The Mill on the Floss

George Eliot

Book I

Boy and Girl

Chapter I

Outside Dorlcote Mill

A wide plain, where the broadening Floss hurries on between its green

banks to the sea, and the loving tide, rushing to meet it, checks its

passage with an impetuous embrace. On this mighty tide the black

ships - laden with the fresh-scented fir-planks, with rounded sacks of

oil-bearing seed, or with the dark glitter of coal - are borne along to

the town of St. Ogg's, which shows its aged, fluted red roofs and the

broad gables of its wharves between the low wooded hill and the

river-brink, tingeing the water with a soft purple hue under the

transient glance of this February sun. Far away on each hand stretch

the rich pastures, and the patches of dark earth made ready for the

seed of broad-leaved green crops, or touched already with the tint of

the tender-bladed autumn-sown corn. There is a remnant still of last

year's golden clusters of beehive-ricks rising at intervals beyond the

hedgerows; and everywhere the hedgerows are studded with trees; the

distant ships seem to be lifting their masts and stretching their

red-brown sails close among the branches of the spreading ash. Just by

the red-roofed town the tributary Ripple flows with a lively current

into the Floss. How lovely the little river is, with its dark changing

wavelets! It seems to me like a living companion while I wander along

the bank, and listen to its low, placid voice, as to the voice of one

who is deaf and loving. I remember those large dipping willows. I

remember the stone bridge.

And this is Dorlcote Mill. I must stand a minute or two here on the

bridge and look at it, though the clouds are threatening, and it is

far on in the afternoon. Even in this leafless time of departing

February it is pleasant to look at, - perhaps the chill, damp season

adds a charm to the trimly kept, comfortable dwelling-house, as old as

the elms and chestnuts that shelter it from the northern blast. The

stream is brimful now, and lies high in this little withy plantation,

and half drowns the grassy fringe of the croft in front of the house.

As I look at the full stream, the vivid grass, the delicate

bright-green powder softening the outline of the great trunks and

branches that gleam from under the bare purple boughs, I am in love

with moistness, and envy the white ducks that are dipping their heads

far into the water here among the withes, unmindful of the awkward

appearance they make in the drier world above.

The rush of the water and the booming of the mill bring a dreamy

deafness, which seems to heighten the peacefulness of the scene. They

are like a great curtain of sound, shutting one out from the world

beyond. And now there is the thunder of the huge covered wagon coming

home with sacks of grain. That honest wagoner is thinking of his

dinner, getting sadly dry in the oven at this late hour; but he will

not touch it till he has fed his horses, - the strong, submissive,

meek-eyed beasts, who, I fancy, are looking mild reproach at him from

between their blinkers, that he should crack his whip at them in that

awful manner as if they needed that hint! See how they stretch their

shoulders up the slope toward the bridge, with all the more energy

because they are so near home. Look at their grand shaggy feet that

seem to grasp the firm earth, at the patient strength of their necks,

bowed under the heavy collar, at the mighty muscles of their

struggling haunches! I should like well to hear them neigh over their

hardly earned feed of corn, and see them, with their moist necks freed

from the harness, dipping their eager nostrils into the muddy pond.

Now they are on the bridge, and down they go again at a swifter pace,

and the arch of the covered wagon disappears at the turning behind the

trees.

Now I can turn my eyes toward the mill again, and watch the unresting

wheel sending out its diamond jets of water. That little girl is

watching it too; she has been standing on just the same spot at the

edge of the water ever since I paused on the bridge. And that queer

white cur with the brown ear seems to be leaping and barking in

ineffectual remonstrance with the wheel; perhaps he is jealous because

his playfellow in the beaver bonnet is so rapt in its movement. It is

time the little playfellow went in, I think; and there is a very

bright fire to tempt her: the red light shines out under the deepening

gray of the sky. It is time, too, for me to leave off resting my arms

on the cold stone of this bridge....

Ah, my arms are really benumbed. I have been pressing my elbows on the

arms of my chair, and dreaming that I was standing on the bridge in

front of Dorlcote Mill, as it looked one February afternoon many years

ago. Before I dozed off, I was going to tell you what Mr. and Mrs.

