

Chapter VI - The Aunts And Uncles Are Coming

It was Easter week, and Mrs Tulliver's cheesecakes were more exquisitely light than usual. 'A puff o' wind 'ud make 'em blow about like feathers,' Kezia the housemaid said, feeling proud to live under a mistress who could make such pastry; so that no season or circumstances could have been more propitious for a family party, even if it had not been advisable to consult sister Glegg and sister Pullet about Tom's going to school.

'I'd as lief not invite sister Deane this time,' said Mrs Tulliver, 'for she's as jealous and having as can be, and's allays trying to make the worst o' my poor children to their aunts and uncles.'

'Yes, yes,' said Mr Tulliver, 'ask her to come. I never hardly get a bit o' talk with Deane now; we haven't had him this six months. What's it matter what she says? My children need be beholding to nobody.'

'That's what you allays say, Mr Tulliver; but I'm sure there's nobody o' your side, neither aunt nor uncle, to leave 'em so much as a five-pound note for a leggicy. And there's sister Glegg, and sister Pullet too, saving money unknown, for they put by all their own interest and butter-money too; their husbands buy 'em everything.' Mrs Tulliver was a mild woman, but even a sheep will face about a little when she has lambs.

'Tchuh!' said Mr Tulliver. 'It takes a big loaf when there's many to breakfast. What signifies your sisters' bits o' money when they've got half-a-dozen nevvies and nieces to divide it among? And your sister Deane won't get 'em to leave all to one, I reckon, and make the country cry shame on 'em when they are dead?'

'I don't know what she won't get 'em to do,' said Mrs Tulliver, 'for my children are so awk'ard wi' their aunts and uncles. Maggie's ten times naughtier when they come than she is other days, and Tom doesn't like 'em, bless him! - though it's more nat'ral in a boy than a gell. And there's Lucy Dean's such a good child, - you may set her on a stool, and there she'll sit for an hour together, and never offer to get off. I can't help loving the child as if she was my own; and I'm sure she's more like *my* child than sister Deane's, for she'd allays a very poor color for one of our family, sister Deane had.'

'Well, well, if you're fond o' the child, ask her father and mother to bring her with 'em. And won't you ask their aunt and uncle Moss too, and some o' *their* children?'

'Oh, dear, Mr Tulliver, why, there'd be eight people besides the children, and I must put two more leaves i' the table, besides reaching

down more o' the dinner-service; and you know as well as I do as *my* sisters and *your* sister don't suit well together.'

'Well, well, do as you like, Bessy,' said Mr Tulliver, taking up his hat and walking out to the mill. Few wives were more submissive than Mrs Tulliver on all points unconnected with her family relations; but she had been a Miss Dodson, and the Dodsons were a very respectable family indeed, - as much looked up to as any in their own parish, or the next to it. The Miss Dodsons had always been thought to hold up their heads very high, and no one was surprised the two eldest had married so well, - not at an early age, for that was not the practice of the Dodson family. There were particular ways of doing everything in that family: particular ways of bleaching the linen, of making the cowslip wine, curing the hams, and keeping the bottled gooseberries; so that no daughter of that house could be indifferent to the privilege of having been born a Dodson, rather than a Gibson or a Watson. Funerals were always conducted with peculiar propriety in the Dodson family: the hat-bands were never of a blue shade, the gloves never split at the thumb, everybody was a mourner who ought to be, and there were always scarfs for the bearers. When one of the family was in trouble or sickness, all the rest went to visit the unfortunate member, usually at the same time, and did not shrink from uttering the most disagreeable truths that correct family feeling dictated; if the illness or trouble was the sufferer's own fault, it was not in the practice of the Dodson family to shrink from saying so. In short, there was in this family a peculiar tradition as to what was the right thing in household management and social demeanor, and the only bitter circumstance attending this superiority was a painful inability to approve the condiments or the conduct of families ungoverned by the Dodson tradition. A female Dodson, when in 'strange houses,' always ate dry bread with her tea, and declined any sort of preserves, having no confidence in the butter, and thinking that the preserves had probably begun to ferment from want of due sugar and boiling. There were some Dodsons less like the family than others, that was admitted; but in so far as they were 'kin,' they were of necessity better than those who were 'no kin.' And it is remarkable that while no individual Dodson was satisfied with any other individual Dodson, each was satisfied, not only with him or her self, but with the Dodsons collectively. The feeblest member of a family - the one who has the least character - is often the merest epitome of the family habits and traditions; and Mrs Tulliver was a thorough Dodson, though a mild one, as small-beer, so long as it is anything, is only describable as very weak ale: and though she had groaned a little in her youth under the yoke of her elder sisters, and still shed occasional tears at their sisterly reproaches, it was not in Mrs Tulliver to be an innovator on the family ideas. She was thankful to have been a Dodson, and to have one child who took after her own family, at

least in his features and complexion, in liking salt and in eating beans, which a Tulliver never did.

