

Chapter VII - The Golden Gates Are Passed

So Tom went on even to the fifth half-year - till he was turned sixteen - at King's Lorton, while Maggie was growing with a rapidity which her aunts considered highly reprehensible, at Miss Firniss's boarding-school in the ancient town of Laceham on the Floss, with cousin Lucy for her companion. In her early letters to Tom she had always sent her love to Philip, and asked many questions about him, which were answered by brief sentences about Tom's toothache, and a turf-house which he was helping to build in the garden, with other items of that kind. She was pained to hear Tom say in the holidays that Philip was as queer as ever again, and often cross. They were no longer very good friends, she perceived; and when she reminded Tom that he ought always to love Philip for being so good to him when his foot was bad, he answered: 'Well, it isn't my fault; *I don't do anything to him.*' She hardly ever saw Philip during the remainder of their school-life; in the Midsummer holidays he was always away at the seaside, and at Christmas she could only meet him at long intervals in the street of St. Ogg's. When they did meet, she remembered her promise to kiss him, but, as a young lady who had been at a boarding-school, she knew now that such a greeting was out of the question, and Philip would not expect it. The promise was void, like so many other sweet, illusory promises of our childhood; void as promises made in Eden before the seasons were divided, and when the starry blossoms grew side by side with the ripening peach, - impossible to be fulfilled when the golden gates had been passed.

But when their father was actually engaged in the long-threatened lawsuit, and Wakem, as the agent at once of Pivart and Old Harry, was acting against him, even Maggie felt, with some sadness, that they were not likely ever to have any intimacy with Philip again; the very name of Wakem made her father angry, and she had once heard him say that if that crook-backed son lived to inherit his father's ill-gotten gains, there would be a curse upon him. 'Have as little to do with him at school as you can, my lad,' he said to Tom; and the command was obeyed the more easily because Mr Sterling by this time had two additional pupils; for though this gentleman's rise in the world was not of that meteor-like rapidity which the admirers of his extemporaneous eloquence had expected for a preacher whose voice demanded so wide a sphere, he had yet enough of growing prosperity to enable him to increase his expenditure in continued disproportion to his income.

As for Tom's school course, it went on with mill-like monotony, his mind continuing to move with a slow, half-stifled pulse in a medium uninteresting or unintelligible ideas. But each vacation he brought home larger and larger drawings with the satiny rendering of landscape, and water-colors in vivid greens, together with manuscript

books full of exercises and problems, in which the handwriting was all the finer because he gave his whole mind to it. Each vacation he brought home a new book or two, indicating his progress through different stages of history, Christian doctrine, and Latin literature; and that passage was not entirely without results, besides the possession of the books. Tom's ear and tongue had become accustomed to a great many words and phrases which are understood to be signs of an educated condition; and though he had never really applied his mind to any one of his lessons, the lessons had left a deposit of vague, fragmentary, ineffectual notions. Mr Tulliver, seeing signs of acquirement beyond the reach of his own criticism, thought it was probably all right with Tom's education; he observed, indeed, that there were no maps, and not enough 'summing'; but he made no formal complaint to Mr Stelling. It was a puzzling business, this schooling; and if he took Tom away, where could he send him with better effect?

By the time Tom had reached his last quarter at King's Lorton, the years had made striking changes in him since the day we saw him returning from Mr Jacobs's academy. He was a tall youth now, carrying himself without the least awkwardness, and speaking without more shyness than was a becoming symptom of blended diffidence and pride; he wore his tail-coat and his stand-up collars, and watched the down on his lip with eager impatience, looking every day at his virgin razor, with which he had provided himself in the last holidays. Philip had already left, - at the autumn quarter, - that he might go to the south for the winter, for the sake of his health; and this change helped to give Tom the unsettled, exultant feeling that usually belongs to the last months before leaving school. This quarter, too, there was some hope of his father's lawsuit being decided; *that* made the prospect of home more entirely pleasurable. For Tom, who had gathered his view of the case from his father's conversation, had no doubt that Pivart would be beaten.