Tulliver were talking about, as they sat by the bright fire in the

left-hand parlor, on that very afternoon I have been dreaming of.

Chapter II

Mr. Tulliver, of Dorlcote Mill, Declares His Resolution about Tom

"What I want, you know," said Mr. Tulliver, - "what I want is to give

Tom a good eddication; an eddication as'll be a bread to him. That was

what I was thinking of when I gave notice for him to leave the academy

at Lady-day. I mean to put him to a downright good school at

Midsummer. The two years at th' academy 'ud ha' done well enough, if

I'd meant to make a miller and farmer of him, for he's had a fine

sight more schoolin' nor I ever got. All the learnin' my father

ever paid for was a bit o' birch at one end and the alphabet at th'

other. But I should like Tom to be a bit of a scholard, so as he might

be up to the tricks o' these fellows as talk fine and write with a

flourish. It 'ud be a help to me wi' these lawsuits, and arbitrations,

and things. I wouldn't make a downright lawyer o' the lad, - I should

be sorry for him to be a raskill, - but a sort o' engineer, or a

surveyor, or an auctioneer and vallyer, like Riley, or one o' them

smartish businesses as are all profits and no outlay, only for a big

watch-chain and a high stool. They're pretty nigh all one, and they're

not far off being even wi' the law, I believe; for Riley looks

Lawyer Wakem i' the face as hard as one cat looks another. He's none

frightened at him."

Mr. Tulliver was speaking to his wife, a blond comely woman in a

fan-shaped cap I am afraid to think how long it is since fan-shaped

caps were worn, they must be so near coming in again. At that time,

when Mrs. Tulliver was nearly forty, they were new at St. Ogg's, and

considered sweet things .

"Well, Mr. Tulliver, you know best: I've no objections. But hadn't I

better kill a couple o' fowl, and have th' aunts and uncles to dinner

next week, so as you may hear what sister Glegg and sister Pullet have

got to say about it? There's a couple o' fowl wants killing!"

"You may kill every fowl i' the yard if you like, Bessy; but I shall

ask neither aunt nor uncle what I'm to do wi' my own lad," said Mr.

Tulliver, defiantly.

"Dear heart!" said Mrs. Tulliver, shocked at this sanguinary rhetoric,

"how can you talk so, Mr. Tulliver? But it's your way to speak

disrespectful o' my family; and sister Glegg throws all the blame

upo'me, though I'm sure I'm as innocent as the babe unborn. For

nobody's ever heard me say as it wasn't lucky for my children to have

aunts and uncles as can live independent. Howiver, if Tom's to go to a

new school, I should like him to go where I can wash him and mend him;

else he might as well have calico as linen, for they'd be one as

yallow as th' other before they'd been washed half-a-dozen times. And

then, when the box is goin' back'ard and forrard, I could send the lad

a cake, or a pork-pie, or an apple; for he can do with an extry bit,

bless him! whether they stint him at the meals or no. My children can

eat as much victuals as most, thank God!"

"Well, well, we won't send him out o' reach o' the carrier's cart, if

other things fit in," said Mr. Tulliver. "But you mustn't put a spoke

i' the wheel about the washin,' if we can't get a school near enough.

That's the fault I have to find wi' you, Bessy; if you see a stick i'

the road, you're allays thinkin' you can't step over it. You'd want me

not to hire a good wagoner, 'cause he'd got a mole on his face."

"Dear heart!" said Mrs. Tulliver, in mild surprise, "when did I iver

make objections to a man because he'd got a mole on his face? I'm sure

I'm rether fond o' the moles; for my brother, as is dead an' gone, had

a mole on his brow. But I can't remember your iver offering to hire a

wagoner with a mole, Mr. Tulliver. There was John Gibbs hadn't a mole

on his face no more nor you have, an' I was all for having you hire

him ; an' so you did hire him, an' if he hadn't died o' th'

inflammation, as we paid Dr. Turnbull for attending him, he'd very

like ha' been drivin' the wagon now. He might have a mole somewhere

out o' sight, but how was I to know that, Mr. Tulliver?"

