

Chapter II - The Christmas Holidays

Fine old Christmas, with the snowy hair and ruddy face, had done his duty that year in the noblest fashion, and had set off his rich gifts of warmth and color with all the heightening contrast of frost and snow.

Snow lay on the croft and river-bank in undulations softer than the limbs of infancy; it lay with the neatliest finished border on every sloping roof, making the dark-red gables stand out with a new depth of color; it weighed heavily on the laurels and fir-trees, till it fell from them with a shuddering sound; it clothed the rough turnip-field with whiteness, and made the sheep look like dark blotches; the gates were all blocked up with the sloping drifts, and here and there a disregarded four-footed beast stood as if petrified 'in unrecumbent sadness'; there was no gleam, no shadow, for the heavens, too, were one still, pale cloud; no sound or motion in anything but the dark river that flowed and moaned like an unresting sorrow. But old Christmas smiled as he laid this cruel-seeming spell on the outdoor world, for he meant to light up home with new brightness, to deepen all the richness of indoor color, and give a keener edge of delight to the warm fragrance of food; he meant to prepare a sweet imprisonment that would strengthen the primitive fellowship of kindred, and make the sunshine of familiar human faces as welcome as the hidden day-star. His kindness fell but hardly on the homeless, - fell but hardly on the homes where the hearth was not very warm, and where the food had little fragrance; where the human faces had had no sunshine in them, but rather the leaden, blank-eyed gaze of unexpectant want. But the fine old season meant well; and if he has not learned the secret how to bless men impartially, it is because his father Time, with ever-unrelenting unrelenting purpose, still hides that secret in his own mighty, slow-beating heart.

And yet this Christmas day, in spite of Tom's fresh delight in home, was not, he thought, somehow or other, quite so happy as it had always been before. The red berries were just as abundant on the holly, and he and Maggie had dressed all the windows and mantelpieces and picture-frames on Christmas eve with as much taste as ever, wedding the thick-set scarlet clusters with branches of the black-berried ivy. There had been singing under the windows after midnight, - supernatural singing, Maggie always felt, in spite of Tom's contemptuous insistence that the singers were old Patch, the parish clerk, and the rest of the church choir; she trembled with awe when their carolling broke in upon her dreams, and the image of men in fustian clothes was always thrust away by the vision of angels resting on the parted cloud. The midnight chant had helped as usual to lift the morning above the level of common days; and then there were the smell of hot toast and ale from the kitchen, at the breakfast hour; the favorite anthem, the green boughs, and the short sermon gave the

appropriate festal character to the church-going; and aunt and uncle Moss, with all their seven children, were looking like so many reflectors of the bright parlor-fire, when the church-goers came back, stamping the snow from their feet. The plum-pudding was of the same handsome roundness as ever, and came in with the symbolic blue flames around it, as if it had been heroically snatched from the nether fires, into which it had been thrown by dyspeptic Puritans; the dessert was as splendid as ever, with its golden oranges, brown nuts, and the crystalline light and dark of apple-jelly and damson cheese; in all these things Christmas was as it had always been since Tom could remember; it was only distinguished, it by anything, by superior sliding and snowballs.

Christmas was cheery, but not so Mr Tulliver. He was irate and defiant; and Tom, though he espoused his father's quarrels and shared his father's sense of injury, was not without some of the feeling that oppressed Maggie when Mr Tulliver got louder and more angry in narration and assertion with the increased leisure of dessert. The attention that Tom might have concentrated on his nuts and wine was distracted by a sense that there were rascally enemies in the world, and that the business of grown-up life could hardly be conducted without a good deal of quarrelling. Now, Tom was not fond of quarrelling, unless it could soon be put an end to by a fair stand-up fight with an adversary whom he had every chance of thrashing; and his father's irritable talk made him uncomfortable, though he never accounted to himself for the feeling, or conceived the notion that his father was faulty in this respect.

The particular embodiment of the evil principle now exciting Mr Tulliver's determined resistance was Mr Pivart, who, having lands higher up the Ripple, was taking measures for their irrigation, which either were, or would be, or were bound to be (on the principle that water was water), an infringement on Mr Tulliver's legitimate share of water-power. Dix, who had a mill on the stream, was a feeble auxiliary of Old Harry compared with Pivart. Dix had been brought to his senses by arbitration, and Wakem's advice had not carried *him* far. No; Dix, Mr Tulliver considered, had been as good as nowhere in point of law; and in the intensity of his indignation against Pivart, his contempt for a baffled adversary like Dix began to wear the air of a friendly attachment. He had no male audience to-day except Mr Moss, who knew nothing, as he said, of the 'natur' o' mills,' and could only assent to Mr Tulliver's arguments on the *a priori* ground of family relationship and monetary obligation; but Mr Tulliver did not talk with the futile intention of convincing his audience, he talked to relieve himself; while good Mr Moss made strong efforts to keep his eyes wide open, in spite of the sleepiness which an unusually good dinner produced in his hard-worked frame. Mrs Moss, more alive to the subject, and interested in everything that affected her brother,

listened and put in a word as often as maternal preoccupations allowed.