Tom had not heard anything from home for some weeks, - a fact which did not surprise him, for his father and mother were not apt to manifest their affection in unnecessary letters, - when, to his great surprise, on the morning of a dark, cold day near the end of November, he was told, soon after entering the study at nine o'clock, that his sister was in the drawing-room. It was Mrs Stelling who had come into the study to tell him, and she left him to enter the drawing-room alone.

Maggie, too, was tall now, with braided and coiled hair; she was almost as tall as Tom, though she was only thirteen; and she really looked older than he did at that moment. She had thrown off her bonnet, her heavy braids were pushed back from her forehead, as if it would not bear that extra load, and her young face had a strangely

worn look, as her eyes turned anxiously toward the door. When Tom entered she did not speak, but only went up to him, put her arms round his neck, and kissed him earnestly. He was used to various moods of hers, and felt no alarm at the unusual seriousness of her greeting.

'Why, how is it you're come so early this cold morning, Maggie? Did you come in the gig?' said Tom, as she backed toward the sofa, and drew him to her side.

'No, I came by the coach. I've walked from the turnpike.'

'But how is it you're not at school? The holidays have not begun yet?'

'Father wanted me at home,' said Maggie, with a slight trembling of the lip. 'I came home three or four days ago.'

'Isn't my father well?' said Tom, rather anxiously.

'Not quite,' said Maggie. 'He's very unhappy, Tom. The lawsuit is ended, and I came to tell you because I thought it would be better for you to know it before you came home, and I didn't like only to send you a letter.'

'My father hasn't lost?' said Tom, hastily, springing from the sofa, and standing before Maggie with his hands suddenly thrust into his pockets.

'Yes, dear Tom,' said Maggie, looking up at him with trembling.

Tom was silent a minute or two, with his eyes fixed on the floor. Then he said:

'My father will have to pay a good deal of money, then?'

'Yes,' said Maggie, rather faintly.

'Well, it can't be helped,' said Tom, bravely, not translating the loss of a large sum of money into any tangible results. 'But my father's very much vexed, I dare say?' he added, looking at Maggie, and thinking that her agitated face was only part of her girlish way of taking things.

'Yes,' said Maggie, again faintly. Then, urged to fuller speech by Tom's freedom from apprehension, she said loudly and rapidly, as if the words *would* burst from her: 'Oh, Tom, he will lose the mill and the land and everything; he will have nothing left.'

Tom's eyes flashed out one look of surprise at her, before he turned pale, and trembled visibly. He said nothing, but sat down on the sofa again, looking vaguely out of the opposite window.

Anxiety about the future had never entered Tom's mind. His father had always ridden a good horse, kept a good house, and had the cheerful, confident air of a man who has plenty of property to fall back upon. Tom had never dreamed that his father would 'fail'; *that* was a form of misfortune which he had always heard spoken of as a deep disgrace, and disgrace was an idea that he could not associate with any of his relations, least of all with his father. A proud sense of family respectability was part of the very air Tom had been born and brought up in. He knew there were people in St. Ogg's who made a show without money to support it, and he had always heard such people spoken of by his own friends with contempt and reprobation. He had a strong belief, which was a lifelong habit, and required no definite evidence to rest on, that his father could spend a great deal of money if he chose; and since his education at Mr Stelling's had given him a more expensive view of life, he had often thought that when he got older he would make a figure in the world, with his horse and dogs and saddle, and other accoutrements of a fine young man, and show himself equal to any of his contemporaries at St. Ogg's, who might consider themselves a grade above him in society because their fathers were professional men, or had large oil-mills. As to the prognostics and headshaking of his aunts and uncles, they had never produced the least effect on him, except to make him think that aunts and uncles were disagreeable society; he had heard them find fault in much the same way as long as he could remember. His father knew better than they did.

The down had come on Tom's lip, yet his thoughts and expectations had been hitherto only the reproduction, in changed forms, of the boyish dreams in which he had lived three years ago. He was awakened now with a violent shock.

Maggie was frightened at Tom's pale, trembling silence. There was something else to tell him, - something worse. She threw her arms round him at last, and said, with a half sob:

'Oh, Tom - dear, dear Tom, don't fret too much; try and bear it well.'

