

Chapter VI - A Love-Scene

Poor Tom bore his severe pain heroically, and was resolute in not 'telling' of Mr Poulter more than was unavoidable; the five-shilling piece remained a secret even to Maggie. But there was a terrible dread weighing on his mind, so terrible that he dared not even ask the question which might bring the fatal 'yes'; he dared not ask the surgeon or Mr Stelling, 'Shall I be lame, Sir?' He mastered himself so as not to cry out at the pain; but when his foot had been dressed, and he was left alone with Maggie seated by his bedside, the children sobbed together, with their heads laid on the same pillow. Tom was thinking of himself walking about on crutches, like the wheelwright's son; and Maggie, who did not guess what was in his mind, sobbed for company. It had not occurred to the surgeon or to Mr Stelling to anticipate this dread in Tom's mind, and to reassure him by hopeful words. But Philip watched the surgeon out of the house, and waylaid Mr Stelling to ask the very question that Tom had not dared to ask for himself.

'I beg your pardon, sir, - but does Mr Askern say Tulliver will be lame?'

'Oh, no; oh, no,' said Mr Stelling, 'not permanently; only for a little while.'

'Did he tell Tulliver so, sir, do you think?'

'No; nothing was said to him on the subject.'

'Then may I go and tell him, sir?'

'Yes, to be sure; now you mention it, I dare say he may be troubling about that. Go to his bedroom, but be very quiet at present.'

It had been Philip's first thought when he heard of the accident, - 'Will Tulliver be lame? It will be very hard for him if he is'; and Tom's hitherto unforgiven offences were washed out by that pity. Philip felt that they were no longer in a state of repulsion, but were being drawn into a common current of suffering and sad privation. His imagination did not dwell on the outward calamity and its future effect on Tom's life, but it made vividly present to him the probable state of Tom's feeling. Philip had only lived fourteen years, but those years had, most of them, been steeped in the sense of a lot irremediably hard.

'Mr Askern says you'll soon be all right again, Tulliver, did you know?' he said rather timidly, as he stepped gently up to Tom's bed. 'I've just been to ask Mr Stelling, and he says you'll walk as well as ever again by-and-day.'

Tom looked up with that momentary stopping of the breath which comes with a sudden joy; then he gave a long sigh, and turned his blue-gray eyes straight on Philip's face, as he had not done for a fortnight or more. As for Maggie, this intimation of a possibility she had not thought of before affected her as a new trouble; the bare idea of Tom's being always lame overpowered the assurance that such a misfortune was not likely to befall him, and she clung to him and cried afresh.

'Don't be a little silly, Magsie,' said Tom, tenderly, feeling very brave now. 'I shall soon get well.'

'Good-by, Tulliver,' said Philip, putting out his small, delicate hand, which Tom clasped immediately with his more substantial fingers.

'I say,' said Tom, 'ask Mr Stelling to let you come and sit with me sometimes, till I get up again, Wakem; and tell me about Robert Bruce, you know.'

After that, Philip spent all his time out of school-hours with Tom and Maggie. Tom liked to hear fighting stories as much as ever, but he insisted strongly on the fact that those great fighters who did so many wonderful things and came off unhurt, wore excellent armor from head to foot, which made fighting easy work, he considered. He should not have hurt his foot if he had had an iron shoe on. He listened with great interest to a new story of Philip's about a man who had a very bad wound in his foot, and cried out so dreadfully with the pain that his friends could bear with him no longer, but put him ashore on a desert island, with nothing but some wonderful poisoned arrows to kill animals with for food.

'I didn't roar out a bit, you know,' Tom said, 'and I dare say my foot was as bad as his. It's cowardly to roar.'

But Maggie would have it that when anything hurt you very much, it was quite permissible to cry out, and it was cruel of people not to bear it. She wanted to know if Philoctetes had a sister, and why *she* didn't go with him on the desert island and take care of him.

One day, soon after Philip had told this story, he and Maggie were in the study alone together while Tom's foot was being dressed. Philip was at his books, and Maggie, after sauntering idly round the room, not caring to do anything in particular, because she would soon go to Tom again, went and leaned on the table near Philip to see what he was doing, for they were quite old friends now, and perfectly at home with each other.

'What are you reading about in Greek?' she said. 'It's poetry, I can see that, because the lines are so short.'

