

## Chapter V - The Last Conflict

In the second week of September, Maggie was again sitting in her lonely room, battling with the old shadowy enemies that were forever slain and rising again. It was past midnight, and the rain was beating heavily against the window, driven with fitful force by the rushing, loud-moaning wind. For the day after Lucy's visit there had been a sudden change in the weather; the heat and drought had given way to cold variable winds, and heavy falls of rain at intervals; and she had been forbidden to risk the contemplated journey until the weather should become more settled. In the counties higher up the Floss the rains had been continuous, and the completion of the harvest had been arrested. And now, for the last two days, the rains on this lower course of the river had been incessant, so that the old men had shaken their heads and talked of sixty years ago, when the same sort of weather, happening about the equinox, brought on the great floods, which swept the bridge away, and reduced the town to great misery. But the younger generation, who had seen several small floods, thought lightly of these sombre recollections and forebodings; and Bob Jakin, naturally prone to take a hopeful view of his own luck, laughed at his mother when she regretted their having taken a house by the riverside, observing that but for that they would have had no boats, which were the most lucky of possessions in case of a flood that obliged them to go to a distance for food.

But the careless and the fearful were alike sleeping in their beds now. There was hope that the rain would abate by the morrow; threatenings of a worse kind, from sudden thaws after falls of snow, had often passed off, in the experience of the younger ones; and at the very worst, the banks would be sure to break lower down the river when the tide came in with violence, and so the waters would be carried off, without causing more than temporary inconvenience, and losses that would be felt only by the poorer sort, whom charity would relieve.

All were in their beds now, for it was past midnight; all except some solitary watchers such as Maggie. She was seated in her little parlor toward the river, with one candle, that left everything dim in the room except a letter which lay before her on the table. That letter, which had come to her to-day, was one of the causes that had kept her up far on into the night, unconscious how the hours were going, careless of seeking rest, with no image of rest coming across her mind, except of that far, far off rest from which there would be no more waking for her into this struggling earthly life.

Two days before Maggie received that letter, she had been to the Rectory for the last time. The heavy rain would have prevented her from going since; but there was another reason. Dr. Kenn, at first enlightened only by a few hints as to the new turn which gossip and

slander had taken in relation to Maggie, had recently been made more fully aware of it by an earnest remonstrance from one of his male parishioners against the indiscretion of persisting in the attempt to overcome the prevalent feeling in the parish by a course of resistance. Dr. Kenn, having a conscience void of offence in the matter, was still inclined to persevere, - was still averse to give way before a public sentiment that was odious and contemptible; but he was finally wrought upon by the consideration of the peculiar responsibility attached to his office, of avoiding the appearance of evil, - an 'appearance' that is always dependent on the average quality of surrounding minds. Where these minds are low and gross, the area of that 'appearance' is proportionately widened. Perhaps he was in danger of acting from obstinacy; perhaps it was his duty to succumb. Conscientious people are apt to see their duty in that which is the most painful course; and to recede was always painful to Dr. Kenn. He made up his mind that he must advise Maggie to go away from St. Ogg's for a time; and he performed that difficult task with as much delicacy as he could, only stating in vague terms that he found his attempt to countenance her stay was a source of discord between himself and his parishioners, that was likely to obstruct his usefulness as a clergyman. He begged her to allow him to write to a clerical friend of his, who might possibly take her into his own family as governess; and, if not, would probably know of some other available position for a young woman in whose welfare Dr. Kenn felt a strong interest.

Poor Maggie listened with a trembling lip; she could say nothing but a faint 'Thank you, I shall be grateful'; and she walked back to her lodgings, through the driving rain, with a new sense of desolation. She must be a lonely wanderer; she must go out among fresh faces, that would look at her wonderingly, because the days did not seem joyful to her; she must begin a new life, in which she would have to rouse herself to receive new impressions; and she was so unspeakably, sickeningly weary! There was no home, no help for the erring; even those who pitied were constrained to hardness. But ought she to complain? Ought she to shrink in this way from the long penance of life, which was all the possibility she had of lightening the load to some other sufferers, and so changing that passionate error into a new force of unselfish human love? All the next day she sat in her lonely room, with a window darkened by the cloud and the driving rain, thinking of that future, and wrestling for patience; for what repose could poor Maggie ever win except by wrestling?

And on the third day - this day of which she had just sat out the close - the letter had come which was lying on the table before her.

The letter was from Stephen. He was come back from Holland; he was at Mudport again, unknown to any of his friends, and had written to

her from that place, enclosing the letter to a person whom he trusted in St. Ogg's. From beginning to end it was a passionate cry of reproach; an appeal against her useless sacrifice of him, of herself, against that perverted notion of right which led her to crush all his hopes, for the sake of a mere idea, and not any substantial good, - *his* hopes, whom she loved, and who loved her with that single overpowering passion, that worship, which a man never gives to a woman more than once in his life.

'They have written to me that you are to marry Kenn. As if I should believe that! Perhaps they have told you some such fables about me. Perhaps they tell you I've been 'travelling.' My body has been dragged about somewhere; but *I* have never travelled from the hideous place where you left me; where I started up from the stupor of helpless rage to find you gone.