"No, no, Bessy; I didn't mean justly the mole; I meant it to stand for

summat else; but niver mind - it's puzzling work, talking is. What I'm

thinking on, is how to find the right sort o' school to send Tom to,

for I might be ta'en in again, as I've been wi' th' academy. I'll have

nothing to do wi' a 'cademy again: whativer school I send Tom to, it

sha'n't be a 'cademy; it shall be a place where the lads spend their

time i' summat else besides blacking the family's shoes, and getting

up the potatoes. It's an uncommon puzzling thing to know what school

to pick."

Mr. Tulliver paused a minute or two, and dived with both hands into

his breeches pockets as if he hoped to find some suggestion there.

Apparently he was not disappointed, for he presently said, "I know

what I'll do: I'll talk it over wi' Riley; he's coming to-morrow, t'

arbitrate about the dam."

"Well, Mr. Tulliver, I've put the sheets out for the best bed, and

Kezia's got 'em hanging at the fire. They aren't the best sheets, but

they're good enough for anybody to sleep in, be he who he will; for as

for them best Holland sheets, I should repent buying 'em, only they'll

do to lay us out in. An' if you was to die to-morrow, Mr. Tulliver,

they're mangled beautiful, an' all ready, an' smell o' lavender as it

'ud be a pleasure to lay 'em out; an' they lie at the left-hand corner

o' the big oak linen-chest at the back: not as I should trust anybody

to look 'em out but myself."

As Mrs. Tulliver uttered the last sentence, she drew a bright bunch of

keys from her pocket, and singled out one, rubbing her thumb and

finger up and down it with a placid smile while she looked at the

clear fire. If Mr. Tulliver had been a susceptible man in his conjugal

relation, he might have supposed that she drew out the key to aid her

imagination in anticipating the moment when he would be in a state to

justify the production of the best Holland sheets. Happily he was not

so; he was only susceptible in respect of his right to water-power;

moreover, he had the marital habit of not listening very closely, and

since his mention of Mr. Riley, had been apparently occupied in a

tactile examination of his woollen stockings.

"I think I've hit it, Bessy," was his first remark after a short

silence. "Riley's as likely a man as any to know o' some school; he's

had schooling himself, an' goes about to all sorts o' places,

arbitratin' and vallyin' and that. And we shall have time to talk it

over to-morrow night when the business is done. I want Tom to be such

a sort o' man as Riley, you know, - as can talk pretty nigh as well as

if it was all wrote out for him, and knows a good lot o' words as

don't mean much, so as you can't lay hold of 'em i' law; and a good

solid knowledge o' business too."

"Well," said Mrs. Tulliver, 'so far as talking proper, and knowing

everything, and walking with a bend in his back, and setting his hair

up, I shouldn't mind the lad being brought up to that. But them

fine-talking men from the big towns mostly wear the false

shirt-fronts; they wear a frill till it's all a mess, and then hide it

with a bib; I know Riley does. And then, if Tom's to go and live at

Mudport, like Riley, he'll have a house with a kitchen hardly big

enough to turn in, an' niver get a fresh egg for his breakfast, an'

sleep up three pair o' stairs, - or four, for what I know, - and be

burnt to death before he can get down."

"No, no," said Mr. Tulliver, "I've no thoughts of his going to

Mudport: I mean him to set up his office at St. Ogg's, close by us,

an' live at home. But," continued Mr. Tulliver after a pause, "what

I'm a bit afraid on is, as Tom hasn't got the right sort o' brains for

a smart fellow. I doubt he's a bit slowish. He takes after your

family, Bessy."

"Yes, that he does," said Mrs. Tulliver, accepting the last

proposition entirely on its own merits; "he's wonderful for liking a

deal o' salt in his broth. That was my brother's way, and my father's

before him."

"It seems a bit a pity, though," said Mr. Tulliver, "as the lad should

take after the mother's side instead o' the little wench. That's the

worst on't wi' crossing o' breeds: you can never justly calkilate

what'll come on't . The little un takes after my side, now: she's twice

as 'cute as Tom. Too 'cute for a woman, I'm afraid," continued Mr.

Tulliver, turning his head dubiously first on one side and then on the

other. "It's no mischief much while she's a little un; but an

over-'cute woman's no better nor a long-tailed sheep, - she'll fetch

none the bigger price for that."

