Chapter V - The Cloven Tree

Secrets are rarely betrayed or discovered according to any programme our fear has sketched out. Fear is almost always haunted by terrible dramatic scenes, which recur in spite of the best-argued probabilities against them; and during a year that Maggie had had the burthen of concealment on her mind, the possibility of discovery had continually presented itself under the form of a sudden meeting with her father or Tom when she was walking with Philip in the Red Deeps. She was aware that this was not one of the most likely events; but it was the scene that most completely symbolized her inward dread. Those slight indirect suggestions which are dependent on apparently trivial coincidences and incalculable states of mind, are the favorite machinery of Fact, but are not the stuff in which Imagination is apt to work.

Certainly one of the persons about whom Maggie's fears were furthest from troubling themselves was her aunt Pullet, on whom, seeing that she did not live in St. Ogg's, and was neither sharp-eyed nor sharp-tempered, it would surely have been quite whimsical of them to fix rather than on aunt Glegg. And yet the channel of fatality - the pathway of the lightning - was no other than aunt Pullet. She did not live at St. Ogg's, but the road from Garum Firs lay by the Red Deeps, at the end opposite that by which Maggie entered.

The day after Maggie's last meeting with Philip, being a Sunday on which Mr Pullet was bound to appear in funeral hatband and scarf at St. Ogg's church, Mrs Pullet made this the occasion of dining with sister Glegg, and taking tea with poor sister Tulliver. Sunday was the one day in the week on which Tom was at home in the afternoon; and today the brighter spirits he had been in of late had flowed over in unusually cheerful open chat with his father, and in the invitation, 'Come, Magsie, you come too!' when he strolled out with his mother in the garden to see the advancing cherry-blossoms. He had been better pleased with Maggie since she had been less odd and ascetic; he was even getting rather proud of her; several persons had remarked in his hearing that his sister was a very fine girl. To-day there was a peculiar brightness in her face, due in reality to an undercurrent of excitement, which had as much doubt and pain as pleasure in it; but it might pass for a sign of happiness.

'You look very well, my dear,' said aunt Pullet, shaking her head sadly, as they sat round the tea-table. 'I niver thought your girl 'ud be so good-looking, Bessy. But you must wear pink, my dear; that blue thing as your aunt Glegg gave you turns you into a crowflower. Jane never *was* tasty. Why don't you wear that gown o' mine?'

'It is so pretty and so smart, aunt. I think it's too showy for me, - at least for my other clothes, that I must wear with it.

'To be sure, it 'ud be unbecoming if it wasn't well known you've got them belonging to you as can afford to give you such things when they've done with 'em themselves. It stands to reason I must give my own niece clothes now and then, - such things as *I* buy every year, and never wear anything out. And as for Lucy, there's no giving to her, for she's got everything o' the choicest; sister Deane may well hold her head up, - though she looks dreadful yallow, poor thing - I doubt this liver complaint 'ull carry her off. That's what this new vicar, this Dr. Kenn, said in the funeral sermon to-day.'

'Ah, he's a wonderful preacher, by all account, - isn't he, Sophy?' said Mrs Tulliver.

'Why, Lucy had got a collar on this blessed day,' continued Mrs Pullet, with her eyes fixed in a ruminating manner, 'as I don't say I haven't got as good, but I must look out my best to match it.'

'Miss Lucy's called the bell o' St. Ogg's, they say; that's a cur'ous word,' observed Mr Pullet, on whom the mysteries of etymology sometimes fell with an oppressive weight.

'Pooh!' said Mr Tulliver, jealous for Maggie, 'she's a small thing, not much of a figure. But fine feathers make fine birds. I see nothing to admire so much in those diminutive women; they look silly by the side o' the men, - out o' proportion. When I chose my wife, I chose her the right size, - neither too little nor too big.'

The poor wife, with her withered beauty, smiled complacently.

'But the men aren't *all* big,' said uncle Pullet, not without some self-reference; 'a young fellow may be good-looking and yet not be a six-foot, like Master Tom here.

'Ah, it's poor talking about littleness and bigness, - anybody may think it's a mercy they're straight,' said aunt Pullet. 'There's that mismade son o' Lawyer Wakem's, I saw him at church to-day. Dear, dear! to think o' the property he's like to have; and they say he's very queer and lonely, doesn't like much company. I shouldn't wonder if he goes out of his mind; for we never come along the road but he's a-scrambling out o' the trees and brambles at the Red Deeps.'

