

Chapter VIII - Mr Tulliver Shows His Weaker Side

'Suppose sister Glegg should call her money in; it 'ud be very awkward for you to have to raise five hundred pounds now,' said Mrs Tulliver to her husband that evening, as she took a plaintive review of the day.

Mrs Tulliver had lived thirteen years with her husband, yet she retained in all the freshness of her early married life a facility of saying things which drove him in the opposite direction to the one she desired. Some minds are wonderful for keeping their bloom in this way, as a patriarchal goldfish apparently retains to the last its youthful illusion that it can swim in a straight line beyond the encircling glass. Mrs Tulliver was an amiable fish of this kind, and after running her head against the same resisting medium for thirteen years would go at it again to-day with undulled alacrity.

This observation of hers tended directly to convince Mr Tulliver that it would not be at all awkward for him to raise five hundred pounds; and when Mrs Tulliver became rather pressing to know *how* he would raise it without mortgaging the mill and the house which he had said he never *would* mortgage, since nowadays people were none so ready to lend money without security, Mr Tulliver, getting warm, declared that Mrs Glegg might do as she liked about calling in her money, he should pay it in whether or not. He was not going to be beholden to his wife's sisters. When a man had married into a family where there was a whole litter of women, he might have plenty to put up with if he chose. But Mr Tulliver did *not* choose.

Mrs Tulliver cried a little in a trickling, quiet way as she put on her nightcap; but presently sank into a comfortable sleep, lulled by the thought that she would talk everything over with her sister Pullet tomorrow, when she was to take the children to Garum Firs to tea. Not that she looked forward to any distinct issue from that talk; but it seemed impossible that past events should be so obstinate as to remain unmodified when they were complained against.

Her husband lay awake rather longer, for he too was thinking of a visit he would pay on the morrow; and his ideas on the subject were not of so vague and soothing a kind as those of his amiable partner.

Mr Tulliver, when under the influence of a strong feeling, had a promptitude in action that may seem inconsistent with that painful sense of the complicated, puzzling nature of human affairs under which his more dispassionate deliberations were conducted; but it is really not improbable that there was a direct relation between these apparently contradictory phenomena, since I have observed that for getting a strong impression that a skein is tangled there is nothing like snatching hastily at a single thread. It was owing to this

promptitude that Mr Tulliver was on horseback soon after dinner the next day (he was not dyspeptic) on his way to Basset to see his sister Moss and her husband. For having made up his mind irrevocably that he would pay Mrs Glegg her loan of five hundred pounds, it naturally occurred to him that he had a promissory note for three hundred pounds lent to his brother-in-law Moss; and if the said brother-in-law could manage to pay in the money within a given time, it would go far to lessen the fallacious air of inconvenience which Mr Tulliver's spirited step might have worn in the eyes of weak people who require to know precisely *how* a thing is to be done before they are strongly confident that it will be easy.

For Mr Tulliver was in a position neither new nor striking, but, like other every-day things, sure to have a cumulative effect that will be felt in the long run: he was held to be a much more substantial man than he really was. And as we are all apt to believe what the world believes about us, it was his habit to think of failure and ruin with the same sort of remote pity with which a spare, long-necked man hears that his plethoric short-necked neighbor is stricken with apoplexy. He had been always used to hear pleasant jokes about his advantages as a man who worked his own mill, and owned a pretty bit of land; and these jokes naturally kept up his sense that he was a man of considerable substance. They gave a pleasant flavor to his glass on a market-day, and if it had not been for the recurrence of half-yearly payments, Mr Tulliver would really have forgotten that there was a mortgage of two thousand pounds on his very desirable freehold. That was not altogether his own fault, since one of the thousand pounds was his sister's fortune, which he had to pay on her marriage; and a man who has neighbors that *will* go to law with him is not likely to pay off his mortgages, especially if he enjoys the good opinion of acquaintances who want to borrow a hundred pounds on security too lofty to be represented by parchment. Our friend Mr Tulliver had a good-natured fibre in him, and did not like to give harsh refusals even to his sister, who had not only come in to the world in that superfluous way characteristic of sisters, creating a necessity for mortgages, but had quite thrown herself away in marriage, and had crowned her mistakes by having an eighth baby. On this point Mr Tulliver was conscious of being a little weak; but he apologized to himself by saying that poor Gritty had been a good-looking wench before she married Moss; he would sometimes say this even with a slight tremulousness in his voice. But this morning he was in a mood more becoming a man of business, and in the course of his ride along the Basset lanes, with their deep ruts, - lying so far away from a market-town that the labor of drawing produce and manure was enough to take away the best part of the profits on such poor land as that parish was made of, - he got up a due amount of irritation against Moss as a man without capital, who, if murrain and blight were abroad, was sure to have his share of them, and who, the more