Tom turned his cheek passively to meet her entreating kisses, and there gathered a moisture in his eyes, which he just rubbed away with his hand. The action seemed to rouse him, for he shook himself and said: 'I shall go home, with you, Maggie. Didn't my father say I was to go?'

'No, Tom, father didn't wish it,' said Maggie, her anxiety about *his* feeling helping her to master her agitation. What *would* he do when she told him all? 'But mother wants you to come, - poor mother! - she cries so. Oh, Tom, it's very dreadful at home.'

Maggie's lips grew whiter, and she began to tremble almost as Tom had done. The two poor things clung closer to each other, both trembling, - the one at an unshapen fear, the other at the image of a terrible certainty. When Maggie spoke, it was hardly above a whisper.

'And - and - poor father - - '

Maggie could not utter it. But the suspense was intolerable to Tom. A vague idea of going to prison, as a consequence of debt, was the shape his fears had begun to take.

'Where's my father?' he said impatiently. 'Tell me, Maggie.'

'He's at home,' said Maggie, finding it easier to reply to that question. 'But,' she added, after a pause, 'not himself - he fell off his horse. He has known nobody but me ever since - he seems to have lost his senses. O father, father - - '

With these last words, Maggie's sobs burst forth with the more violence for the previous struggle against them. Tom felt that pressure of the heart which forbids tears; he had no distinct vision of their troubles as Maggie had, who had been at home; he only felt the crushing weight of what seemed unmitigated misfortune. He tightened his arm almost convulsively round Maggie as she sobbed, but his face looked rigid and tearless, his eyes blank, - as if a black curtain of cloud had suddenly fallen on his path.

But Maggie soon checked herself abruptly; a single thought had acted on her like a startling sound.

'We must set out, Tom, we must not stay. Father will miss me; we must be at the turnpike at ten to meet the coach.' She said this with hasty decision, rubbing her eyes, and rising to seize her bonnet.

Tom at once felt the same impulse, and rose too. 'Wait a minute, Maggie,' he said. 'I must speak to Mr Stelling, and then we'll go.'

He thought he must go to the study where the pupils were; but on his way he met Mr Stelling, who had heard from his wife that Maggie appeared to be in trouble when she asked for her brother, and now that he thought the brother and sister had been alone long enough, was coming to inquire and offer his sympathy.

'Please, sir, I must go home,' Tom said abruptly, as he met Mr Stelling in the passage. 'I must go back with my sister directly. My father's lost his lawsuit - he's lost all his property - and he's very ill.'

Mr Stelling felt like a kind-hearted man; he foresaw a probable money loss for himself, but this had no appreciable share in his feeling, while he looked with grave pity at the brother and sister for whom youth and sorrow had begun together. When he knew how Maggie had come, and how eager she was to get home again, he hurried their departure, only whispering something to Mrs Stelling, who had followed him, and who immediately left the room.

Tom and Maggie were standing on the door-step, ready to set out, when Mrs Stelling came with a little basket, which she hung on Maggie's arm, saying: 'Do remember to eat something on the way, dear.' Maggie's heart went out toward this woman whom she had never liked, and she kissed her silently. It was the first sign within the poor child of that new sense which is the gift of sorrow, - that susceptibility to the bare offices of humanity which raises them into a bond of loving fellowship, as to haggard men among the ice-bergs the mere presence of an ordinary comrade stirs the deep fountains of affection.

Mr Stelling put his hand on Tom's shoulder and said: 'God bless you, my boy; let me know how you get on.' Then he pressed Maggie's hand; but there were no audible good-byes. Tom had so often thought how joyful he should be the day he left school 'for good!' And now his school years seemed like a holiday that had come to an end.

The two slight youthful figures soon grew indistinct on the distant road, - were soon lost behind the projecting hedgerow.

They had gone forth together into their life of sorrow, and they would never more see the sunshine undimmed by remembered cares. They had entered the thorny wilderness, and the golden gates of their childhood had forever closed behind them.