

## **Book III - The Downfall**

### **Chapter I - What Had Happened At Home**

When Mr Tulliver first knew the fact that the law-suit was decided against him, and that Pivart and Wakem were triumphant, every one who happened to observe him at the time thought that, for so confident and hot-tempered a man, he bore the blow remarkably well. He thought so himself; he thought he was going to show that if Wakem or anybody else considered him crushed, they would find themselves mistaken. He could not refuse to see that the costs of this protracted suit would take more than he possessed to pay them; but he appeared to himself to be full of expedients by which he could ward off any results but such as were tolerable, and could avoid the appearance of breaking down in the world. All the obstinacy and defiance of his nature, driven out of their old channel, found a vent for themselves in the immediate formation of plans by which he would meet his difficulties, and remain Mr Tulliver of Dorlcote Mill in spite of them. There was such a rush of projects in his brain, that it was no wonder his face was flushed when he came away from his talk with his attorney, Mr Gore, and mounted his horse to ride home from Lindum. There was Furley, who held the mortgage on the land, - a reasonable fellow, who would see his own interest, Mr Tulliver was convinced, and who would be glad not only to purchase the whole estate, including the mill and homestead, but would accept Mr Tulliver as tenant, and be willing to advance money to be repaid with high interest out of the profits of the business, which would be made over to him, Mr Tulliver only taking enough barely to maintain himself and his family. Who would neglect such a profitable investment? Certainly not Furley, for Mr Tulliver had determined that Furley should meet his plans with the utmost alacrity; and there are men whose brains have not yet been dangerously heated by the loss of a lawsuit, who are apt to see in their own interest or desires a motive for other men's actions. There was no doubt (in the miller's mind) that Furley would do just what was desirable; and if he did - why, things would not be so very much worse. Mr Tulliver and his family must live more meagrely and humbly, but it would only be till the profits of the business had paid off Furley's advances, and that might be while Mr Tulliver had still a good many years of life before him. It was clear that the costs of the suit could be paid without his being obliged to turn out of his old place, and look like a ruined man. It was certainly an awkward moment in his affairs. There was that suretyship for poor Riley, who had died suddenly last April, and left his friend saddled with a debt of two hundred and fifty pounds, - a fact which had helped to make Mr Tulliver's banking book less pleasant reading than a man might desire toward Christmas. Well! he had never been one of those poor-spirited sneaks who would refuse to give a helping hand to a fellow-traveller in this puzzling world. The really vexatious business

was the fact that some months ago the creditor who had lent him the five hundred pounds to repay Mrs Glegg had become uneasy about his money (set on by Wakem, of course), and Mr Tulliver, still confident that he should gain his suit, and finding it eminently inconvenient to raise the said sum until that desirable issue had taken place, had rashly acceded to the demand that he should give a bill of sale on his household furniture and some other effects, as security in lieu of the bond. It was all one, he had said to himself; he should soon pay off the money, and there was no harm in giving that security any more than another. But now the consequences of this bill of sale occurred to him in a new light, and he remembered that the time was close at hand when it would be enforced unless the money were repaid. Two months ago he would have declared stoutly that he would never be beholden to his wife's friends; but now he told himself as stoutly that it was nothing but right and natural that Bessy should go to the Pulletts and explain the thing to them; they would hardly let Bessy's furniture be sold, and it might be security to Pullett if he advanced the money, - there would, after all, be no gift or favor in the matter. Mr Tulliver would never have asked for anything from so poor-spirited a fellow for himself, but Bessy might do so if she liked.

