

Chapter II - Mrs Tulliver's Teraphim, Or Household Gods

When the coach set down Tom and Maggie, it was five hours since she had started from home, and she was thinking with some trembling that her father had perhaps missed her, and asked for 'the little wench' in vain. She thought of no other change that might have happened.

She hurried along the gravel-walk and entered the house before Tom; but in the entrance she was startled by a strong smell of tobacco. The parlor door was ajar; that was where the smell came from. It was very strange; could any visitor be smoking at a time like this? Was her mother there? If so, she must be told that Tom was come. Maggie, after this pause of surprise, was only in the act of opening the door when Tom came up, and they both looked into the parlor together.

There was a coarse, dingy man, of whose face Tom had some vague recollection, sitting in his father's chair, smoking, with a jug and glass beside him.

The truth flashed on Tom's mind in an instant. To 'have the bailiff in the house,' and 'to be sold up,' were phrases which he had been used to, even as a little boy; they were part of the disgrace and misery of 'failing,' of losing all one's money, and being ruined, - sinking into the condition of poor working people. It seemed only natural this should happen, since his father had lost all his property, and he thought of no more special cause for this particular form of misfortune than the loss of the lawsuit. But the immediate presence of this disgrace was so much keener an experience to Tom than the worst form of apprehension, that he felt at this moment as if his real trouble had only just begin; it was a touch on the irritated nerve compared with its spontaneous dull aching.

'How do you do, sir?' said the man, taking the pipe out of his mouth, with rough, embarrassed civility. The two young startled faces made him a little uncomfortable.

But Tom turned away hastily without speaking; the sight was too hateful. Maggie had not understood the appearance of this stranger, as Tom had. She followed him, whispering: 'Who can it be, Tom? What is the matter?' Then, with a sudden undefined dread lest this stranger might have something to do with a change in her father, she rushed upstairs, checking herself at the bedroom door to throw off her bonnet, and enter on tiptoe. All was silent there; her father was lying, heedless of everything around him, with his eyes closed as when she had left him. A servant was there, but not her mother.

'Where's my mother?' she whispered. The servant did not know.

Maggie hastened out, and said to Tom; 'Father is lying quiet; let us go and look for my mother. I wonder where she is.'

Mrs Tulliver was not downstairs, not in any of the bedrooms. There was but one room below the attic which Maggie had left unsearched; it was the storeroom, where her mother kept all her linen and all the precious 'best things' that were only unwrapped and brought out on special occasions.

Tom, preceding Maggie, as they returned along the passage, opened the door of this room, and immediately said, 'Mother!'

Mrs Tulliver was seated there with all her laid-up treasures. One of the linen chests was open; the silver teapot was unwrapped from its many folds of paper, and the best china was laid out on the top of the closed linen-chest; spoons and skewers and ladles were spread in rows on the shelves; and the poor woman was shaking her head and weeping, with a bitter tension of the mouth, over the mark, 'Elizabeth Dodson,' on the corner of some tablecloths she held in her lap.

She dropped them, and started up as Tom spoke.

'Oh, my boy, my boy!' she said, clasping him round the neck. 'To think as I should live to see this day! We're ruined - everything's going to be sold up - to think as your father should ha' married me to bring me to this! We've got nothing - we shall be beggars - we must go to the workhouse - - '

She kissed him, then seated herself again, and took another tablecloth on her lap, unfolding it a little way to look at the pattern, while the children stood by in mute wretchedness, their minds quite filled for the moment with the words 'beggars' and 'workhouse.'

'To think o' these cloths as I spun myself,' she went on, lifting things out and turning them over with an excitement all the more strange and piteous because the stout blond woman was usually so passive, - if she had been ruffled before, it was at the surface merely, - 'and Job Haxey wove 'em, and brought the piece home on his back, as I remember standing at the door and seeing him come, before I ever thought o' marrying your father! And the pattern as I chose myself, and bleached so beautiful, and I marked 'em so as nobody ever saw such marking, - they must cut the cloth to get it out, for it's a particular stitch. And they're all to be sold, and go into strange people's houses, and perhaps be cut with the knives, and wore out before I'm dead. You'll never have one of 'em, my boy,' she said, looking up at Tom with her eyes full of tears, 'and I meant 'em for you. I wanted you to have all o' this pattern. Maggie could have had the large check - it never shows so well when the dishes are on it.'