This wide statement, by which Mrs Pullet represented the fact that she had twice seen Philip at the spot indicated, produced an effect on Maggie which was all the stronger because Tom sate opposite her, and she was intensely anxious to look indifferent. At Philip's name she had

blushed, and the blush deepened every instant from consciousness, until the mention of the Red Deeps made her feel as if the whole secret were betrayed, and she dared not even hold her tea-spoon lest she should show how she trembled. She sat with her hands clasped under the table, not daring to look round. Happily, her father was seated on the same side with herself, beyond her uncle Pullet, and could not see her face without stooping forward. Her mother's voice brought the first relief, turning the conversation; for Mrs Tulliver was always alarmed when the name of Wakem was mentioned in her husband's presence. Gradually Maggie recovered composure enough to look up; her eyes met Tom's, but he turned away his head immediately; and she went to bed that night wondering if he had gathered any suspicion from her confusion. Perhaps not; perhaps he would think it was only her alarm at her aunt's mention of Wakem before her father; that was the interpretation her mother had put in it. To her father, Wakem was like a disfiguring disease, of which he was obliged to endure the consciousness, but was exasperated to have the existence recognized by others; and no amount of sensitiveness in her about her father could be surprising, Maggie thought.

But Tom was too keen-sighted to rest satisfied with such an interpretation; he had seen clearly enough that there was something distinct from anxiety about her father in Maggie's excessive confusion. In trying to recall all the details that could give shape to his suspicions, he remembered only lately hearing his mother scold Maggie for walking in the Red Deeps when the ground was wet, and bringing home shoes clogged with red soil; still Tom, retaining all his old repulsion for Philip's deformity, shrank from attributing to his sister the probability of feeling more than a friendly interest in such an unfortunate exception to the common run of men. Tom's was a nature which had a sort of superstitious repugnance to everything exceptional. A love for a deformed man would be odious in any woman, in a sister intolerable. But if she had been carrying on any kind of intercourse whatever with Philip, a stop must be put to it at once; she was disobeying her father's strongest feelings and her brother's express commands, besides compromising herself by secret meetings. He left home the next morning in that watchful state of mind which turns the most ordinary course of things into pregnant coincidences.

That afternoon, about half-past three o'clock, Tom was standing on the wharf, talking with Bob Jakin about the probability of the good ship Adelaide coming in, in a day or two, with results highly important to both of them.

‘Eh,’ said Bob, parenthetically, as he looked over the fields on the other side of the river, ‘there goes that crooked young Wakem. I know

him or his shadder as far off as I can see 'em; I'm allays lighting on him o' that side the river.'

A sudden thought seemed to have darted through Tom's mind. 'I must go, Bob,' he said; 'I've something to attend to,' hurrying off to the warehouse, where he left notice for some one to take his place; he was called away home on peremptory business.

The swiftest pace and the shortest road took him to the gate, and he was pausing to open it deliberately, that he might walk into the house with an appearance of perfect composure, when Maggie came out at the front door in bonnet and shawl. His conjecture was fulfilled, and he waited for her at the gate. She started violently when she saw him.

'Tom, how is it you are come home? Is there anything the matter?' Maggie spoke in a low, tremulous voice.

'I'm come to walk with you to the Red Deeps, and meet Philip Wakem,' said Tom, the central fold in his brow, which had become habitual with him, deepening as he spoke.

Maggie stood helpless, pale and cold. By some means, then, Tom knew everything. At last she said, 'I'm, not going,' and turned round.

'Yes, you are; but I want to speak to you first. Where is my father?'

'Out on horseback.'

'And my mother?'

'In the yard, I think, with the poultry.'

'I can go in, then, without her seeing me?'

They walked in together, and Tom, entering the parlor, said to Maggie, 'Come in here.'

She obeyed, and he closed the door behind her.

'Now, Maggie, tell me this instant everything that has passed between you and Philip Wakem.'

'Does my father know anything?' said Maggie, still trembling.

'No,' said Tom indignantly. 'But he *shall* know, if you attempt to use deceit toward me any further.'

'I don't wish to use deceit,' said Maggie, flushing into resentment at hearing this word applied to her conduct.

'Tell me the whole truth, then.'