'Why, Pivart's a new name hereabout, brother, isn't it?' she said; 'he didn't own the land in father's time, nor yours either, before I was married.'

'New name? Yes, I should think it *is* a new name,' said Mr Tulliver, with angry emphasis. 'Dorlcote Mill's been in our family a hundred year and better, and nobody ever heard of a Pivart meddling with the river, till this fellow came and bought Bincome's farm out of hand, before anybody else could so much as say 'snap.' But I'll *Pivart* him!' added Mr Tulliver, lifting his glass with a sense that he had defined his resolution in an unmistakable manner.

'You won't be forced to go to law with him, I hope, brother?' said Mrs Moss, with some anxiety.

I don't know what I shall be forced to; but I know what I shall force *him* to, with his dikes and erigations, if there's any law to be brought to bear o' the right side. I know well enough who's at the bottom of it; he's got Wakem to back him and egg him on. I know Wakem tells him the law can't touch him for it, but there's folks can handle the law besides Wakem. It takes a big raskil to beat him; but there's bigger to be found, as know more o' th' ins and outs o' the law, else how came Wakem to lose Brumley's suit for him?'

Mr Tulliver was a strictly honest man, and proud of being honest, but he considered that in law the ends of justice could only be achieved by employing a stronger knave to frustrate a weaker. Law was a sort of cock-fight, in which it was the business of injured honesty to get a game bird with the best pluck and the strongest spurs.

'Gore's no fool; you needn't tell me that,' he observed presently, in a pugnacious tone, as if poor Gritty had been urging that lawyer's capabilities; 'but, you see, he isn't up to the law as Wakem is. And water's a very particular thing; you can't pick it up with a pitchfork. That's why it's been nuts to Old Harry and the lawyers. It's plain enough what's the rights and the wrongs of water, if you look at it straight-forrard; for a river's a river, and if you've got a mill, you must have water to turn it; and it's no use telling me Pivart's erigation and nonsense won't stop my wheel; I know what belongs to water better than that. Talk to me o' what th' engineers say! I say it's common sense, as Pivart's dikes must do me an injury. But if that's their engineering, I'll put Tom to it by-and-by, and he shall see if he can't find a bit more sense in th' engineering business than what *that* comes to.'

Tom, looking round with some anxiety at this announcement of his prospects, unthinkingly withdrew a small rattle he was amusing baby Moss with, whereupon she, being a baby that knew her own mind with remarkable clearness, instantaneously expressed her sentiments in a piercing yell, and was not to be appeased even by the restoration of the rattle, feeling apparently that the original wrong of having it taken from her remained in all its force. Mrs Moss hurried away with her into another room, and expressed to Mrs Tulliver, who accompanied her, the conviction that the dear child had good reasons for crying; implying that if it was supposed to be the rattle that baby clamored for, she was a misunderstood baby. The thoroughly justifiable yell being quieted, Mrs Moss looked at her sister-in-law and said, -

'I'm sorry to see brother so put out about this water work.'

'It's your brother's way, Mrs Moss; I'd never anything o' that sort before I was married,' said Mrs Tulliver, with a half-implied reproach. She always spoke of her husband as 'your brother' to Mrs Moss in any case when his line of conduct was not matter of pure admiration. Amiable Mrs Tulliver, who was never angry in her life, had yet her mild share of that spirit without which she could hardly have been at once a Dodson and a woman. Being always on the defensive toward her own sisters, it was natural that she should be keenly conscious of her superiority, even as the weakest Dodson, over a husband's sister, who, besides being poorly off, and inclined to 'hang on' her brother, had the good-natured submissiveness of a large, easy-tempered, untidy, prolific woman, with affection enough in her not only for her own husband and abundant children, but for any number of collateral relations.

'I hope and pray he won't go to law,' said Mrs Moss, 'for there's never any knowing where that'll end. And the right doesn't allays win. This Mr Pivart's a rich man, by what I can make out, and the rich mostly get things their own way.'

'As to that,' said Mrs Tulliver, stroking her dress down, 'I've seen what riches are in my own family; for my sisters have got husbands as can afford to do pretty much what they like. But I think sometimes I shall be drove off my head with the talk about this law and erigation; and my sisters lay all the fault to me, for they don't know what it is to marry a man like your brother; how should they? Sister Pullet has her own way from morning till night.'

'Well,' said Mrs Moss, 'I don't think I should like my husband if he hadn't got any wits of his own, and I had to find head-piece for him. It's a deal easier to do what pleases one's husband, than to be puzzling what else one should do.'