you tried to help him out of the mud, would sink the further in. It would do him good rather than harm, now, if he were obliged to raise this three hundred pounds; it would make him look about him better, and not act so foolishly about his wool this year as he did the last; in fact, Mr Tulliver had been too easy with his brother-in-law, and because he had let the interest run on for two years, Moss was likely enough to think that he should never be troubled about the principal. But Mr Tulliver was determined not to encourage such shuffling people any longer; and a ride along the Basset lanes was not likely to enervate a man's resolution by softening his temper. The deep-trodden hoof-marks, made in the muddiest days of winter, gave him a shake now and then which suggested a rash but stimulating snarl at the father of lawyers, who, whether by means of his hoof or otherwise, had doubtless something to do with this state of the roads; and the abundance of foul land and neglected fences that met his eye, though they made no part of his brother Moss's farm, strongly contributed to his dissatisfaction with that unlucky agriculturist. If this wasn't Moss's fallow, it might have been; Basset was all alike; it was a beggarly parish, in Mr Tulliver's opinion, and his opinion was certainly not groundless. Basset had a poor soil, poor roads, a poor non-resident landlord, a poor non-resident vicar, and rather less than half a curate, also poor. If any one strongly impressed with the power of the human mind to triumph over circumstances will contend that the parishioners of Basset might nevertheless have been a very superior class of people, I have nothing to urge against that abstract proposition; I only know that, in point of fact, the Basset mind was in strict keeping with its circumstances. The muddy lanes, green or clayey, that seemed to the unaccustomed eye to lead nowhere but into each other, did really lead, with patience, to a distant high-road; but there were many feet in Basset which they led more frequently to a centre of dissipation, spoken of formerly as the 'Markis o' Granby,' but among intimates as 'Dickison's.' A large low room with a sanded floor; a cold scent of tobacco, modified by undetected beer-dregs; Mr Dickison leaning against the door-post with a melancholy pimpled face, looking as irrelevant to the daylight as a last night's guttered candle, - all this may not seem a very seductive form of temptation; but the majority of men in Basset found it fatally alluring when encountered on their road toward four o'clock on a wintry afternoon; and if any wife in Basset wished to indicate that her husband was not a pleasure-seeking man, she could hardly do it more emphatically than by saying that he didn't spend a shilling at Dickison's from one Whitsuntide to another. Mrs Moss had said so of *her* husband more than once, when her brother was in a mood to find fault with him, as he certainly was to-day. And nothing could be less pacifying to Mr Tulliver than the behavior of the farmyard gate, which he no sooner attempted to push open with his riding-stick than it acted as gates without the upper hinge are known to do, to the peril of shins, whether equine or human. He was about to get down and lead his

horse through the damp dirt of the hollow farmyard, shadowed drearily by the large half-timbered buildings, up to the long line of tumble-down dwelling-houses standing on a raised causeway; but the timely appearance of a cowboy saved him that frustration of a plan he had determined on, - namely, not to get down from his horse during this visit. If a man means to be hard, let him keep in his saddle and speak from that height, above the level of pleading eyes, and with the command of a distant horizon. Mrs Moss heard the sound of the horse's feet, and, when her brother rode up, was already outside the kitchen door, with a half-weary smile on her face, and a black-eyed baby in her arms. Mrs Moss's face bore a faded resemblance to her brother's; baby's little fat hand, pressed against her cheek, seemed to show more strikingly that the cheek was faded.

'Brother, I'm glad to see you,' she said, in an affectionate tone. 'I didn't look for you to-day. How do you do?'

'Oh, pretty well, Mrs Moss, pretty well,' answered the brother, with cool deliberation, as if it were rather too forward of her to ask that question. She knew at once that her brother was not in a good humor; he never called her Mrs Moss except when he was angry, and when they were in company. But she thought it was in the order of nature that people who were poorly off should be snubbed. Mrs Moss did not take her stand on the equality of the human race; she was a patient, prolific, loving-hearted woman.

'Your husband isn't in the house, I suppose?' added Mr Tulliver after a grave pause, during which four children had run out, like chickens whose mother has been suddenly in eclipse behind the hen-coop.

'No,' said Mrs Moss, 'but he's only in the potato-field yonders. Georgy, run to the Far Close in a minute, and tell father your uncle's come. You'll get down, brother, won't you, and take something?'

'No, no; I can't get down. I must be going home again directly,' said Mr Tulliver, looking at the distance.

'And how's Mrs Tulliver and the children?' said Mrs Moss, humbly, not daring to press her invitation.

'Oh, pretty well. Tom's going to a new school at Midsummer, - a deal of expense to me. It's bad work for me, lying out o' my money.'

