

Chapter VII - How A Hen Takes To Stratagem

The days passed, and Mr Tulliver showed, at least to the eyes of the medical man, stronger and stronger symptoms of a gradual return to his normal condition; the paralytic obstruction was, little by little, losing its tenacity, and the mind was rising from under it with fitful struggles, like a living creature making its way from under a great snowdrift, that slides and slides again, and shuts up the newly made opening.

Time would have seemed to creep to the watchers by the bed, if it had only been measured by the doubtful, distant hope which kept count of the moments within the chamber; but it was measured for them by a fast-approaching dread which made the nights come too quickly. While Mr Tulliver was slowly becoming himself again, his lot was hastening toward its moment of most palpable change. The taxing-masters had done their work like any respectable gunsmith conscientiously preparing the musket, that, duly pointed by a brave arm, will spoil a life or two. Allocaturs, filing of bills in Chancery, decrees of sale, are legal chain-shot or bomb-shells that can never hit a solitary mark, but must fall with widespread shattering. So deeply inherent is it in this life of ours that men have to suffer for each other's sins, so inevitably diffusive is human suffering, that even justice makes its victims, and we can conceive no retribution that does not spread beyond its mark in pulsations of unmerited pain.

By the beginning of the second week in January, the bills were out advertising the sale, under a decree of Chancery, of Mr Tulliver's farming and other stock, to be followed by a sale of the mill and land, held in the proper after-dinner hour at the Golden Lion. The miller himself, unaware of the lapse of time, fancied himself still in that first stage of his misfortunes when expedients might be thought of; and often in his conscious hours talked in a feeble, disjointed manner of plans he would carry out when he 'got well.' The wife and children were not without hope of an issue that would at least save Mr Tulliver from leaving the old spot, and seeking an entirely strange life. For uncle Deane had been induced to interest himself in this stage of the business. It would not, he acknowledged, be a bad speculation for Guest & Co. to buy Dorlcote Mill, and carry on the business, which was a good one, and might be increased by the addition of steam power; in which case Tulliver might be retained as manager. Still, Mr Deane would say nothing decided about the matter; the fact that Wakem held the mortgage on the land might put it into his head to bid for the whole estate, and further, to outbid the cautious firm of Guest & Co., who did not carry on business on sentimental grounds. Mr Deane was obliged to tell Mrs Tulliver something to that effect, when he rode over to the mill to inspect the books in company with Mrs Glegg; for she had observed that 'if Guest & Co. would only think

about it, Mr Tulliver's father and grandfather had been carrying on Dorlcote Mill long before the oil-mill of that firm had been so much as thought of.'

Mr Deane, in reply, doubted whether that was precisely the relation between the two mills which would determine their value as investments. As for uncle Glegg, the thing lay quite beyond his imagination; the good-natured man felt sincere pity for the Tulliver family, but his money was all locked up in excellent mortgages, and he could run no risk; that would be unfair to his own relatives; but he had made up his mind that Tulliver should have some new flannel waistcoats which he had himself renounced in favor of a more elastic commodity, and that he would buy Mrs Tulliver a pound of tea now and then; it would be a journey which his benevolence delighted in beforehand, to carry the tea and see her pleasure on being assured it was the best black.

Still, it was clear that Mr Deane was kindly disposed toward the Tullivers. One day he had brought Lucy, who was come home for the Christmas holidays, and the little blond angel-head had pressed itself against Maggie's darker cheek with many kisses and some tears. These fair slim daughters keep up a tender spot in the heart of many a respectable partner in a respectable firm, and perhaps Lucy's anxious, pitying questions about her poor cousins helped to make uncle Deane more prompt in finding Tom a temporary place in the warehouse, and in putting him in the way of getting evening lessons in book-keeping and calculation.

That might have cheered the lad and fed his hopes a little, if there had not come at the same time the much-dreaded blow of finding that his father must be a bankrupt, after all; at least, the creditors must be asked to take less than their due, which to Tom's untechnical mind was the same thing as bankruptcy. His father must not only be said to have 'lost his property,' but to have 'failed,' - the word that carried the worst obloquy to Tom's mind. For when the defendant's claim for costs had been satisfied, there would remain the friendly bill of Mr Gore, and the deficiency at the bank, as well as the other debts which would make the assets shrink into unequivocal disproportion; 'not more than ten or twelve shillings in the pound,' predicted Mr Deane, in a decided tone, tightening his lips; and the words fell on Tom like a scalding liquied, leaving a continual smart.