In other respects the true Dodson was partly latent in Tom, and he was as far from appreciating his 'kin' on the mother's side as Maggie herself, generally absconding for the day with a large supply of the most portable food, when he received timely warning that his aunts and uncles were coming, - a moral symptom from which his aunt Glegg deduced the gloomiest views of his future. It was rather hard on Maggie that Tom always absconded without letting her into the secret, but the weaker sex are acknowledged to be serious *impedimenta* in cases of flight.

On Wednesday, the day before the aunts and uncles were coming, there were such various and suggestive scents, as of plumcakes in the oven and jellies in the hot state, mingled with the aroma of gravy, that it was impossible to feel altogether gloomy: there was hope in the air. Tom and Maggie made several inroads into the kitchen, and, like other marauders, were induced to keep aloof for a time only by being allowed to carry away a sufficient load of booty.

'Tom,' said Maggie, as they sat on the boughs of the elder-tree, eating their jam-puffs, 'shall you run away to-morrow?'

'No,' said Tom, slowly, when he had finished his puff, and was eyeing the third, which was to be divided between them, - 'no, I sha'n't.'

'Why, Tom? Because Lucy's coming?'

'No,' said Tom, opening his pocket-knife and holding it over the puff, with his head on one side in a dubitative manner. (It was a difficult problem to divide that very irregular polygon into two equal parts.) 'What do *I* care about Lucy? She's only a girl, - *she* can't play at bandy.'

'Is it the tipsy-cake, then?' said Maggie, exerting her hypothetic powers, while she leaned forward toward Tom with her eyes fixed on the hovering knife.

'No, you silly, that'll be good the day after. It's the pudden. I know what the pudden's to be, - apricot roll-up - O my buttons!'

With this interjection, the knife descended on the puff, and it was in two, but the result was not satisfactory to Tom, for he still eyed the halves doubtfully. At last he said, -

'Shut your eyes, Maggie.'

'What for?'

'You never mind what for. Shut 'em when I tell you.'

Maggie obeyed.

'Now, which'll you have, Maggie, - right hand or left?'

'I'll have that with the jam run out,' said Maggie, keeping her eyes shut to please Tom.

'Why, you don't like that, you silly. You may have it if it comes to you fair, but I sha'n't give it you without. Right or left, - you choose, now. Ha-a-a!' said Tom, in a tone of exasperation, as Maggie peeped. 'You keep your eyes shut, now, else you sha'n't have any.'

Maggie's power of sacrifice did not extend so far; indeed, I fear she cared less that Tom should enjoy the utmost possible amount of puff, than that he should be pleased with her for giving him the best bit. So she shut her eyes quite close, till Tom told her to 'say which,' and then she said, 'Left hand.'

'You've got it,' said Tom, in rather a bitter tone.

'What! the bit with the jam run out?'

'No; here, take it,' said Tom, firmly, handing, decidedly the best piece to Maggie.

'Oh, please, Tom, have it; I don't mind - I like the other; please take this.'

'No, I sha'n't,' said Tom, almost crossly, beginning on his own inferior piece.

Maggie, thinking it was no use to contend further, began too, and ate up her half puff with considerable relish as well as rapidity. But Tom had finished first, and had to look on while Maggie ate her last morsel or two, feeling in himself a capacity for more. Maggie didn't know Tom was looking at her; she was seesawing on the elder-bough, lost to almost everything but a vague sense of jam and idleness.

'Oh, you greedy thing!' said Tom, when she had swallowed the last morsel. He was conscious of having acted very fairly, and thought she ought to have considered this, and made up to him for it. He would have refused a bit of hers beforehand, but one is naturally at a different point of view before and after one's own share of puff is swallowed.

Maggie turned quite pale. 'Oh, Tom, why didn't you ask me?'

'I wasn't going to ask you for a bit, you greedy. You might have thought of it without, when you knew I gave you the best bit.'

'But I wanted you to have it; you know I did,' said Maggie, in an injured tone.

