she came outside the door, and even held her hand on Maggie's offending head, forgetting all the griefs of the morning.

'There he is, my sweet lad! But, Lord ha' mercy! he's got never a collar on; it's been lost on the road, I'll be bound, and spoilt the set.'

Mrs Tulliver stood with her arms open; Maggie jumped first on one leg and then on the other; while Tom descended from the gig, and said, with masculine reticence as to the tender emotions, 'Hallo! Yap - what! are you there?'

Nevertheless he submitted to be kissed willingly enough, though Maggie hung on his neck in rather a strangling fashion, while his blue-gray eyes wandered toward the croft and the lambs and the river, where he promised himself that he would begin to fish the first thing to-morrow morning. He was one of those lads that grow everywhere in England, and at twelve or thirteen years of age look as much alike as goslings, - a lad with light-brown hair, cheeks of cream and roses, full lips, indeterminate nose and eyebrows, - a physiognomy in which it seems impossible to discern anything but the generic character to boyhood; as different as possible from poor Maggie's phiz, which Nature seemed to have moulded and colored with the most decided intention. But that same Nature has the deep cunning which hides itself under the appearance of openness, so that simple people think they can see through her quite well, and all the while she is secretly preparing a refutation of their confident prophecies. Under these average boyish physiognomies that she seems to turn off by the gross, she conceals some of her most rigid, inflexible purposes, some of her most unmodifiable characters; and the dark-eyed, demonstrative, rebellious girl may after all turn out to be a passive being compared with this pink-and-white bit of masculinity with the indeterminate features.

'Maggie,' said Tom, confidentially, taking her into a corner, as soon as his mother was gone out to examine his box and the warm parlor had taken off the chill he had felt from the long drive, 'you don't know what I've got in *my* pockets,' nodding his head up and down as a means of rousing her sense of mystery.

‘No,’ said Maggie. ‘How stodgy they look, Tom! Is it marls (marbles) or cobnuts?’ Maggie's heart sank a little, because Tom always said it was ‘no good’ playing with *her* at those games, she played so badly.

‘Marls! no; I've swopped all my marls with the little fellows, and cobnuts are no fun, you silly, only when the nuts are green. But see here!’ He drew something half out of his right-hand pocket.

‘What is it?’ said Maggie, in a whisper. ‘I can see nothing but a bit of yellow.’

‘Why, it's - a - new - guess, Maggie!’

‘Oh, I *can't* guess, Tom,’ said Maggie, impatiently.

‘Don't be a spitfire, else I won't tell you,’ said Tom, thrusting his hand back into his pocket and looking determined.

‘No, Tom,’ said Maggie, imploringly, laying hold of the arm that was held stiffly in the pocket. ‘I'm not cross, Tom; it was only because I can't bear guessing. *Please* be good to me.’

Tom's arm slowly relaxed, and he said, ‘Well, then, it's a new fish-line - two new uns, - one for you, Maggie, all to yourself. I wouldn't go halves in the toffee and gingerbread on purpose to save the money; and Gibson and Spouncer fought with me because I wouldn't. And here's hooks; see here - I say, *won't* we go and fish to-morrow down by the Round Pool? And you shall catch your own fish, Maggie and put the worms on, and everything; won't it be fun?’

Maggie's answer was to throw her arms round Tom's neck and hug him, and hold her cheek against his without speaking, while he slowly unwound some of the line, saying, after a pause, -

‘Wasn't I a good brother, now, to buy you a line all to yourself? You know, I needn't have bought it, if I hadn't liked.’

‘Yes, very, very good - I do love you, Tom.’

Tom had put the line back in his pocket, and was looking at the hooks one by one, before he spoke again.

‘And the fellows fought me, because I wouldn't give in about the toffee.’

‘Oh, dear! I wish they wouldn't fight at your school, Tom. Didn't it hurt you?’

‘Hurt me? no,’ said Tom, putting up the hooks again, taking out a large pocket-knife, and slowly opening the largest blade, which he looked at meditatively as he rubbed his finger along it. Then he added, -

‘I gave Spouncer a black eye, I know; that's what he got by wanting to leather *me;* I wasn't going to go halves because anybody leathered me.’

‘Oh, how brave you are, Tom! I think you're like Samson. If there came a lion roaring at me, I think you'd fight him, wouldn't you, Tom?’

‘How can a lion come roaring at you, you silly thing? There's no lions, only in the shows.’

‘No; but if we were in the lion countries - I mean in Africa, where it's very hot; the lions eat people there. I can show it you in the book where I read it.’

‘Well, I should get a gun and shoot him.’