He was sadly in want of something to keep up his spirits a little in the unpleasant newness of his position, - suddenly transported from the easy carpeted *ennui* of study-hours at Mr Stelling's, and the busy idleness of castle-building in a 'last half' at school, to the companionship of sacks and hides, and bawling men thundering down heavy weights at his elbow. The first step toward getting on in

the world was a chill, dusty, noisy affair, and implied going without one's tea in order to stay in St. Ogg's and have an evening lesson from a one-armed elderly clerk, in a room smelling strongly of bad tobacco. Tom's young pink-and-white face had its colors very much deadened by the time he took off his hat at home, and sat down with keen hunger to his supper. No wonder he was a little cross if his mother or Maggie spoke to him.

But all this while Mrs Tulliver was brooding over a scheme by which she, and no one else, would avert the result most to be dreaded, and prevent Wakem from entertaining the purpose of bidding for the mill. Imagine a truly respectable and amiable hen, by some portentous anomaly, taking to reflection and inventing combinations by which she might prevail on Hodge not to wring her neck, or send her and her chicks to market; the result could hardly be other than much cackling and fluttering. Mrs Tulliver, seeing that everything had gone wrong, had begun to think she had been too passive in life; and that, if she had applied her mind to business, and taken a strong resolution now and then, it would have been all the better for her and her family. Nobody, it appeared, had thought of going to speak to Wakem on this business of the mill; and yet, Mrs Tulliver reflected, it would have been quite the shortest method of securing the right end. It would have been of no use, to be sure, for Mr Tulliver to go, - even if he had been able and willing, - for he had been 'going to law against Wakem' and abusing him for the last ten years; Wakem was always likely to have a spite against him. And now that Mrs Tulliver had come to the conclusion that her husband was very much in the wrong to bring her into this trouble, she was inclined to think that his opinion of Wakem was wrong too. To be sure, Wakem had 'put the bailies in the house, and sold them up'; but she supposed he did that to please the man that lent Mr Tulliver the money, for a lawyer had more folks to please than one, and he wasn't likely to put Mr Tulliver, who had gone to law with him, above everybody else in the world. The attorney might be a very reasonable man; why not? He had married a Miss Clint, and at the time Mrs Tulliver had heard of that marriage, the summer when she wore her blue satin spencer, and had not yet any thoughts of Mr Tulliver, she knew no harm of Wakem. And certainly toward herself, whom he knew to have been a Miss Dodson, it was out of all possibility that he could entertain anything but good-will, when it was once brought home to his observation that she, for her part, had never wanted to go to law, and indeed was at present disposed to take Mr Wakem's view of all subjects rather than her husband's. In fact, if that attorney saw a respectable matron like herself disposed 'to give him good words,' why shouldn't he listen to her representations? For she would put the matter clearly before him, which had never been done yet. And he would never go and bid for the mill on purpose to spite her, an innocent woman, who thought it likely enough that she had danced with him in their youth at Squire Darleigh's, for at those big

dances she had often and often danced with young men whose names she had forgotten.

Mrs Tulliver hid these reasonings in her own bosom; for when she had thrown out a hint to Mr Deane and Mr Glegg that she wouldn't mind going to speak to Wakem herself, they had said, 'No, no, no,' and 'Pooh, pooh,' and 'Let Wakem alone,' in the tone of men who were not likely to give a candid attention to a more definite exposition of her project; still less dared she mention the plan to Tom and Maggie, for 'the children were always so against everything their mother said'; and Tom, she observed, was almost as much set against Wakem as his father was. But this unusual concentration of thought naturally gave Mrs Tulliver an unusual power of device and determination: and a day or two before the sale, to be held at the Golden Lion, when there was no longer any time to be lost, she carried out her plan by a stratagem. There were pickles in question, a large stock of pickles and ketchup which Mrs Tulliver possessed, and which Mr Hyndmarsh, the grocer, would certainly purchase if she could transact the business in a personal interview, so she would walk with Tom to St. Ogg's that morning; and when Tom urged that she might let the pickles be at present, - he didn't like her to go about just yet, - she appeared so hurt at this conduct in her son, contradicting her about pickles which she had made after the family receipts inherited from his own grandmother, who had died when his mother was a little girl, that he gave way, and they walked together until she turned toward Danish Street, where Mr Hyndmarsh retailed his grocery, not far from the offices of Mr Wakem.

