Chapter IX - An Item Added To The Family Register

That first moment of renunciation and submission was followed by days of violent struggle in the miller's mind, as the gradual access of bodily strength brought with it increasing ability to embrace in one view all the conflicting conditions under which he found himself. Feeble limbs easily resign themselves to be tethered, and when we are subdued by sickness it seems possible to us to fulfil pledges which the old vigor comes back and breaks. There were times when poor Tulliver thought the fulfilment of his promise to Bessy was something quite too hard for human nature; he had promised her without knowing what she was going to say, - she might as well have asked him to carry a ton weight on his back. But again, there were many feelings arguing on her side, besides the sense that life had been made hard to her by having married him. He saw a possibility, by much pinching, of saving money out of his salary toward paying a second dividend to his creditors, and it would not be easy elsewhere to get a situation such as he could fill.

He had led an easy life, ordering much and working little, and had no aptitude for any new business. He must perhaps take to day-labor, and his wife must have help from her sisters, - a prospect doubly bitter to him, now they had let all Bessy's precious things be sold, probably because they liked to set her against him, by making her feel that he had brought her to that pass. He listened to their admonitory talk, when they came to urge on him what he was bound to do for poor Bessy's sake, with averted eyes, that every now and then flashed on them furtively when their backs were turned. Nothing but the dread of needing their help could have made it an easier alternative to take their advice.

But the strongest influence of all was the love of the old premises where he had run about when he was a boy, just as Tom had done after him. The Tullivers had lived on this spot for generations, and he had sat listening on a low stool on winter evenings while his father talked of the old half-timbered mill that had been there before the last great floods which damaged it so that his grandfather pulled it down and built the new one. It was when he got able to walk about and look at all the old objects that he felt the strain of his clinging affection for the old home as part of his life, part of himself. He couldn't bear to think of himself living on any other spot than this, where he knew the sound of every gate door, and felt that the shape and color of every roof and weather-stain and broken hillock was good, because his growing senses had been fed on them. Our instructed vagrancy, which was hardly time to linger by the hedgerows, but runs away early to the tropics, and is at home with palms and banyans, - which is nourished on books of travel and stretches the theatre of its imagination to the Zambesi, - can hardly get a dim notion of what an old-fashioned man

like Tulliver felt for this spot, where all his memories centred, and where life seemed like a familiar smooth-handled tool that the fingers clutch with loving ease. And just now he was living in that freshened memory of the far-off time which comes to us in the passive hours of recovery from sickness.

'Ay, Luke,' he said one afternoon, as he stood looking over the orchard gate, 'I remember the day they planted those apple-trees. My father was a huge man for planting, - it was like a merry-making to him to get a cart full o' young trees; and I used to stand i' the cold with him, and follow him about like a dog.'

Then he turned round, and leaning against the gate-post, looked at the opposite buildings.

'The old mill 'ud miss me, I think, Luke. There's a story as when the mill changes hands, the river's angry; I've heard my father say it many a time. There's no telling whether there mayn't be summat *in* the story, for this is a puzzling world, and Old Harry's got a finger in it - it's been too many for me, I know.'

'Ay, sir,' said Luke, with soothing sympathy, 'what wi' the rust on the wheat, an' the firin' o' the ricks an' that, as I've seen i' my time, - things often looks comical; there's the bacon fat wi' our last pig run away like butter, - it leaves nought but a scratchin'.'

'It's just as if it was yesterday, now,' Mr Tulliver went on, 'when my father began the malting. I remember, the day they finished the malt-house, I thought summat great was to come of it; for we'd a plum-pudding that day and a bit of a feast, and I said to my mother, - she was a fine dark-eyed woman, my mother was, - the little wench 'ull be as like her as two peas.' Here Mr Tulliver put his stick between his legs, and took out his snuff-box, for the greater enjoyment of this anecdote, which dropped from him in fragments, as if he every other moment lost narration in vision. 'I was a little chap no higher much than my mother's knee, - she was sore fond of us children, Gritty and me, - and so I said to her, 'Mother,' I said, 'shall we have plum-pudding *every* day because o' the malt-house? She used to tell me o' that till her dying day. She was but a young woman when she died, my mother was. But it's forty good year since they finished the malt-house, and it isn't many days out of 'em all as I haven't looked out into the yard there, the first thing in the morning, - all weathers, from year's end to year's end. I should go off my head in a new place. I should be like as if I'd lost my way. It's all hard, whichever way I look at it, - the harness 'ull gall me, but it 'ud be summat to draw along the old road, instead of a new un.'

‘Ay, sir,’ said Luke, ‘you'd be a deal better here nor in some new place. I can't abide new places mysen: things is allays awk'ard, - narrow-wheeled waggins, belike, and the stiles all another sort, an' oat-cake i' some places, tow'rt th' head o' the Floss, there. It's poor work, changing your country-side.’

‘But I doubt, Luke, they'll be for getting rid o' Ben, and making you do with a lad; and I must help a bit wi' the mill. You'll have a worse place.’

‘Ne'er mind, sir,’ said Luke, ‘I sha'n't plague mysen. I'n been wi' you twenty year, an' you can't get twenty year wi' whistlin' for 'em, no more nor you can make the trees grow: you mun wait till God A'mighty sends 'em. I can't abide new victual nor new faces, *I* can't, - you niver know but what they'll gripe you.’