‘But if you hadn't got a gun, - we might have gone out, you know, not thinking, just as we go fishing; and then a great lion might run toward us roaring, and we couldn't get away from him. What should you do, Tom?’

Tom paused, and at last turned away contemptuously, saying, ‘But the lion *isn't* coming. What's the use of talking?’

‘But I like to fancy how it would be,’ said Maggie, following him. ‘Just think what you would do, Tom.’

‘Oh, don't bother, Maggie! you're such a silly. I shall go and see my rabbits.’

Maggie's heart began to flutter with fear. She dared not tell the sad truth at once, but she walked after Tom in trembling silence as he went out, thinking how she could tell him the news so as to soften at once his sorrow and his anger; for Maggie dreaded Tom's anger of all things; it was quite a different anger from her own.

‘Tom,’ she said, timidly, when they were out of doors, ‘how much money did you give for your rabbits?’

‘Two half-crowns and a sixpence,’ said Tom, promptly.

‘I think I've got a great deal more than that in my steel purse upstairs. I'll ask mother to give it you.’

‘What for?’ said Tom. ‘I don't want *your* money, you silly thing. I've got a great deal more money than you, because I'm a boy. I always have half-sovereigns and sovereigns for my Christmas boxes because I shall be a man, and you only have five-shilling pieces, because you're only a girl.’

‘Well, but, Tom - if mother would let me give you two half-crowns and a sixpence out of my purse to put into your pocket and spend, you know, and buy some more rabbits with it?’

‘More rabbits? I don't want any more.’

‘Oh, but, Tom, they're all dead.’

Tom stopped immediately in his walk and turned round toward Maggie. ‘You forgot to feed 'em, then, and Harry forgot?’ he said, his color heightening for a moment, but soon subsiding. ‘I'll pitch into Harry. I'll have him turned away. And I don't love you, Maggie. You sha'n't go fishing with me to-morrow. I told you to go and see the rabbits every day.’ He walked on again.

‘Yes, but I forgot - and I couldn't help it, indeed, Tom. I'm so very sorry,’ said Maggie, while the tears rushed fast.

‘You're a naughty girl,’ said Tom, severely, ‘and I'm sorry I bought you the fish-line. I don't love you.’

‘Oh, Tom, it's very cruel,’ sobbed Maggie. ‘I'd forgive you, if *you* forgot anything - I wouldn't mind what you did - I'd forgive you and love you.’

‘Yes, you're silly; but I never *do* forget things, *I* don't.’

‘Oh, please forgive me, Tom; my heart will break,’ said Maggie, shaking with sobs, clinging to Tom's arm, and laying her wet cheek on his shoulder.

Tom shook her off, and stopped again, saying in a peremptory tone, ‘Now, Maggie, you just listen. Aren't I a good brother to you?’

‘Ye-ye-es,’ sobbed Maggie, her chin rising and falling convulsedly.

‘Didn't I think about your fish-line all this quarter, and mean to buy it, and saved my money o' purpose, and wouldn't go halves in the toffee, and Spouncer fought me because I wouldn't?’

‘Ye-ye-es - and I - lo-lo-love you so, Tom.’

'But you're a naughty girl. Last holidays you licked the paint off my lozenge-box, and the holidays before that you let the boat drag my fish-line down when I'd set you to watch it, and you pushed your head through my kite, all for nothing.'

'But I didn't mean,' said Maggie; 'I couldn't help it.'

'Yes, you could,' said Tom, 'if you'd minded what you were doing. And you're a naughty girl, and you sha'n't go fishing with me to-morrow.'

With this terrible conclusion, Tom ran away from Maggie toward the mill, meaning to greet Luke there, and complain to him of Harry.

Maggie stood motionless, except from her sobs, for a minute or two; then she turned round and ran into the house, and up to her attic, where she sat on the floor and laid her head against the worm-eaten shelf, with a crushing sense of misery. Tom was come home, and she had thought how happy she should be; and now he was cruel to her. What use was anything if Tom didn't love her? Oh, he was very cruel! Hadn't she wanted to give him the money, and said how very sorry she was? She knew she was naughty to her mother, but she had never been naughty to Tom - had never *meant* to be naughty to him.

'Oh, he is cruel!' Maggie sobbed aloud, finding a wretched pleasure in the hollow resonance that came through the long empty space of the attic. She never thought of beating or grinding her Fetish; she was too miserable to be angry.

These bitter sorrows of childhood! when sorrow is all new and strange, when hope has not yet got wings to fly beyond the days and weeks, and the space from summer to summer seems measureless.