'It's about Philoctetes, the lame man I was telling you of yesterday,' he answered, resting his head on his hand, and looking at her as if he were not at all sorry to be interrupted. Maggie, in her absent way, continued to lean forward, resting on her arms and moving her feet about, while her dark eyes got more and more fixed and vacant, as if she had quite forgotten Philip and his book.

'Maggie,' said Philip, after a minute or two, still leaning on his elbow and looking at her, 'if you had had a brother like me, do you think you should have loved him as well as Tom?'

Maggie started a little on being roused from her reverie, and said, 'What?' Philip repeated his question.

'Oh, yes, better,' she answered immediately. 'No, not better; because I don't think I *could* love you better than Tom. But I should be so sorry, - *so sorry* for you.'

Philip colored; he had meant to imply, would she love him as well in spite of his deformity, and yet when she alluded to it so plainly, he winced under her pity. Maggie, young as she was, felt her mistake. Hitherto she had instinctively behaved as if she were quite unconscious of Philip's deformity; her own keen sensitiveness and experience under family criticism sufficed to teach her this as well as if she had been directed by the most finished breeding.

'But you are so very clever, Philip, and you can play and sing,' she added quickly. 'I wish you *were* my brother. I'm very fond of you. And you would stay at home with me when Tom went out, and you would teach me everything; wouldn't you, - Greek and everything?'

'But you'll go away soon, and go to school, Maggie,' said Philip, 'and then you'll forget all about me, and not care for me any more. And then I shall see you when you're grown up, and you'll hardly take any notice of me.'

'Oh, no, I sha'n't forget you, I'm sure,' said Maggie, shaking her head very seriously. 'I never forget anything, and I think about everybody when I'm away from them. I think about poor Yap; he's got a lump in his throat, and Luke says he'll die. Only don't you tell Tom. because it will vex him so. You never saw Yap; he's a queer little dog, - nobody cares about him but Tom and me.'

'Do you care as much about me as you do about Yap, Maggie?' said Philip, smiling rather sadly.

'Oh, yes, I should think so,' said Maggie, laughing.

'I'm very fond of *you*, Maggie; I shall never forget *you*,' said Philip, 'and when I'm very unhappy, I shall always think of you, and wish I had a sister with dark eyes, just like yours.'

'Why do you like my eyes?' said Maggie, well pleased. She had never heard any one but her father speak of her eyes as if they had merit.

'I don't know,' said Philip. 'They're not like any other eyes. They seem trying to speak, - trying to speak kindly. I don't like other people to look at me much, but I like you to look at me, Maggie.'

'Why, I think you're fonder of me than Tom is,' said Maggie, rather sorrowfully. Then, wondering how she could convince Philip that she could like him just as well, although he was crooked, she said:

'Should you like me to kiss you, as I do Tom? I will, if you like.'

'Yes, very much; nobody kisses me.'

Maggie put her arm round his neck and kissed him quite earnestly.

'There now,' she said, 'I shall always remember you, and kiss you when I see you again, if it's ever so long. But I'll go now, because I think Mr Askern's done with Tom's foot.'

When their father came the second time, Maggie said to him, 'Oh, father, Philip Wakem is so very good to Tom; he is such a clever boy, and I *do* love him. And you love him too, Tom, don't you? *Say* you love him,' she added entreatingly.

Tom colored a little as he looked at his father, and said: 'I sha'n't be friends with him when I leave school, father; but we've made it up now, since my foot has been bad, and he's taught me to play at draughts, and I can beat him.'

'Well, well,' said Mr Tulliver, 'if he's good to you, try and make him amends, and be good to *him*. He's a poor crooked creature, and takes after his dead mother. But don't you be getting too thick with him; he's got his father's blood in him too. Ay, ay, the gray colt may chance to kick like his black sire.'

The jarring natures of the two boys effected what Mr Tulliver's admonition alone might have failed to effect; in spite of Philip's new kindness, and Tom's answering regard in this time of his trouble, they never became close friends. When Maggie was gone, and when Tom by-and-by began to walk about as usual, the friendly warmth that had

been kindled by pity and gratitude died out by degrees, and left them in their old relation to each other. Philip was often peevish and contemptuous; and Tom's more specific and kindly impressions gradually melted into the old background of suspicion and dislike toward him as a queer fellow, a humpback, and the son of a rogue. If boys and men are to be welded together in the glow of transient feeling, they must be made of metal that will mix, else they inevitably fall asunder when the heat dies out.