It is precisely the proudest and most obstinate men who are the most liable to shift their position and contradict themselves in this sudden manner; everything is easier to them than to face the simple fact that they have been thoroughly defeated, and must begin life anew. And Mr Tulliver, you perceive, though nothing more than a superior miller and maltster, was as proud and obstinate as if he had been a very lofty personage, in whom such dispositions might be a source of that conspicuous, far-echoing tragedy, which sweeps the stage in regal robes, and makes the dullest chronicler sublime. The pride and obstinacy of millers and other insignificant people, whom you pass unnoticingly on the road every day, have their tragedy too; but it is of that unwept, hidden sort that goes on from generation to generation, and leaves no record, - such tragedy, perhaps, as lies in the conflicts of young souls, hungry for joy, under a lot made suddenly hard to them, under the dreariness of a home where the morning brings no promise with it, and where the unexpectant discontent of worn and disappointed parents weighs on the children like a damp, thick air, in which all the functions of life are depressed; or such tragedy as lies in the slow or sudden death that follows on a bruised passion, though it may be a death that finds only a parish funeral. There are certain animals to which tenacity of position is a law of life, - they can never flourish again, after a single wrench: and there are certain human beings to whom predominance is a law of life, - they can only sustain humiliation so long as they can refuse to believe in it, and, in their own conception, predominate still.

Mr Tulliver was still predominating, in his own imagination, as he approached St. Ogg's, through which he had to pass on his way homeward. But what was it that suggested to him, as he saw the Laceham coach entering the town, to follow it to the coach-office, and get the clerk there to write a letter, requiring Maggie to come home the very next day? Mr Tulliver's own hand shook too much under his excitement for him to write himself, and he wanted the letter to be given to the coachman to deliver at Miss Firniss's school in the morning. There was a craving which he would not account for to himself, to have Maggie near him, without delay, - she must come back by the coach to-morrow.

To Mrs Tulliver, when he got home, he would admit no difficulties, and scolded down her burst of grief on hearing that the lawsuit was lost, by angry assertions that there was nothing to grieve about. He said nothing to her that night about the bill of sale and the application to Mrs Pullet, for he had kept her in ignorance of the nature of that transaction, and had explained the necessity for taking an inventory of the goods as a matter connected with his will. The possession of a wife conspicuously one's inferior in intellect is, like other high privileges, attended with a few inconveniences, and, among the rest, with the occasional necessity for using a little deception.

The next day Mr Tulliver was again on horseback in the afternoon, on his way to Mr Gore's office at St. Ogg's. Gore was to have seen Furley in the morning, and to have sounded him in relation to Mr Tulliver's affairs. But he had not gone half-way when he met a clerk from Mr Gore's office, who was bringing a letter to Mr Tulliver. Mr Gore had been prevented by a sudden call of business from waiting at his office to see Mr Tulliver, according to appointment, but would be at his office at eleven to-morrow morning, and meanwhile had sent some important information by letter.

'Oh!' said Mr Tulliver, taking the letter, but not opening it. 'Then tell Gore I'll see him to-morrow at eleven'; and he turned his horse.

The clerk, struck with Mr Tulliver's glistening, excited glance, looked after him for a few moments, and then rode away. The reading of a letter was not the affair of an instant to Mr Tulliver; he took in the sense of a statement very slowly through the medium of written or even printed characters; so he had put the letter in his pocket, thinking he would open it in his armchair at home. But by-and-by it occurred to him that there might be something in the letter Mrs Tulliver must not know about, and if so, it would be better to keep it out of her sight altogether. He stopped his horse, took out the letter, and read it. It was only a short letter; the substance was, that Mr Gore had ascertained, on secret, but sure authority, that Furley had been lately much straitened for money, and had parted with his securities,

- among the rest, the mortgage on Mr Tulliver's property, which he had transferred to - - Wakem.

In half an hour after this Mr Tulliver's own wagoner found him lying by the roadside insensible, with an open letter near him, and his gray horse snuffing uneasily about him.

When Maggie reached home that evening, in obedience to her father's call, he was no longer insensible. About an hour before he had become conscious, and after vague, vacant looks around him, had muttered something about 'a letter,' which he presently repeated impatiently. At the instance of Mr Turnbull, the medical man, Gore's letter was brought and laid on the bed, and the previous impatience seemed to be allayed. The stricken man lay for some time with his eyes fixed on the letter, as if he were trying to knit up his thoughts by its help. But presently a new wave of memory seemed to have come and swept the other away; he turned his eyes from the letter to the door, and after looking uneasily, as if striving to see something his eyes were too dim for, he said, 'The little wench.'