Maggie soon thought she had been hours in the attic, and it must be tea-time, and they were all having their tea, and not thinking of her. Well, then, she would stay up there and starve herself, - hide herself behind the tub, and stay there all night, - and then they would all be frightened, and Tom would be sorry. Thus Maggie thought in the pride of her heart, as she crept behind the tub; but presently she began to cry again at the idea that they didn't mind her being there. If she went down again to Tom now - would he forgive her? Perhaps her father would be there, and he would take her part. But then she wanted Tom to forgive her because he loved her, not because his father told him. No, she would never go down if Tom didn't come to fetch her. This resolution lasted in great intensity for five dark minutes behind the tub; but then the need of being loved - the strongest need in poor Maggie's nature - began to wrestle with her pride, and soon threw it. She crept from behind her tub into the twilight of the long attic, but just then she heard a quick foot-step on the stairs.

Tom had been too much interested in his talk with Luke, in going the round of the premises, walking in and out where he pleased, and whittling sticks without any particular reason, - except that he didn't whittle sticks at school, - to think of Maggie and the effect his anger had produced on her. He meant to punish her, and that business having been performed, he occupied himself with other matters, like a practical person. But when he had been called in to tea, his father said, 'Why, where's the little wench?' and Mrs Tulliver, almost at the same moment, said, 'Where's your little sister?' - both of them having supposed that Maggie and Tom had been together all the afternoon.

'I don't know,' said Tom. He didn't want to 'tell' of Maggie, though he was angry with her; for Tom Tulliver was a lad of honor.

'What! hasn't she been playing with you all this while?' said the father. 'She'd been thinking o' nothing but your coming home.'

'I haven't seen her this two hours,' says Tom, commencing on the plumcake.

'Goodness heart; she's got drownded!' exclaimed Mrs Tulliver, rising from her seat and running to the window.

'How could you let her do so?' she added, as became a fearful woman, accusing she didn't know whom of she didn't know what.

'Nay, nay, she's none drownded,' said Mr Tulliver. 'You've been naughty to her, I doubt, Tom?'

'I'm sure I haven't, father,' said Tom, indignantly. 'I think she's in the house.'

'Perhaps up in that attic,' said Mrs Tulliver, 'a-singing and talking to herself, and forgetting all about meal-times.'

'You go and fetch her down, Tom,' said Mr Tulliver, rather sharply, - his perspicacity or his fatherly fondness for Maggie making him suspect that the lad had been hard upon 'the little un,' else she would never have left his side. 'And be good to her, do you hear? Else I'll let you know better.'

Tom never disobeyed his father, for Mr Tulliver was a peremptory man, and, as he said, would never let anybody get hold of his whip-hand; but he went out rather sullenly, carrying his piece of plumcake, and not intending to reprieve Maggie's punishment, which was no more than she deserved. Tom was only thirteen, and had no decided views in grammar and arithmetic, regarding them for the most part as open questions, but he was particularly clear and positive on one

point, - namely, that he would punish everybody who deserved it. Why, he wouldn't have minded being punished himself if he deserved it; but, then, he never *did* deserve it.

It was Tom's step, then, that Maggie heard on the stairs, when her need of love had triumphed over her pride, and she was going down with her swollen eyes and dishevelled hair to beg for pity. At least her father would stroke her head and say, 'Never mind, my wench.' It is a wonderful subduer, this need of love, - this hunger of the heart, - as peremptory as that other hunger by which Nature forces us to submit to the yoke, and change the face of the world.

But she knew Tom's step, and her heart began to beat violently with the sudden shock of hope. He only stood still at the top of the stairs and said, 'Maggie, you're to come down.' But she rushed to him and clung round his neck, sobbing, 'Oh, Tom, please forgive me - I can't bear it - I will always be good - always remember things - do love me - please, dear Tom!'

We learn to restrain ourselves as we get older. We keep apart when we have quarrelled, express ourselves in well-bred phrases, and in this way preserve a dignified alienation, showing much firmness on one side, and swallowing much grief on the other. We no longer approximate in our behavior to the mere impulsiveness of the lower animals, but conduct ourselves in every respect like members of a highly civilized society. Maggie and Tom were still very much like young animals, and so she could rub her cheek against his, and kiss his ear in a random sobbing way; and there were tender fibres in the lad that had been used to answer to Maggie's fondling, so that he behaved with a weakness quite inconsistent with his resolution to punish her as much as she deserved. He actually began to kiss her in return, and say, -

'Don't cry, then, Magsie; here, eat a bit o' cake.'

Maggie's sobs began to subside, and she put out her mouth for the cake and bit a piece; and then Tom bit a piece, just for company, and they ate together and rubbed each other's cheeks and brows and noses together, while they ate, with a humiliating resemblance to two friendly ponies.

'Come along, Magsie, and have tea,' said Tom at last, when there was no more cake except what was down-stairs.