That gentleman was not yet come to his office; would Mrs Tulliver sit down by the fire in his private room and wait for him? She had not long to wait before the punctual attorney entered, knitting his brow with an examining glance at the stout blond woman who rose, curtsying deferentially, - a tallish man, with an aquiline nose and abundant iron-gray hair. You have never seen Mr Wakem before, and are possibly wondering whether he was really as eminent a rascal, and as crafty, bitter an enemy of honest humanity in general, and of Mr Tulliver in particular, as he is represented to be in that eidolon or portrait of him which we have seen to exist in the miller's mind.

It is clear that the irascible miller was a man to interpret any chance-shot that grazed him as an attempt on his own life, and was liable to entanglements in this puzzling world, which, due consideration had to his own infallibility, required the hypothesis of a very active diabolical agency to explain them. It is still possible to believe that the attorney was not more guilty toward him than an ingenious machine, which performs its work with much regularity, is guilty toward the rash man who, venturing too near it, is caught up by some fly-wheel or other, and suddenly converted into unexpected mince-meat.

But it is really impossible to decide this question by a glance at his person; the lines and lights of the human countenance are like other symbols, - not always easy to read without a key. On an *a priori* view of Wakem's aquiline nose, which offended Mr Tulliver, there was not more rascality than in the shape of his stiff shirt-collar, though this too along with his nose, might have become fraught with damnatory meaning when once the rascality was ascertained.

'Mrs Tulliver, I think?' said Mr Wakem.

'Yes, sir; Miss Elizabeth Dodson as was.'

'Pray be seated. You have some business with me?'

'Well, sir, yes,' said Mrs Tulliver, beginning to feel alarmed at her own courage, now she was really in presence of the formidable man, and reflecting that she had not settled with herself how she should begin. Mr Wakem felt in his waistcoat pockets, and looked at her in silence.

'I hope, sir,' she began at last, - 'I hope, sir, you're not a-thinking as I bear you any ill-will because o' my husband's losing his lawsuit, and the bailies being put in, and the linen being sold, - oh dear! - for I wasn't brought up in that way. I'm sure you remember my father, sir, for he was close friends with Squire Darleigh, and we allays went to the dances there, the Miss Dodsons, - nobody could be more looked on, - and justly, for there was four of us, and you're quite aware as Mrs Glegg and Mrs Deane are my sisters. And as for going to law and losing money, and having sales before you're dead, I never saw anything o' that before I was married, nor for a long while after. And I'm not to be answerable for my bad luck i' marrying out o' my own family into one where the goings-on was different. And as for being drawn in t' abuse you as other folks abuse you, sir, *that* I niver was, and nobody can say it of me.'

Mrs Tulliver shook her head a little, and looked at the hem of her pocket-handkerchief.

'I've no doubt of what you say, Mrs Tulliver,' said Mr Wakem, with cold politeness. 'But you have some question to ask me?'

'Well, sir, yes. But that's what I've said to myself, - I've said you'd had some nat'ral feeling; and as for my husband, as hasn't been himself for this two months, I'm not a-defending him, in no way, for being so hot about th' erigation, - not but what there's worse men, for he never wronged nobody of a shilling nor a penny, not willingly; and as for his fieriness and lawing, what could I do? And him struck as if it was with death when he got the letter as said you'd the hold upo' the land. But I can't believe but what you'll behave as a gentleman.'

'What does all this mean, Mrs Tulliver?' said Mr Wakem rather sharply. 'What do you want to ask me?'

'Why, sir, if you'll be so good,' said Mrs Tulliver, starting a little, and speaking more hurriedly, - 'if you'll be so good not to buy the mill an' the land, - the land wouldn't so much matter, only my husband ull' be like mad at your having it.'

Something like a new thought flashed across Mr Wakem's face as he said, 'Who told you I meant to buy it?'

'Why, sir, it's none o' my inventing, and I should never ha' thought of it; for my husband, as ought to know about the law, he allays used to say as lawyers had never no call to buy anything, - either lands or houses, - for they allays got 'em into their hands other ways. An' I should think that 'ud be the way with you, sir; and I niver said as you'd be the man to do contrary to that.'

'Ah, well, who was it that *did* say so?' said Wakem, opening his desk, and moving things about, with the accompaniment of an almost inaudible whistle.

'Why, sir, it was Mr Glegg and Mr Deane, as have all the management; and Mr Deane thinks as Guest &Co. 'ud buy the mill and let Mr Tulliver work it for 'em, if you didn't bid for it and raise the price. And it 'ud be such a thing for my husband to stay where he is, if he could get his living: for it was his father's before him, the mill was, and his grandfather built it, though I wasn't fond o' the noise of it, when first I was married, for there was no mills in our family, - not the Dodson's, - and if I'd known as the mills had so much to do with the law, it wouldn't have been me as 'ud have been the first Dodson to marry one; but I went into it blindfold, that I did, erigation and everything.'