He repeated the words impatiently from time to time, appearing entirely unconscious of everything except this one importunate want, and giving no sign of knowing his wife or any one else; and poor Mrs Tulliver, her feeble faculties almost paralyzed by this sudden accumulation of troubles, went backward and forward to the gate to see if the Laceham coach were coming, though it was not yet time.

But it came at last, and set down the poor anxious girl, no longer the 'little wench,' except to her father's fond memory.

'Oh, mother, what is the matter?' Maggie said, with pale lips, as her mother came toward her crying. She didn't think her father was ill, because the letter had come at his dictation from the office at St. Ogg's.

But Mr Turnbull came now to meet her; a medical man is the good angel of the troubled house, and Maggie ran toward the kind old friend, whom she remembered as long as she could remember anything, with a trembling, questioning look.

'Don't alarm yourself too much, my dear,' he said, taking her hand. 'Your father has had a sudden attack, and has not quite recovered his memory. But he has been asking for you, and it will do him good to see you. Keep as quiet as you can; take off your things, and come upstairs with me.'

Maggie obeyed, with that terrible beating of the heart which makes existence seem simply a painful pulsation. The very quietness with

which Mr Turnbull spoke had frightened her susceptible imagination. Her father's eyes were still turned uneasily toward the door when she entered and met the strange, yearning, helpless look that had been seeking her in vain. With a sudden flash and movement, he raised himself in the bed; she rushed toward him, and clasped him with agonized kisses.

Poor child! it was very early for her to know one of those supreme moments in life when all we have hoped or delighted in, all we can dread or endure, falls away from our regard as insignificant; is lost, like a trivial memory, in that simple, primitive love which knits us to the beings who have been nearest to us, in their times of helplessness or of anguish.

But that flash of recognition had been too great a strain on the father's bruised, enfeebled powers. He sank back again in renewed insensibility and rigidity, which lasted for many hours, and was only broken by a flickering return of consciousness, in which he took passively everything that was given to him, and seemed to have a sort of infantine satisfaction in Maggie's near presence, - such satisfaction as a baby has when it is returned to the nurse's lap.

Mrs Tulliver sent for her sisters, and there was much wailing and lifting up of hands below stairs. Both uncles and aunts saw that the ruin of Bessy and her family was as complete as they had ever foreboded it, and there was a general family sense that a judgment had fallen on Mr Tulliver, which it would be an impiety to counteract by too much kindness. But Maggie heard little of this, scarcely ever leaving her father's bedside, where she sat opposite him with her hand on his. Mrs Tulliver wanted to have Tom fetched home, and seemed to be thinking more of her boy even than of her husband; but the aunts and uncles opposed this. Tom was better at school, since Mr Turnbull said there was no immediate danger, he believed. But at the end of the second day, when Maggie had become more accustomed to her father's fits of insensibility, and to the expectation that he would revive from them, the thought of Tom had become urgent with *her* too; and when her mother sate crying at night and saying, 'My poor lad - it's nothing but right he should come home,' Maggie said, 'Let me go for him, and tell him, mother; I'll go to-morrow morning if father doesn't know me and want me. It would be so hard for Tom to come home and not know anything about it beforehand.'

And the next morning Maggie went, as we have seen. Sitting on the coach on their way home, the brother and sister talked to each other in sad, interrupted whispers.

'They say Mr Wakem has got a mortgage or something on the land, Tom,' said Maggie. 'It was the letter with that news in it that made father ill, they think.'

'I believe that scoundrel's been planning all along to ruin my father,' said Tom, leaping from the vaguest impressions to a definite conclusion. 'I'll make him feel for it when I'm a man. Mind you never speak to Philip again.'

'Oh, Tom!' said Maggie, in a tone of sad remonstrance; but she had no spirit to dispute anything then, still less to vex Tom by opposing him.