'Perhaps you know it.'

'Never mind whether I know it or not. Tell me exactly what has happened, or my father shall know everything.'

'I tell it for my father's sake, then.'

'Yes, it becomes you to profess affection for your father, when you have despised his strongest feelings.'

'You never do wrong, Tom,' said Maggie, tauntingly.

'Not if I know it,' answered Tom, with proud sincerity.

'But I have nothing to say to you beyond this: tell me what has passed between you and Philip Wakem. When did you first meet him in the Red Deeps?'

'A year ago,' said Maggie, quietly. Tom's severity gave her a certain fund of defiance, and kept her sense of error in abeyance. 'You need ask me no more questions. We have been friendly a year. We have met and walked together often. He has lent me books.'

'Is that all?' said Tom, looking straight at her with his frown.

Maggie paused a moment; then, determined to make an end of Tom's right to accuse her of deceit, she said haughtily:

'No, not quite all. On Saturday he told me that he loved me. I didn't think of it before then; I had only thought of him as an old friend.'

'And you *encouraged* him?' said Tom, with an expression of disgust.

'I told him that I loved him too.'

Tom was silent a few moments, looking on the ground and frowning, with his hands in his pockets. At last he looked up and said coldly, -

'Now, then, Maggie, there are but two courses for you to take, - either you vow solemnly to me, with your hand on my father's Bible, that you will never have another meeting or speak another word in private with Philip Wakem, or you refuse, and I tell my father everything; and this month, when by my exertions he might be made happy once

more, you will cause him the blow of knowing that you are a disobedient, deceitful daughter, who throws away her own respectability by clandestine meetings with the son of a man that has helped to ruin her father. Choose!' Tom ended with cold decision, going up to the large Bible, drawing it forward, and opening it at the fly-leaf, where the writing was.

It was a crushing alternative to Maggie.

'Tom,' she said, urged out of pride into pleading, 'don't ask me that. I will promise you to give up all intercourse with Philip, if you will let me see him once, or even only write to him and explain everything, - to give it up as long as it would ever cause any pain to my father. I feel something for Philip too. *He* is not happy.'

'I don't wish to hear anything of your feelings; I have said exactly what I mean. Choose, and quickly, lest my mother should come in.'

'If I give you my word, that will be as strong a bond to me as if I laid my hand on the Bible. I don't require that to bind me.'

'Do what *I* require,' said Tom. 'I can't trust you, Maggie. There is no consistency in you. Put your hand on this Bible, and say, 'I renounce all private speech and intercourse with Philip Wakem from this time forth.' Else you will bring shame on us all, and grief on my father; and what is the use of my exerting myself and giving up everything else for the sake of paying my father's debts, if you are to bring madness and vexation on him, just when he might be easy and hold up his head once more?'

'Oh, Tom, *will* the debts be paid soon?' said Maggie, clasping her hands, with a sudden flash of joy across her wretchedness.

'If things turn out as I expect,' said Tom. 'But,' he added, his voice trembling with indignation, 'while I have been contriving and working that my father may have some peace of mind before he dies, - working for the respectability of our family, - you have done all you can to destroy both.'

Maggie felt a deep movement of compunction; for the moment, her mind ceased to contend against what she felt to be cruel and unreasonable, and in her self-blame she justified her brother.

'Tom,' she said in a low voice, 'it was wrong of me; but I was so lonely, and I was sorry for Philip. And I think enmity and hatred are wicked.'

'Nonsense!' said Tom. 'Your duty was clear enough. Say no more; but promise, in the words I told you.'

'I *must* speak to Philip once more.'

'You will go with me now and speak to him.'

'I give you my word not to meet him or write to him again without your knowledge. That is the only thing I will say. I will put my hand on the Bible if you like.'

'Say it, then.'

Maggie laid her hand on the page of manuscript and repeated the promise. Tom closed the book, and said, 'Now let us go.'

Not a word was spoken as they walked along. Maggie was suffering in anticipation of what Philip was about to suffer, and dreading the galling words that would fall on him from Tom's lips; but she felt it was in vain to attempt anything but submission. Tom had his terrible clutch on her conscience and her deepest dread; she writhed under the demonstrable truth of the character he had given to her conduct, and yet her whole soul rebelled against it as unfair from its incompleteness. He, meanwhile, felt the impetus of his indignation diverted toward Philip. He did not know how much of an old boyish repulsion and of mere personal pride and animosity was concerned in the bitter severity of the words by which he meant to do the duty of a son and a brother. Tom was not given to inquire subtly into his own motives any more than into other matters of an intangible kind; he was quite sure that his own motives as well as actions were good, else he would have had nothing to do with them.