'What! Guest &Co. would keep the mill in their own hands, I suppose, and pay your husband wages?'

'Oh dear, sir, it's hard to think of,' said poor Mrs Tulliver, a little tear making its way, 'as my husband should take wage. But it 'ud look more like what used to be, to stay at the mill than to go anywhere else; and if you'll only think - if you was to bid for the mill and buy it, my husband might be struck worse than he was before, and niver get better again as he's getting now.'

'Well, but if I bought the mill, and allowed your husband to act as my manager in the same way, how then?' said Mr Wakem.

'Oh, sir, I doubt he could niver be got to do it, not if the very mill stood still to beg and pray of him. For your name's like poison to him, it's so

as never was; and he looks upon it as you've been the ruin of him all along, ever since you set the law on him about the road through the meadow, - that's eight year ago, and he's been going on ever since - as I've allays told him he was wrong - - '

'He's a pig-headed, foul-mouthed fool!' burst out Mr Wakem, forgetting himself.

'Oh dear, sir!' said Mrs Tulliver, frightened at a result so different from the one she had fixed her mind on; 'I wouldn't wish to contradict you, but it's like enough he's changed his mind with this illness, - he's forgot a many things he used to talk about. And you wouldn't like to have a corpse on your mind, if he was to die; and they *do* say as it's allays unlucky when Dorlcote Mill changes hands, and the water might all run away, and *then* - not as I'm wishing you any ill-luck, sir, for I forgot to tell you as I remember your wedding as if it was yesterday; Mrs Wakem was a Miss Clint, I know *that*; and my boy, as there isn't a nicer, handsomer, straighter boy nowhere, went to school with your son - - '

Mr Wakem rose, opened the door, and called to one of his clerks.

'You must excuse me for interrupting you, Mrs Tulliver; I have business that must be attended to; and I think there is nothing more necessary to be said.'

'But if you *would* bear it in mind, sir,' said Mrs Tulliver, rising, 'and not run against me and my children; and I'm not denying Mr Tulliver's been in the wrong, but he's been punished enough, and there's worse men, for it's been giving to other folks has been his fault. He's done nobody any harm but himself and his family, - the more's the pity, - and I go and look at the bare shelves every day, and think where all my things used to stand.'

'Yes, yes, I'll bear it in mind,' said Mr Wakem, hastily, looking toward the open door.

'And if you'd please not to say as I've been to speak to you, for my son 'ud be very angry with me for demeaning myself, I know he would, and I've trouble enough without being scolded by my children.'

Poor Mrs Tulliver's voice trembled a little, and she could make no answer to the attorney's 'good morning,' but curtsied and walked out in silence.

'Which day is it that Dorlcote Mill is to be sold? Where's the bill?' said Mr Wakem to his clerk when they were alone.

'Next Friday is the day, - Friday at six o'clock.'

'Oh, just run to Winship's the auctioneer, and see if he's at home. I have some business for him; ask him to come up.'

Although, when Mr Wakem entered his office that morning, he had had no intention of purchasing Dorlcote Mill, his mind was already made up. Mrs Tulliver had suggested to him several determining motives, and his mental glance was very rapid; he was one of those men who can be prompt without being rash, because their motives run in fixed tracks, and they have no need to reconcile conflicting aims.

To suppose that Wakem had the same sort of inveterate hatred toward Tulliver that Tulliver had toward him would be like supposing that a pike and a roach can look at each other from a similar point of view. The roach necessarily abhors the mode in which the pike gets his living, and the pike is likely to think nothing further even of the most indignant roach than that he is excellent good eating; it could only be when the roach choked him that the pike could entertain a strong personal animosity. If Mr Tulliver had ever seriously injured or thwarted the attorney, Wakem would not have refused him the distinction of being a special object of his vindictiveness. But when Mr Tulliver called Wakem a rascal at the market dinner-table, the attorneys' clients were not a whit inclined to withdraw their business from him; and if, when Wakem himself happened to be present, some jocose cattle-feeder, stimulated by opportunity and brandy, made a thrust at him by alluding to old ladies' wills, he maintained perfect *sang froid*, and knew quite well that the majority of substantial men then present were perfectly contented with the fact that 'Wakem was Wakem'; that is to say, a man who always knew the stepping-stones that would carry him through very muddy bits of practice. A man who had made a large fortune, had a handsome house among the trees at Tofton, and decidedly the finest stock of port-wine in the neighborhood of St. Ogg's, was likely to feel himself on a level with public opinion. And I am not sure that even honest Mr Tulliver himself, with his general view of law as a cockpit, might not, under opposite circumstances, have seen a fine appropriateness in the truth that 'Wakem was Wakem'; since I have understood from persons versed in history, that mankind is not disposed to look narrowly into the conduct of great victors when their victory is on the right side. Tulliver, then, could be no obstruction to Wakem; on the contrary, he was a poor devil whom the lawyer had defeated several times; a hot-tempered fellow, who would always give you a handle against him. Wakem's conscience was not uneasy because he had used a few tricks against the miller; why should he hate that unsuccessful plaintiff, that pitiable, furious bull entangled in the meshes of a net?