'I wish you'd be so good as let the children come and see their cousins some day. My little uns want to see their cousin Maggie so as never was. And me her godmother, and so fond of her; there's nobody 'ud make a bigger fuss with her, according to what they've got. And I

know she likes to come, for she's a loving child, and how quick and clever she is, to be sure!

If Mrs Moss had been one of the most astute women in the world, instead of being one of the simplest, she could have thought of nothing more likely to propitiate her brother than this praise of Maggie. He seldom found any one volunteering praise of 'the little wench'; it was usually left entirely to himself to insist on her merits. But Maggie always appeared in the most amiable light at her aunt Moss's; it was her Alsatia, where she was out of the reach of law, - if she upset anything, dirtied her shoes, or tore her frock, these things were matters of course at her aunt Moss's. In spite of himself, Mr Tulliver's eyes got milder, and he did not look away from his sister as he said, -

'Ay; she's fonder o' you than o' the other aunts, I think. She takes after our family: not a bit of her mother's in her.'

'Moss says she's just like what I used to be,' said Mrs Moss, 'though I was never so quick and fond o' the books. But I think my Lizzy's like her; *she's* sharp. Come here, Lizzy, my dear, and let your uncle see you; he hardly knows you, you grow so fast.'

Lizzy, a black-eyed child of seven, looked very shy when her mother drew her forward, for the small Mosses were much in awe of their uncle from Dorlcote Mill. She was inferior enough to Maggie in fire and strength of expression to make the resemblance between the two entirely flattering to Mr Tulliver's fatherly love.

'Ay, they're a bit alike,' he said, looking kindly at the little figure in the soiled pinafore. 'They both take after our mother. You've got enough o' gells, Gritty,' he added, in a tone half compassionate, half reproachful.

'Four of 'em, bless 'em!' said Mrs Moss, with a sigh, stroking Lizzy's hair on each side of her forehead; 'as many as there's boys. They've got a brother apiece.'

'Ah, but they must turn out and fend for themselves,' said Mr Tulliver, feeling that his severity was relaxing and trying to brace it by throwing out a wholesome hint 'They mustn't look to hanging on their brothers.'

'No; but I hope their brothers 'ull love the poor things, and remember they came o' one father and mother; the lads 'ull never be the poorer for that,' said Mrs Moss, flashing out with hurried timidity, like a half-smothered fire.

Mr Tulliver gave his horse a little stroke on the flank, then checked it, and said angrily, 'Stand still with you!' much to the astonishment of that innocent animal.

'And the more there is of 'em, the more they must love one another,' Mrs Moss went on, looking at her children with a didactic purpose. But she turned toward her brother again to say, 'Not but what I hope your boy 'ull allays be good to his sister, though there's but two of 'em, like you and me, brother.'

The arrow went straight to Mr Tulliver's heart. He had not a rapid imagination, but the thought of Maggie was very near to him, and he was not long in seeing his relation to his own sister side by side with Tom's relation to Maggie. Would the little wench ever be poorly off, and Tom rather hard upon her?

'Ay, ay, Gritty,' said the miller, with a new softness in his tone; 'but I've allays done what I could for you,' he added, as if vindicating himself from a reproach.

'I'm not denying that, brother, and I'm noways ungrateful,' said poor Mrs Moss, too fagged by toil and children to have strength left for any pride. 'But here's the father. What a while you've been, Moss!'

'While, do you call it?' said Mr Moss, feeling out of breath and injured. 'I've been running all the way. Won't you 'light, Mr Tulliver?'

'Well, I'll just get down and have a bit o' talk with you in the garden,' said Mr Tulliver, thinking that he should be more likely to show a due spirit of resolve if his sister were not present.

He got down, and passed with Mr Moss into the garden, toward an old yew-tree arbor, while his sister stood tapping her baby on the back and looking wistfully after them.

Their entrance into the yew-tree arbor surprised several fowls that were recreating themselves by scratching deep holes in the dusty ground, and at once took flight with much pother and cackling. Mr Tulliver sat down on the bench, and tapping the ground curiously here and there with his stick, as if he suspected some hollowness, opened the conversation by observing, with something like a snarl in his tone, -

'Why, you've got wheat again in that Corner Close, I see; and never a bit o' dressing on it. You'll do no good with it this year.'

Mr Moss, who, when he married Miss Tulliver, had been regarded as the buck of Basset, now wore a beard nearly a week old, and had the

depressed, unexpectant air of a machine-horse. He answered in a patient-grumbling tone, 'Why, poor farmers like me must do as they can; they must leave it to them as have got money to play with, to put half as much into the ground as they mean to get out of it.'

'I don't know who should have money to play with, if it isn't them as can borrow money without paying interest,' said Mr Tulliver, who wished to get into a slight quarrel; it was the most natural and easy introduction to calling in money.