So ended the sorrows of this day, and the next morning Maggie was trotting with her own fishing-rod in one hand and a handle of the basket in the other, stepping always, by a peculiar gift, in the muddiest places, and looking darkly radiant from under her beaver-

bonnet because Tom was good to her. She had told Tom, however, that she should like him to put the worms on the hook for her, although she accepted his word when he assured her that worms couldn't feel (it was Tom's private opinion that it didn't much matter if they did). He knew all about worms, and fish, and those things; and what birds were mischievous, and how padlocks opened, and which way the handles of the gates were to be lifted. Maggie thought this sort of knowledge was very wonderful, - much more difficult than remembering what was in the books; and she was rather in awe of Tom's superiority, for he was the only person who called her knowledge 'stuff,' and did not feel surprised at her cleverness. Tom, indeed, was of opinion that Maggie was a silly little thing; all girls were silly, - they couldn't throw a stone so as to hit anything, couldn't do anything with a pocket-knife, and were frightened at frogs. Still, he was very fond of his sister, and meant always to take care of her, make her his housekeeper, and punish her when she did wrong.

They were on their way to the Round Pool, - that wonderful pool, which the floods had made a long while ago. No one knew how deep it was; and it was mysterious, too, that it should be almost a perfect round, framed in with willows and tall reeds, so that the water was only to be seen when you got close to the brink. The sight of the old favorite spot always heightened Tom's good humor, and he spoke to Maggie in the most amicable whispers, as he opened the precious basket and prepared their tackle. He threw her line for her, and put the rod into her hand. Maggie thought it probable that the small fish would come to her hook, and the large ones to Tom's. But she had forgotten all about the fish, and was looking dreamily at the glassy water, when Tom said, in a loud whisper, 'Look, look, Maggie!' and came running to prevent her from snatching her line away.

Maggie was frightened lest she had been doing something wrong, as usual, but presently Tom drew out her line and brought a large tench bouncing on the grass.

Tom was excited.

'O Magsie, you little duck! Empty the basket.'

Maggie was not conscious of unusual merit, but it was enough that Tom called her Magsie, and was pleased with her. There was nothing to mar her delight in the whispers and the dreamy silences, when she listened to the light dripping sounds of the rising fish, and the gentle rustling, as if the willows and the reeds and the water had their happy whisperings also. Maggie thought it would make a very nice heaven to sit by the pool in that way, and never be scolded. She never knew she had a bite till Tom told her; but she liked fishing very much.

It was one of their happy mornings. They trotted along and sat down together, with no thought that life would ever change much for them; they would only get bigger and not go to school, and it would always be like the holidays; they would always live together and be fond of each other. And the mill with its booming; the great chestnut-tree under which they played at houses; their own little river, the Ripple, where the banks seemed like home, and Tom was always seeing the water-rats, while Maggie gathered the purple plumy tops of the reeds, which she forgot and dropped afterward; above all, the great Floss, along which they wandered with a sense of travel, to see the rushing spring-tide, the awful Eagle, come up like a hungry monster, or to see the Great Ash which had once wailed and groaned like a man, these things would always be just the same to them. Tom thought people were at a disadvantage who lived on any other spot of the globe; and Maggie, when she read about Christiana passing 'the river over which there is no bridge,' always saw the Floss between the green pastures by the Great Ash.

Life did change for Tom and Maggie; and yet they were not wrong in believing that the thoughts and loves of these first years would always make part of their lives. We could never have loved the earth so well if we had had no childhood in it, - if it were not the earth where the same flowers come up again every spring that we used to gather with our tiny fingers as we sat lisping to ourselves on the grass; the same hips and haws on the autumn's hedgerows; the same redbreasts that we used to call 'God's birds,' because they did no harm to the precious crops. What novelty is worth that sweet monotony where everything is known, and *loved* because it is known?

The wood I walk in on this mild May day, with the young yellow-brown foliage of the oaks between me and the blue sky, the white star-flowers and the blue-eyed speedwell and the ground ivy at my feet, what grove of tropic palms, what strange ferns or splendid broad-petalled blossoms, could ever thrill such deep and delicate fibres within me as this home scene? These familiar flowers, these well-remembered bird-notes, this sky, with its fitful brightness, these furrowed and grassy fields, each with a sort of personality given to it by the capricious hedgerows, - such things as these are the mother-tongue of our imagination, the language that is laden with all the subtle, inextricable associations the fleeting hours of our childhood left behind them. Our delight in the sunshine on the deep-bladed grass to-day might be no more than the faint perception of wearied souls, if it were not for the sunshine and the grass in the far-off years which still live in us, and transform our perception into love.