Still, among the various excesses to which human nature is subject, moralists have never numbered that of being too fond of the people who openly revile us. The successful Yellow candidate for the borough of Old Topping, perhaps, feels no pursuant meditative hatred toward the Blue editor who consoles his subscribers with vituperative rhetoric against Yellow men who sell their country, and are the demons of private life; but he might not be sorry, if law and opportunity favored, to kick that Blue editor to a deeper shade of his favorite color. Prosperous men take a little vengeance now and then, as they take a diversion, when it comes easily in their way, and is no hindrance to business; and such small unimpassioned revenges have an enormous effect in life, running through all degrees of pleasant infliction, blocking the fit men out of places, and blackening characters in unpremeditated talk. Still more, to see people who have been only insignificantly offensive to us reduced in life and humiliated, without any special effort of ours, is apt to have a soothing, flattering influence. Providence or some other prince of this world, it appears, has undertaken the task of retribution for us; and really, by an agreeable constitution of things, our enemies somehow *don't* prosper.

Wakem was not without this parenthetic vindictiveness toward the uncomplimentary miller; and now Mrs Tulliver had put the notion into his head, it presented itself to him as a pleasure to do the very thing that would cause Mr Tulliver the most deadly mortification, - and a pleasure of a complex kind, not made up of crude malice, but mingling with it the relish of self-approbation. To see an enemy humiliated gives a certain contentment, but this is jejune compared with the highly blent satisfaction of seeing him humiliated by your benevolent action or concession on his behalf. That is a sort of revenge which falls into the scale of virtue, and Wakem was not without an intention of keeping that scale respectably filled. He had once had the pleasure of putting an old enemy of his into one of the St. Ogg's almshouses, to the rebuilding of which he had given a large subscription; and here was an opportunity of providing for another by making him his own servant. Such things give a completeness to prosperity, and contribute elements of agreeable consciousness that are not dreamed of by that short-sighted, overheated vindictiveness which goes out its way to wreak itself in direct injury. And Tulliver, with his rough tongue filed by a sense of obligation, would make a better servant than any chance-fellow who was cap-in-hand for a situation. Tulliver was known to be a man of proud honesty, and Wakem was too acute not to believe in the existence of honesty. He was given too observing individuals, not to judging of them according to maxims, and no one knew better than he that all men were not like himself. Besides, he intended to overlook the whole business of land and mill pretty closely; he was fond of these practical rural matters. But there were good reasons for purchasing Dorlcote Mill, quite apart from any benevolent vengeance on the miller. It was really a capital investment;

besides, Guest & Co. were going to bid for it. Mr Guest and Mr Wakem were on friendly dining terms, and the attorney liked to predominate over a ship-owner and mill-owner who was a little too loud in the town affairs as well as in his table-talk. For Wakem was not a mere man of business; he was considered a pleasant fellow in the upper circles of St. Ogg's - chatted amusingly over his port-wine, did a little amateur farming, and had certainly been an excellent husband and father; at church, when he went there, he sat under the handsomest of mural monuments erected to the memory of his wife. Most men would have married again under his circumstances, but he was said to be more tender to his deformed son than most men were to their best-shaped offspring. Not that Mr Wakem had not other sons beside Philip; but toward them he held only a chiaroscuro parentage, and provided for them in a grade of life duly beneath his own. In this fact, indeed, there lay the clenching motive to the purchase of Dorlcote Mill. While Mrs Tulliver was talking, it had occurred to the rapid-minded lawyer, among all the other circumstances of the case, that this purchase would, in a few years to come, furnish a highly suitable position for a certain favorite lad whom he meant to bring on in the world.

These were the mental conditions on which Mrs Tulliver had undertaken to act persuasively, and had failed; a fact which may receive some illustration from the remark of a great philosopher, that fly-fishers fail in preparing their bait so as to make it alluring in the right quarter, for want of a due acquaintance with the subjectivity of fishes.