The walk was finished in silence after this, for Luke had disburthened himself of thoughts to an extent that left his conversational resources quite barren, and Mr Tulliver had relapsed from his recollections into a painful meditation on the choice of hardships before him. Maggie noticed that he was unusually absent that evening at tea; and afterward he sat leaning forward in his chair, looking at the ground, moving his lips, and shaking his head from time to time. Then he looked hard at Mrs Tulliver, who was knitting opposite him, then at Maggie, who, as she bent over her sewing, was intensely conscious of some drama going forward in her father's mind. Suddenly he took up the poker and broke the large coal fiercely.

‘Dear heart, Mr Tulliver, what can you be thinking of?’ said his wife, looking up in alarm; ‘it's very wasteful, breaking the coal, and we've got hardly any large coal left, and I don't know where the rest is to come from.’

‘I don't think you're quite so well to-night, are you, father?’ said Maggie; ‘you seem uneasy.’

‘Why, how is it Tom doesn't come?’ said Mr Tulliver, impatiently.

‘Dear heart, is it time? I must go and get his supper,’ said Mrs Tulliver, laying down her knitting, and leaving the room.

‘It's nigh upon half-past eight,’ said Mr Tulliver. ‘He'll be here soon. Go, go and get the big Bible, and open it at the beginning, where everything's set down. And get the pen and ink.’

Maggie obeyed, wondering; but her father gave no further orders, and only sat listening for Tom's footfall on the gravel, apparently irritated by the wind, which had risen, and was roaring so as to drown all other

sounds. There was a strange light in his eyes that rather frightened Maggie; *she* began to wish that Tom would come, too.

'There he is, then,' said Mr Tulliver, in an excited way, when the knock came at last. Maggie went to open the door, but her mother came out of the kitchen hurriedly, saying, 'Stop a bit, Maggie; I'll open it.'

Mrs Tulliver had begun to be a little frightened at her boy, but she was jealous of every office others did for him.

'Your supper's ready by the kitchen-fire, my boy,' she said, as he took off his hat and coat. 'You shall have it by yourself, just as you like, and I won't speak to you.'

'I think my father wants Tom, mother,' said Maggie; 'he must come into the parlor first.'

Tom entered with his usual saddened evening face, but his eyes fell immediately on the open Bible and the inkstand, and he glanced with a look of anxious surprise at his father, who was saying, -

'Come, come, you're late; I want you.'

'Is there anything the matter, father?' said Tom.

'You sit down, all of you,' said Mr Tulliver, peremptorily.

'And, Tom, sit down here; I've got something for you to write i' the Bible.'

They all three sat down, looking at him. He began to speak slowly, looking first at his wife.

'I've made up my mind, Bessy, and I'll be as good as my word to you. There'll be the same grave made for us to lie down in, and we mustn't be bearing one another ill-will. I'll stop in the old place, and I'll serve under Wakem, and I'll serve him like an honest man; there's no Tulliver but what's honest, mind that, Tom,' - here his voice rose, - 'they'll have it to throw up against me as I paid a dividend, but it wasn't my fault; it was because there's raskills in the world. They've been too many for me, and I must give in. I'll put my neck in harness, - for you've a right to say as I've brought you into trouble, Bessy, - and I'll serve him as honest as if he was no raskill; I'm an honest man, though I shall never hold my head up no more. I'm a tree as is broke - a tree as is broke.'

He paused and looked on the ground. Then suddenly raising his head, he said, in a louder yet deeper tone:

‘But I won't forgive him! I know what they say, he never meant me any harm. That's the way Old Harry props up the rascals. He's been at the bottom of everything; but he's a fine gentleman, - I know, I know. I shouldn't ha' gone to law, they say. But who made it so as there was no arbitratin', and no justice to be got? It signifies nothing to him, I know that; he's one o' them fine gentlemen as get money by doing business for poorer folks, and when he's made beggars of 'em he'll give 'em charity. I won't forgive him! I wish he might be punished with shame till his own son 'ud like to forget him. I wish he may do summat as they'd make him work at the treadmill! But he won't, - he's too big a raskill to let the law lay hold on him. And you mind this, Tom, - you never forgive him neither, if you mean to be my son. There'll maybe come a time when you may make him feel; it'll never come to me; I'n got my head under the yoke. Now write - write it i' the Bible.’

‘Oh, father, what?’ said Maggie, sinking down by his knee, pale and trembling. ‘It's wicked to curse and bear malice.’

‘It isn't wicked, I tell you,’ said her father, fiercely. ‘It's wicked as the raskills should prosper; it's the Devil's doing. Do as I tell you, Tom. Write.’

‘What am I to write?’ said Tom, with gloomy submission.

‘Write as your father, Edward Tulliver, took service under John Wakem, the man as had helped to ruin him, because I'd promised my wife to make her what amends I could for her trouble, and because I wanted to die in th' old place where I was born and my father was born. Put that i' the right words - you know how - and then write, as I don't forgive Wakem for all that; and for all I'll serve him honest, I wish evil may befall him. Write that.’

There was a dead silence as Tom's pen moved along the paper; Mrs Tulliver looked scared, and Maggie trembled like a leaf.

‘Now let me hear what you've wrote,’ said Mr Tulliver, Tom read aloud slowly.

‘Now write - write as you'll remember what Wakem's done to your father, and you'll make him and his feel it, if ever the day comes. And sign your name Thomas Tulliver.’

‘Oh no, father, dear father!’ said Maggie, almost choked with fear. ‘You shouldn't make Tom write that.’

‘Be quiet, Maggie!’ said Tom. ‘I *shall* write it.’