Maggie's only hope was that something might, for the first time, have prevented Philip from coming. Then there would be delay, - then she might get Tom's permission to write to him. Her heart beat with double violence when they got under the Scotch firs. It was the last moment of suspense, she thought; Philip always met her soon after she got beyond them. But they passed across the more open green space, and entered the narrow bushy path by the mound. Another turning, and they came so close upon him that both Tom and Philip stopped suddenly within a yard of each other. There was a moment's silence, in which Philip darted a look of inquiry at Maggie's face. He saw an answer there, in the pale, parted lips, and the terrified tension of the large eyes. Her imagination, always rushing extravagantly beyond an immediate impression, saw her tall, strong brother grasping the feeble Philip bodily, crushing him and trampling on him.

'Do you call this acting the part of a man and a gentleman, sir?' Tom said, in a voice of harsh scorn, as soon as Philip's eyes were turned on him again.

'What do you mean?' answered Philip, haughtily.

'Mean? Stand farther from me, lest I should lay hands on you, and I'll tell you what I mean. I mean, taking advantage of a young girl's foolishness and ignorance to get her to have secret meetings with you. I mean, daring to trifle with the respectability of a family that has a good and honest name to support.'

'I deny that,' interrupted Philip, impetuously. 'I could never trifle with anything that affected your sister's happiness. She is dearer to me than she is to you; I honor her more than you can ever honor her; I would give up my life to her.'

'Don't talk high-flown nonsense to me, sir! Do you mean to pretend that you didn't know it would be injurious to her to meet you here week after week? Do you pretend you had any right to make professions of love to her, even if you had been a fit husband for her, when neither her father nor your father would ever consent to a marriage between you? And *you*, - *you* to try and worm yourself into the affections of a handsome girl who is not eighteen, and has been shut out from the world by her father's misfortunes! That's your crooked notion of honor, is it? I call it base treachery; I call it taking advantage of circumstances to win what's too good for you, - what you'd never get by fair means.'

'It is manly of you to talk in this way to *me*,' said Philip, bitterly, his whole frame shaken by violent emotions. 'Giants have an immemorial right to stupidity and insolent abuse. You are incapable even of understanding what I feel for your sister. I feel so much for her that I could even desire to be at friendship with *you*.'

'I should be very sorry to understand your feelings,' said Tom, with scorching contempt. 'What I wish is that you should understand *me*, - that I shall take care of *my* sister, and that if you dare to make the least attempt to come near her, or to write to her, or to keep the slightest hold on her mind, your puny, miserable body, that ought to have put some modesty into your mind, shall not protect you. I'll thrash you; I'll hold you up to public scorn. Who wouldn't laugh at the idea of *your* turning lover to a fine girl?'

Tom and Maggie walked on in silence for some yards. He burst out, in a convulsed voice.

'Stay, Maggie!' said Philip, making a strong effort to speak. Then looking at Tom, 'You have dragged your sister here, I suppose, that she may stand by while you threaten and insult me. These naturally seemed to you the right means to influence me. But you are mistaken.

Let your sister speak. If she says she is bound to give me up, I shall abide by her wishes to the slightest word.'

'It was for my father's sake, Philip,' said Maggie, imploringly. 'Tom threatens to tell my father, and he couldn't bear it; I have promised, I have vowed solemnly, that we will not have any intercourse without my brother's knowledge.'

'It is enough, Maggie. *I* shall not change; but I wish you to hold yourself entirely free. But trust me; remember that I can never seek for anything but good to what belongs to you.'

'Yes,' said Tom, exasperated by this attitude of Philip's, 'you can talk of seeking good for her and what belongs to her now; did you seek her good before?'

'I did, - at some risk, perhaps. But I wished her to have a friend for life, - who would cherish her, who would do her more justice than a coarse and narrow-minded brother, that she has always lavished her affections on.'