"Yes, it is a mischief while she's a little un, Mr. Tulliver, for it

runs to naughtiness. How to keep her in a clean pinafore two hours

together passes my cunning. An' now you put me i' mind," continued

Mrs. Tulliver, rising and going to the window, "I don't know where she

is now, an' it's pretty nigh tea-time. Ah, I thought so, - wanderin' up

an' down by the water, like a wild thing: She'll tumble in some day."

Mrs. Tulliver rapped the window sharply, beckoned, and shook her

head, - a process which she repeated more than once before she returned

to her chair.

"You talk o' 'cuteness, Mr. Tulliver," she observed as she sat down,

"but I'm sure the child's half an idiot i' some things; for if I send

her upstairs to fetch anything, she forgets what she's gone for, an'

perhaps 'ull sit down on the floor i' the sunshine an' plait her hair

an' sing to herself like a Bedlam creatur', all the while I'm waiting

for her downstairs. That niver run i' my family, thank God! no more

nor a brown skin as makes her look like a mulatter. I don't like to

fly i' the face o' Providence, but it seems hard as I should have but

one gell, an' her so comical."

"Pooh, nonsense!" said Mr. Tulliver; 'she's a straight, black-eyed

wench as anybody need wish to see. I don't know i' what she's behind

other folks's children; and she can read almost as well as the

parson."

"But her hair won't curl all I can do with it, and she's so franzy

about having it put i' paper, and I've such work as never was to make

her stand and have it pinched with th' irons."

"Cut it off - cut it off short," said the father, rashly.

"How can you talk so, Mr. Tulliver? She's too big a gell - gone nine,

and tall of her age - to have her hair cut short; an' there's her

cousin Lucy's got a row o' curls round her head, an' not a hair out o'

place. It seems hard as my sister Deane should have that pretty child;

I'm sure Lucy takes more after me nor my own child does. Maggie,

Maggie," continued the mother, in a tone of half-coaxing fretfulness,

as this small mistake of nature entered the room, "where's the use o'

my telling you to keep away from the water? You'll tumble in and be

drownded some day, an' then you'll be sorry you didn't do as mother

told you."

Maggie's hair, as she threw off her bonnet, painfully confirmed her

mother's accusation. Mrs. Tulliver, desiring her daughter to have a

curled crop, "like other folks's children," had had it cut too short

in front to be pushed behind the ears; and as it was usually straight

an hour after it had been taken out of paper, Maggie was incessantly

tossing her head to keep the dark, heavy locks out of her gleaming

black eyes, - an action which gave her very much the air of a small

Shetland pony.

"Oh, dear, oh, dear, Maggie, what are you thinkin'of, to throw your

bonnet down there? Take it upstairs, there's a good gell, an' let your

hair be brushed, an' put your other pinafore on, an' change your

shoes, do, for shame; an' come an' go on with your patchwork, like a

little lady."

"Oh, mother," said Maggie, in a vehemently cross tone, "I don't want

to do my patchwork."

"What! not your pretty patchwork, to make a counterpane for your aunt

Glegg?"

"It's foolish work," said Maggie, with a toss of her mane, - "tearing

things to pieces to sew 'em together again. And I don't want to do

anything for my aunt Glegg. I don't like her."

Exit Maggie, dragging her bonnet by the string, while Mr. Tulliver

laughs audibly.

"I wonder at you, as you'll laugh at her, Mr. Tulliver," said the

mother, with feeble fretfulness in her tone. "You encourage her i'

naughtiness. An' her aunts will have it as it's me spoils her."

Mrs. Tulliver was what is called a good-tempered person, - never cried,

when she was a baby, on any slighter ground than hunger and pins; and

from the cradle upward had been healthy, fair, plump, and dull-witted;

in short, the flower of her family for beauty and amiability. But milk

and mildness are not the best things for keeping, and when they turn

only a little sour, they may disagree with young stomachs seriously. I

have often wondered whether those early Madonnas of Raphael, with the

blond faces and somewhat stupid expression, kept their placidity

undisturbed when their strong-limbed, strong-willed boys got a little

too old to do without clothing. I think they must have been given to

feeble remonstrance, getting more and more peevish as it became more

and more ineffectual.