'If people come to talk o' doing what pleases their husbands,' said Mrs Tulliver, with a faint imitation of her sister Glegg, 'I'm sure your brother might have waited a long while before he'd have found a wife that 'ud have let him have his say in everything, as I do. It's nothing but law and erigation now, from when we first get up in the morning till we go to bed at night; and I never contradict him; I only say, 'Well, Mr Tulliver, do as you like; but whatever you do, don't go to law.'

Mrs Tulliver, as we have seen, was not without influence over her husband. No woman is; she can always incline him to do either what she wishes, or the reverse; and on the composite impulses that were threatening to hurry Mr Tulliver into 'law,' Mrs Tulliver's monotonous pleading had doubtless its share of force; it might even be comparable to that proverbial feather which has the credit or discredit of breaking the camel's back; though, on a strictly impartial view, the blame ought rather to lie with the previous weight of feathers which had already placed the back in such imminent peril that an otherwise innocent feather could not settle on it without mischief. Not that Mrs Tulliver's feeble beseeching could have had this feather's weight in virtue of her single personality; but whenever she departed from entire assent to her husband, he saw in her the representative of the Dodson family; and it was a guiding principle with Mr Tulliver to let the Dodsons know that they were not to domineer over *him*, or - more specifically - that a male Tulliver was far more than equal to four female Dodsons, even though one of them was Mrs Glegg.

But not even a direct argument from that typical Dodson female herself against his going to law could have heightened his disposition toward it so much as the mere thought of Wakem, continually freshened by the sight of the too able attorney on market-days. Wakem, to his certain knowledge, was (metaphorically speaking) at the bottom of Pivart's irrigation; Wakem had tried to make Dix stand out, and go to law about the dam; it was unquestionably Wakem who had caused Mr Tulliver to lose the suit about the right of road and the bridge that made a thoroughfare of his land for every vagabond who preferred an opportunity of damaging private property to walking like an honest man along the highroad; all lawyers were more or less rascals, but Wakem's rascality was of that peculiarly aggravated kind which placed itself in opposition to that form of right embodied in Mr Tulliver's interests and opinions. And as an extra touch of bitterness, the injured miller had recently, in borrowing the five hundred pounds, been obliged to carry a little business to Wakem's office on his own account. A hook-nosed glib fellow! as cool as a cucumber, - always looking so sure of his game! And it was vexatious that Lawyer Gore was not more like him, but was a bald, round-featured man, with bland manners and fat hands; a game-cock that you would be rash to bet upon against Wakem. Gore was a sly fellow. His weakness did not lie on the side of scrupulosity; but the largest amount of winking,

however significant, is not equivalent to seeing through a stone wall; and confident as Mr Tulliver was in his principle that water was water, and in the direct inference that Pivart had not a leg to stand on in this affair of irrigation, he had an uncomfortable suspicion that Wakem had more law to show against this (rationally) irrefragable inference than Gore could show for it. But then, if they went to law, there was a chance for Mr Tulliver to employ Counsellor Wylde on his side, instead of having that admirable bully against him; and the prospect of seeing a witness of Wakem's made to perspire and become confounded, as Mr Tulliver's witness had once been, was alluring to the love of retributive justice.

Much rumination had Mr Tulliver on these puzzling subjects during his rides on the gray horse; much turning of the head from side to side, as the scales dipped alternately; but the probable result was still out of sight, only to be reached through much hot argument and iteration in domestic and social life. That initial stage of the dispute which consisted in the narration of the case and the enforcement of Mr Tulliver's views concerning it throughout the entire circle of his connections would necessarily take time; and at the beginning of February, when Tom was going to school again, there were scarcely any new items to be detected in his father's statement of the case against Pivart, or any more specific indication of the measures he was bent on taking against that rash contravener of the principle that water was water. Iteration, like friction, is likely to generate heat instead of progress, and Mr Tulliver's heat was certainly more and more palpable. If there had been no new evidence on any other point, there had been new evidence that Pivart was as 'thick as mud' with Wakem.

'Father,' said Tom, one evening near the end of the holidays, 'uncle Glegg says Lawyer Wakem is going to send his son to Mr Stelling. It isn't true, what they said about his going to be sent to France. You won't like me to go to school with Wakem's son, shall you?'

'It's no matter for that, my boy,' said Mr Tulliver; 'don't you learn anything bad of him, that's all. The lad's a poor deformed creatur, and takes after his mother in the face; I think there isn't much of his father in him. It's a sign Wakem thinks high o' Mr Sterling, as he sends his son to him, and Wakem knows meal from bran.'

Mr Tulliver in his heart was rather proud of the fact that his son was to have the same advantages as Wakem's; but Tom was not at all easy on the point. It would have been much clearer if the lawyer's son had not been deformed, for then Tom would have had the prospect of pitching into him with all that freedom which is derived from a high moral sanction.