'Yes, my way of befriending her is different from yours; and I'll tell you what is my way. I'll save her from disobeying and disgracing her father; I'll save her from throwing herself away on you, - from making herself a laughing-stock, - from being flouted by a man like *your* father, because she's not good enough for his son. You know well enough what sort of justice and cherishing you were preparing for her. I'm not to be imposed upon by fine words; I can see what actions mean. Come away, Maggie.'

He seized Maggie's right wrist as he spoke, and she put out her left hand. Philip clasped it an instant, with one eager look, and then hurried away.

Tom and Maggie walked on in silence for some yards. He was still holding her wrist tightly, as if he were compelling a culprit from the scene of action. At last Maggie, with a violent snatch, drew her hand away, and her pent-up, long-gathered irritation burst into utterance.

'Don't suppose that I think you are right, Tom, or that I bow to your will. I despise the feelings you have shown in speaking to Philip; I detest your insulting, unmanly allusions to his deformity. You have been reproaching other people all your life; you have been always sure you yourself are right. It is because you have not a mind large enough to see that there is anything better than your own conduct and your own petty aims.'

'Certainly,' said Tom, coolly. 'I don't see that your conduct is better, or your aims either. If your conduct, and Philip Wakem's conduct, has been right, why are you ashamed of its being known? Answer me that. I know what I have aimed at in my conduct, and I've succeeded; pray, what good has your conduct brought to you or any one else?'

'I don't want to defend myself,' said Maggie, still with vehemence: 'I know I've been wrong, - often, continually. But yet, sometimes when I have done wrong, it has been because I have feelings that you would be the better for, if you had them. If *you* were in fault ever, if you had done anything very wrong, I should be sorry for the pain it brought you; I should not want punishment to be heaped on you. But you have always enjoyed punishing me; you have always been hard and cruel to me; even when I was a little girl, and always loved you better than any one else in the world, you would let me go crying to bed without forgiving me. You have no pity; you have no sense of your own imperfection and your own sins. It is a sin to be hard; it is not fitting for a mortal, for a Christian. You are nothing but a Pharisee. You thank God for nothing but your own virtues; you think they are great enough to win you everything else. You have not even a vision of feelings by the side of which your shining virtues are mere darkness!'

'Well,' said Tom, with cold scorn, 'if your feelings are so much better than mine, let me see you show them in some other way than by conduct that's likely to disgrace us all, - than by ridiculous flights first into one extreme and then into another. Pray, how have you shown your love, that you talk of, either to me or my father? By disobeying and deceiving us. I have a different way of showing my affection.'

'Because you are a man, Tom, and have power, and can do something in the world.'

'Then, if you can do nothing, submit to those that can.'

'So I *will* submit to what I acknowledge and feel to be right. I will submit even to what is unreasonable from my father, but I will not submit to it from you. You boast of your virtues as if they purchased you a right to be cruel and unmanly, as you've been to-day. Don't suppose I would give up Philip Wakem in obedience to you. The deformity you insult would make me cling to him and care for him the more.'

'Very well; that is your view of things.' said Tom, more coldly than ever; 'you need say no more to show me what a wide distance there is between us. Let us remember that in future, and be silent.'

Tom went back to St. Ogg's, to fulfill an appointment with his uncle Deane, and receive directions about a journey on which he was to set out the next morning.

Maggie went up to her own room to pour out all that indignant remonstrance, against which Tom's mind was close barred, in bitter tears. Then, when the first burst of unsatisfied anger was gone by, came the recollection of that quiet time before the pleasure which had ended in to-day's misery had perturbed the clearness and simplicity of her life. She used to think in that time that she had made great conquests, and won a lasting stand on serene heights above worldly temptations and conflict. And here she was down again in the thick of a hot strife with her own and others' passions. Life was not so short, then, and perfect rest was not so near as she had dreamed when she was two years younger. There was more struggle for her, and perhaps more falling. If she had felt that she was entirely wrong, and that Tom had been entirely right, she could sooner have recovered more inward harmony; but now her penitence and submission were constantly obstructed by resentment that would present itself to her no otherwise than as a just indignation. Her heart bled for Philip; she went on recalling the insults that had been flung at him with so vivid a conception of what he had felt under them, that it was almost like a sharp bodily pain to her, making her beat the floor with her foot and tighten her fingers on her palm.

And yet, how was it that she was now and then conscious of a certain dim background of relief in the forced separation from Philip? Surely it was only because the sense of a deliverance from concealment was welcome at any cost.