'Yes, but I wasn't going to do what wasn't fair, like Spouncer. He always takes the best bit, if you don't punch him for it; and if you choose the best with your eyes shut, he changes his hands. But if I go halves, I'll go 'em fair; only I wouldn't be a greedy.'

With this cutting innuendo, Tom jumped down from his bough, and threw a stone with a 'hoigh!' as a friendly attention to Yap, who had also been looking on while the eatables vanished, with an agitation of his ears and feelings which could hardly have been without bitterness. Yet the excellent dog accepted Tom's attention with as much alacrity as if he had been treated quite generously.

But Maggie, gifted with that superior power of misery which distinguishes the human being, and places him at a proud distance from the most melancholy chimpanzee, sat still on her bough, and gave herself up to the keen sense of unmerited reproach. She would have given the world not to have eaten all her puff, and to have saved some of it for Tom. Not but that the puff was very nice, for Maggie's palate was not at all obtuse, but she would have gone without it many times over, sooner than Tom should call her greedy and be cross with her. And he had said he wouldn't have it, and she ate it without thinking; how could she help it? The tears flowed so plentifully that Maggie saw nothing around her for the next ten minutes; but by that time resentment began to give way to the desire of reconciliation, and she jumped from her bough to look for Tom. He was no longer in the paddock behind the rickyard; where was he likely to be gone, and Yap with him? Maggie ran to the high bank against the great holly-tree, where she could see far away toward the Floss. There was Tom; but her heart sank again as she saw how far off he was on his way to the great river, and that he had another companion besides Yap, - naughty Bob Jakin, whose official, if not natural, function of frightening the birds was just now at a standstill. Maggie felt sure that Bob was wicked, without very distinctly knowing why; unless it was because Bob's mother was a dreadfully large fat woman, who lived at a queer round house down the river; and once, when Maggie and Tom had wandered thither, there rushed out a brindled dog that wouldn't stop barking; and when Bob's mother came out after it, and screamed above the barking to tell them not to be frightened, Maggie thought she was scolding them fiercely, and her heart beat with terror. Maggie thought it very likely that the round house had snakes on the floor,

and bats in the bedroom; for she had seen Bob take off his cap to show Tom a little snake that was inside it, and another time he had a handful of young bats: altogether, he was an irregular character, perhaps even slightly diabolical, judging from his intimacy with snakes and bats; and to crown all, when Tom had Bob for a companion, he didn't mind about Maggie, and would never let her go with him.

It must be owned that Tom was fond of Bob's company. How could it be otherwise? Bob knew, directly he saw a bird's egg, whether it was a swallow's, or a tomtit's, or a yellow-hammer's; he found out all the wasps' nests, and could set all sort of traps; he could climb the trees like a squirrel, and had quite a magical power of detecting hedgehogs and stoats; and he had courage to do things that were rather naughty, such as making gaps in the hedgerows, throwing stones after the sheep, and killing a cat that was wandering *incognito*.

Such qualities in an inferior, who could always be treated with authority in spite of his superior knowingness, had necessarily a fatal fascination for Tom; and every holiday-time Maggie was sure to have days of grief because he had gone off with Bob.

Well! there was no hope for it; he was gone now, and Maggie could think of no comfort but to sit down by the hollow, or wander by the hedgerow, and fancy it was all different, refashioning her little world into just what she should like it to be.

Maggie's was a troublous life, and this was the form in which she took her opium.

Meanwhile Tom, forgetting all about Maggie and the sting of reproach which he had left in her heart, was hurrying along with Bob, whom he had met accidentally, to the scene of a great rat-catching in a neighboring barn. Bob knew all about this particular affair, and spoke of the sport with an enthusiasm which no one who is not either divested of all manly feeling, or pitiably ignorant of rat-catching, can fail to imagine. For a person suspected of preternatural wickedness, Bob was really not so very villanous-looking; there was even something agreeable in his snub-nosed face, with its close-curved border of red hair. But then his trousers were always rolled up at the knee, for the convenience of wading on the slightest notice; and his virtue, supposing it to exist, was undeniably 'virtue in rags,' which, on the authority even of bilious philosophers, who think all well-dressed merit overpaid, is notoriously likely to remain unrecognized (perhaps because it is seen so seldom).