'I know I'm behind with the interest,' said Mr Moss, 'but I was so unlucky wi' the wool last year; and what with the Missis being laid up so, things have gone awk'arder nor usual.'

'Ay,' snarled Mr Tulliver, 'there's folks as things 'ull allays go awk'ard with; empty sacks 'ull never stand upright.'

'Well, I don't know what fault you've got to find wi' me, Mr Tulliver,' said Mr Moss, deprecatingly; 'I know there isn't a day-laborer works harder.'

'What's the use o' that,' said Mr Tulliver, sharply, 'when a man marries, and's got no capital to work his farm but his wife's bit o' fortin? I was against it from the first; but you'd neither of you listen to me. And I can't lie out o' my money any longer, for I've got to pay five hundred o' Mrs Glegg's, and there'll be Tom an expense to me. I should find myself short, even saying I'd got back all as is my own. You must look about and see how you can pay me the three hundred pound.'

'Well, if that's what you mean,' said Mr Moss, looking blankly before him, 'we'd better be sold up, and ha' done with it; I must part wi' every head o' stock I've got, to pay you and the landlord too.'

Poor relations are undeniably irritating, - their existence is so entirely uncalled for on our part, and they are almost always very faulty people. Mr Tulliver had succeeded in getting quite as much irritated with Mr Moss as he had desired, and he was able to say angrily, rising from his seat, -

'Well, you must do as you can. *I* can't find money for everybody else as well as myself. I must look to my own business and my own family. I can't lie out o' my money any longer. You must raise it as quick as you can.'

Mr Tulliver walked abruptly out of the arbor as he uttered the last sentence, and, without looking round at Mr Moss, went on to the kitchen door, where the eldest boy was holding his horse, and his

sister was waiting in a state of wondering alarm, which was not without its alleviations, for baby was making pleasant gurgling sounds, and performing a great deal of finger practice on the faded face. Mrs Moss had eight children, but could never overcome her regret that the twins had not lived. Mr Moss thought their removal was not without its consolations. 'Won't you come in, brother?' she said, looking anxiously at her husband, who was walking slowly up, while Mr Tulliver had his foot already in the stirrup.

'No, no; good-by,' said he, turning his horse's head, and riding away.

No man could feel more resolute till he got outside the yard gate, and a little way along the deep-rutted lane; but before he reached the next turning, which would take him out of sight of the dilapidated farm-buildings, he appeared to be smitten by some sudden thought. He checked his horse, and made it stand still in the same spot for two or three minutes, during which he turned his head from side to side in a melancholy way, as if he were looking at some painful object on more sides than one. Evidently, after his fit of promptitude, Mr Tulliver was relapsing into the sense that this is a puzzling world. He turned his horse, and rode slowly back, giving vent to the climax of feeling which had determined this movement by saying aloud, as he struck his horse, 'Poor little wench! she'll have nobody but Tom, belike, when I'm gone.'

Mr Tulliver's return into the yard was descried by several young Mosses, who immediately ran in with the exciting news to their mother, so that Mrs Moss was again on the door-step when her brother rode up. She had been crying, but was rocking baby to sleep in her arms now, and made no ostentatious show of sorrow as her brother looked at her, but merely said:

'The father's gone to the field, again, if you want him, brother.'

'No, Gritty, no,' said Mr Tulliver, in a gentle tone. 'Don't you fret, - that's all, - I'll make a shift without the money a bit, only you must be as clever and contriving as you can.'

Mrs Moss's tears came again at this unexpected kindness, and she could say nothing.

'Come, come! - the little wench shall come and see you. I'll bring her and Tom some day before he goes to school. You mustn't fret. I'll allays be a good brother to you.'

'Thank you for that word, brother,' said Mrs Moss, drying her tears; then turning to Lizzy, she said, 'Run now, and fetch the colored egg for

cousin Maggie.' Lizzy ran in, and quickly reappeared with a small paper parcel.

'It's boiled hard, brother, and colored with thrums, very pretty; it was done o' purpose for Maggie. Will you please to carry it in your pocket?'

'Ay, ay,' said Mr Tulliver, putting it carefully in his side pocket. 'Good-by.'

And so the respectable miller returned along the Basset lanes rather more puzzled than before as to ways and means, but still with the sense of a danger escaped. It had come across his mind that if he were hard upon his sister, it might somehow tend to make Tom hard upon Maggie at some distant day, when her father was no longer there to take her part; for simple people, like our friend Mr Tulliver, are apt to clothe unimpeachable feelings in erroneous ideas, and this was his confused way of explaining to himself that his love and anxiety for 'the little wench' had given him a new sensibility toward his sister.