Tom was touched to the quick, but there was an angry reaction immediately. His face flushed as he said:

'But will my aunts let them be sold, mother? Do they know about it? They'll never let your linen go, will they? Haven't you sent to them?'

'Yes, I sent Luke directly they'd put the bailies in, and your aunt Pullet's been - and, oh dear, oh dear, she cries so and says your father's disgraced my family and made it the talk o' the country; and she'll buy the spotted cloths for herself, because she's never had so many as she wanted o' that pattern, and they sha'n't go to strangers, but she's got more checks a'ready nor she can do with.' (Here Mrs Tulliver began to lay back the tablecloths in the chest, folding and stroking them automatically.) 'And your uncle Glegg's been too, and he says things must be bought in for us to lie down on, but he must talk to your aunt; and they're all coming to consult. But I know they'll none of 'em take my chany,' she added, turning toward the cups and saucers, 'for they all found fault with 'em when I bought 'em, 'cause o' the small gold sprig all over 'em, between the flowers. But there's none of 'em got better chany, not even your aunt Pullet herself; and I bought it wi' my own money as I'd saved ever since I was turned fifteen; and the silver teapot, too, - your father never paid for 'em. And to think as he should ha' married me, and brought me to this.'

Mrs Tulliver burst out crying afresh, and she sobbed with her handkerchief at her eyes a few moments, but then removing it, she said in a deprecating way, still half sobbing, as if she were called upon to speak before she could command her voice, -

'And I *did* say to him times and times, 'Whatever you do, don't go to law,' and what more could I do? I've had to sit by while my own fortin's been spent, and what should ha' been my children's, too. You'll have niver a penny, my boy - but it isn't your poor mother's fault.'

She put out one arm toward Tom, looking up at him piteously with her helpless, childish blue eyes. The poor lad went to her and kissed her, and she clung to him. For the first time Tom thought of his father with some reproach. His natural inclination to blame, hitherto kept entirely in abeyance toward his father by the predisposition to think him always right, simply on the ground that he was Tom Tulliver's father, was turned into this new channel by his mother's complaints; and with his indignation against Wakem there began to mingle some indignation of another sort. Perhaps his father might have helped bringing them all down in the world, and making people talk of them with contempt, but no one should talk long of Tom Tulliver with contempt.

The natural strength and firmness of his nature was beginning to assert itself, urged by the double stimulus of resentment against his aunts, and the sense that he must behave like a man and take care of his mother.

'Don't fret, mother,' he said tenderly. 'I shall soon be able to get money; I'll get a situation of some sort.'

'Bless you, my boy!' said Mrs Tulliver, a little soothed. Then, looking round sadly, 'But I shouldn't ha' minded so much if we could ha' kept the things wi' my name on 'em.'

Maggie had witnessed this scene with gathering anger. The implied reproaches against her father - her father, who was lying there in a sort of living death - neutralized all her pity for griefs about tablecloths and china; and her anger on her father's account was heightened by some egoistic resentment at Tom's silent concurrence with her mother in shutting her out from the common calamity. She had become almost indifferent to her mother's habitual depreciation of her, but she was keenly alive to any sanction of it, however passive, that she might suspect in Tom. Poor Maggie was by no means made up of unalloyed devotedness, but put forth large claims for herself where she loved strongly. She burst out at last in an agitated, almost violent tone: 'Mother, how can you talk so; as if you cared only for things with *your* name on, and not for what has my father's name too; and to care about anything but dear father himself! - when he's lying there, and may never speak to us again. Tom, you ought to say so too; you ought not to let any one find fault with my father.'

Maggie, almost choked with mingled grief and anger, left the room, and took her old place on her father's bed. Her heart went out to him with a stronger movement than ever, at the thought that people would blame him. Maggie hated blame; she had been blamed all her life, and nothing had come of it but evil tempers.

Her father had always defended and excused her, and her loving remembrance of his tenderness was a force within her that would enable her to do or bear anything for his sake.

Tom was a little shocked at Maggie's outburst, - telling *him* as well as his mother what it was right to do! She ought to have learned better than have those hectoring, assuming manners, by this time. But he presently went into his father's room, and the sight there touched him in a way that effaced the slighter impressions of the previous hour. When Maggie saw how he was moved, she went to him and put her arm round his neck as he sat by the bed, and the two children forgot everything else in the sense that they had one father and one sorrow.