'I know the chap as owns the ferrets,' said Bob, in a hoarse treble voice, as he shuffled along, keeping his blue eyes fixed on the river,

like an amphibious animal who foresaw occasion for darting in. 'He lives up the Kennel Yard at Sut Ogg's, he does. He's the biggest rot-catcher anywhere, he is. I'd sooner, be a rot-catcher nor anything, I would. The moles is nothing to the rots. But Lors! you mun ha' ferrets. Dogs is no good. Why, there's that dog, now!' Bob continued, pointing with an air of disgust toward Yap, 'he's no more good wi' a rot nor nothin'. I see it myself, I did, at the rot-catchin' i' your feyther's barn.'

Yap, feeling the withering influence of this scorn, tucked his tail in and shrank close to Tom's leg, who felt a little hurt for him, but had not the superhuman courage to seem behindhand with Bob in contempt for a dog who made so poor a figure.

'No, no,' he said, 'Yap's no good at sport. I'll have regular good dogs for rats and everything, when I've done school.'

'Hev ferrets, Measter Tom,' said Bob, eagerly, - 'them white ferrets wi' pink eyes; Lors, you might catch your own rots, an' you might put a rot in a cage wi' a ferret, an' see 'em fight, you might. That's what I'd do, I know, an' it 'ud be better fun a'most nor seein' two chaps fight, - if it wasn't them chaps as sold cakes an' oranges at the Fair, as the things flew out o' their baskets, an' some o' the cakes was smashed - But they tasted just as good,' added Bob, by way of note or addendum, after a moment's pause.

'But, I say, Bob,' said Tom, in a tone of deliberation, 'ferrets are nasty biting things, - they'll bite a fellow without being set on.'

'Lors! why that's the beauty on 'em. If a chap lays hold o' your ferret, he won't be long before he hollows out a good un, *he* won't.'

At this moment a striking incident made the boys pause suddenly in their walk. It was the plunging of some small body in the water from among the neighboring bulrushes; if it was not a water-rat, Bob intimated that he was ready to undergo the most unpleasant consequences.

'Hoigh! Yap, - hoigh! there he is,' said Tom, clapping his hands, as the little black snout made its arrowy course to the opposite bank. 'Seize him, lad! seize him!'

Yap agitated his ears and wrinkled his brows, but declined to plunge, trying whether barking would not answer the purpose just as well.

'Ugh! you coward!' said Tom, and kicked him over, feeling humiliated as a sportsman to possess so poor-spirited an animal. Bob abstained from remark and passed on, choosing, however, to walk in the shallow edge of the overflowing river by way of change.

'He's none so full now, the Floss isn't,' said Bob, as he kicked the water up before him, with an agreeable sense of being insolent to it. 'Why, last 'ear, the meadows was all one sheet o' water, they was.'

'Ay, but,' said Tom, whose mind was prone to see an opposition between statements that were really accordant, - 'but there was a big flood once, when the Round Pool was made. *I* know there was, 'cause father says so. And the sheep and cows all drowned, and the boats went all over the fields ever such a way.'

'*I* don't care about a flood comin',' said Bob; '*I* don't mind the water, no more nor the land. *I*'d swim, *I* would.'

'Ah, but if you got nothing to eat for ever so long?' said Tom, his imagination becoming quite active under the stimulus of that dread. 'When I'm a man, I shall make a boat with a wooden house on the top of it, like Noah's ark, and keep plenty to eat in it, - rabbits and things, - all ready. And then if the flood came, you know, Bob, I shouldn't mind. And I'd take you in, if I saw you swimming,' he added, in the tone of a benevolent patron.

'*I* aren't frightened,' said Bob, to whom hunger did not appear so appalling. 'But I'd get in an' knock the rabbits on th' head when you wanted to eat 'em.'

'Ah, and I should have halfpence, and we'd play at heads-and-tails,' said Tom, not contemplating the possibility that this recreation might have fewer charms for his mature age. '*I*'d divide fair to begin with, and then we'd see who'd win.'

'*I*'ve got a halfpenny o' my own,' said Bob, proudly, coming out of the water and tossing his halfpenny in the air. 'Yeads or tails?'

'Tails,' said Tom, instantly fired with the desire to win.

'It's yeads,' said Bob, hastily, snatching up the halfpenny as it fell.

'It wasn't,' said Tom, loudly and peremptorily. 'You give me the halfpenny; I've won it fair.'

'*I* sha'n't,' said Bob, holding it tight in his pocket.

'Then I'll make you; see if I don't,' said Tom.

'Yes, I can.'

'You can't make me do nothing, you can't,' said Bob.

'No, you can't.'

'I'm master.'

'I don't care for you.'

'But I'll make you care, you cheat,' said Tom, collaring Bob and shaking him.

'You get out wi' you,' said Bob, giving Tom a kick.

Tom's blood was thoroughly up: he went at Bob with a lunge and threw him down, but Bob seized hold and kept it like a cat, and pulled Tom down after him. They struggled fiercely on the ground for a moment or two, till Tom, pinning Bob down by the shoulders, thought he had the mastery.

'*You*, say you'll give me the halfpenny now,' he said, with difficulty, while he exerted himself to keep the command of Bob's arms.

But at this moment Yap, who had been running on before, returned barking to the scene of action, and saw a favorable opportunity for biting Bob's bare leg not only with impunity but with honor. The pain from Yap's teeth, instead of surprising Bob into a relaxation of his hold, gave it a fiercer tenacity, and with a new exertion of his force he pushed Tom backward and got uppermost. But now Yap, who could get no sufficient purchase before, set his teeth in a new place, so that Bob, harassed in this way, let go his hold of Tom, and, almost throttling Yap, flung him into the river. By this time Tom was up again, and before Bob had quite recovered his balance after the act of swinging Yap, Tom fell upon him, threw him down, and got his knees firmly on Bob's chest.

'You give me the halfpenny now,' said Tom.

'Take it,' said Bob, sulkily.

'No, I sha'n't take it; you give it me.'

Bob took the halfpenny out of his pocket, and threw it away from him on the ground.

Tom loosed his hold, and left Bob to rise.

'There the halfpenny lies,' he said. 'I don't want your halfpenny; I wouldn't have kept it. But you wanted to cheat; I hate a cheat. I sha'n't go along with you any more,' he added, turning round

homeward, not without casting a regret toward the rat-catching and other pleasures which he must relinquish along with Bob's society.

'You may let it alone, then,' Bob called out after him. 'I shall cheat if I like; there's no fun i' playing else; and I know where there's a goldfinch's nest, but I'll take care *you* don't. An' you're a nasty fightin' turkey-cock, you are - - '

Tom walked on without looking around, and Yap followed his example, the cold bath having moderated his passions.

'Go along wi' you, then, wi' your drowned dog; I wouldn't own such a dog - *I* wouldn't,' said Bob, getting louder, in a last effort to sustain his defiance. But Tom was not to be provoked into turning round, and Bob's voice began to falter a little as he said, -

'An' I'n gi'en you everything, an' showed you everything, an' niver wanted nothin' from you. An' there's your horn-handed knife, then as you gi'en me.' Here Bob flung the knife as far as he could after Tom's retreating footsteps. But it produced no effect, except the sense in Bob's mind that there was a terrible void in his lot, now that knife was gone.

He stood still till Tom had passed through the gate and disappeared behind the hedge. The knife would do not good on the ground there; it wouldn't vex Tom; and pride or resentment was a feeble passion in Bob's mind compared with the love of a pocket-knife. His very fingers sent entreating thrills that he would go and clutch that familiar rough buck's-horn handle, which they had so often grasped for mere affection, as it lay idle in his pocket. And there were two blades, and they had just been sharpened! What is life without a pocket-knife to him who has once tasted a higher existence? No; to throw the handle after the hatchet is a comprehensible act of desperation, but to throw one's pocket-knife after an implacable friend is clearly in every sense a hyperbole, or throwing beyond the mark. So Bob shuffled back to the spot where the beloved knife lay in the dirt, and felt quite a new pleasure in clutching it again after the temporary separation, in opening one blade after the other, and feeling their edge with his well-hardened thumb. Poor Bob! he was not sensitive on the point of honor, not a chivalrous character. That fine moral aroma would not have been thought much of by the public opinion of Kennel Yard, which was the very focus or heart of Bob's world, even if it could have made itself perceptible there; yet, for all that, he was not utterly a sneak and a thief as our friend Tom had hastily decided.

But Tom, you perceive, was rather a Rhadamanthine personage, having more than the usual share of boy's justice in him, - the justice that desires to hurt culprits as much as they deserve to be hurt, and

is troubled with no doubts concerning the exact amount of their deserts. Maggie saw a cloud on his brow when he came home, which checked her joy at his coming so much sooner than she had expected, and she dared hardly speak to him as he stood silently throwing the small gravel-stones into the mill-dam. It is not pleasant to give up a rat-catching when you have set your mind on it. But if Tom had told his strongest feeling at that moment, he would have said, 'I'd do just the same again.' That was his usual mode of viewing his past actions; whereas Maggie was always wishing she had done something different.