'Maggie! whose pain can have been like mine? Whose injury is like mine? Who besides me has met that long look of love that has burnt itself into my soul, so that no other image can come there? Maggie, call me back to you! Call me back to life and goodness! I am banished from both now. I have no motives; I am indifferent to everything. Two months have only deepened the certainty that I can never care for life without you. Write me one word; say 'Come!' In two days I should be with you. Maggie, have you forgotten what it was to be together, - to be within reach of a look, to be within hearing of each other's voice?'

When Maggie first read this letter she felt as if her real temptation had only just begun. At the entrance of the chill dark cavern, we turn with unworn courage from the warm light; but how, when we have trodden far in the damp darkness, and have begun to be faint and weary; how, if there is a sudden opening above us, and we are invited back again to the life-nourishing day? The leap of natural longing from under the pressure of pain is so strong, that all less immediate motives are likely to be forgotten - till the pain has been escaped from.

For hours Maggie felt as if her struggle had been in vain. For hours every other thought that she strove to summon was thrust aside by the image of Stephen waiting for the single word that would bring him to her. She did not *read* the letter: she heard him uttering it, and the voice shook her with its old strange power. All the day before she had been filled with the vision of a lonely future through which she must carry the burthen of regret, upheld only by clinging faith. And here, close within her reach, urging itself upon her even as a claim, was another future, in which hard endurance and effort were to be exchanged for easy, delicious leaning on another's loving strength! And yet that promise of joy in the place of sadness did not make the dire force of the temptation to Maggie.

It was Stephen's tone of misery, it was the doubt in the justice of her own resolve, that made the balance tremble, and made her once start from her seat to reach the pen and paper, and write 'Come!'

But close upon that decisive act, her mind recoiled; and the sense of contradiction with her past self in her moments of strength and clearness came upon her like a pang of conscious degradation. No, she must wait; she must pray; the light that had forsaken her would come again; she should feel again what she had felt when she had fled away, under an inspiration strong enough to conquer agony, - to conquer love; she should feel again what she had felt when Lucy stood by her, when Philip's letter had stirred all the fibres that bound her to the calmer past.

She sat quite still, far on into the night, with no impulse to change her attitude, without active force enough even for the mental act of prayer; only waiting for the light that would surely come again. It came with the memories that no passion could long quench; the long past came back to her, and with it the fountains of self-renouncing pity and affection, of faithfulness and resolve. The words that were marked by the quiet hand in the little old book that she had long ago learned by heart, rushed even to her lips, and found a vent for themselves in a low murmur that was quite lost in the loud driving of the rain against the window and the loud moan and roar of the wind. 'I have received the Cross, I have received it from Thy hand; I will bear it, and bear it till death, as Thou hast laid it upon me.'

But soon other words rose that could find no utterance but in a sob, - 'Forgive me, Stephen! It will pass away. You will come back to her.'

She took up the letter, held it to the candle, and let it burn slowly on the hearth. To-morrow she would write to him the last word of parting.

'I will bear it, and bear it till death. But how long it will be before death comes! I am so young, so healthy. How shall I have patience and strength? Am I to struggle and fall and repent again? Has life other trials as hard for me still?'

With that cry of self-despair, Maggie fell on her knees against the table, and buried her sorrow-stricken face. Her soul went out to the Unseen Pity that would be with her to the end. Surely there was something being taught her by this experience of great need; and she must be learning a secret of human tenderness and long-suffering, that the less erring could hardly know? 'O God, if my life is to be long, let me live to bless and comfort - -'

At that moment Maggie felt a startling sensation of sudden cold about her knees and feet; it was water flowing under her. She started up; the stream was flowing under the door that led into the passage. She was not bewildered for an instant; she knew it was the flood!

The tumult of emotion she had been enduring for the last twelve hours seemed to have left a great calm in her; without screaming, she hurried with the candle upstairs to Bob Jakin's bedroom. The door was ajar; she went in and shook him by the shoulder.

'Bob, the flood is come! it is in the house; let us see if we can make the boats safe.'

She lighted his candle, while the poor wife, snatching up her baby, burst into screams; and then she hurried down again to see if the waters were rising fast. There was a step down into the room at the door leading from the staircase; she saw that the water was already on a level with the step. While she was looking, something came with a tremendous crash against the window, and sent the leaded panes and the old wooden framework inward in shivers, the water pouring in after it.

'It is the boat!' cried Maggie. 'Bob, come down to get the boats!'

And without a moment's shudder of fear, she plunged through the water, which was rising fast to her knees, and by the glimmering light of the candle she had left on the stairs, she mounted on to the window-sill, and crept into the boat, which was left with the prow lodging and protruding through the window. Bob was not long after her, hurrying without shoes or stockings, but with the lanthorn in his hand.

'Why, they're both here, - both the boats,' said Bob, as he got into the one where Maggie was. 'It's wonderful this fastening isn't broke too, as well as the mooring.'

In the excitement of getting into the other boat, unfastening it, and mastering an oar, Bob was not struck with the danger Maggie incurred. We are not apt to fear for the fearless, when we are companions in their danger, and Bob's mind was absorbed in possible expedients for the safety of the helpless indoors. The fact that Maggie had been up, had waked him, and had taken the lead in activity, gave Bob a vague impression of her as one who would help to protect, not need to be protected. She too had got possession of an oar, and had pushed off, so as to release the boat from the overhanging window-frame.

'The water's rising so fast,' said Bob, 'I doubt it'll be in at the chambers before long, - th' house is so low. I've more mind to get Prissy and the child and the mother into the boat, if I could, and trusten to the water, - for th' old house is none so safe. And if I let go the boat - but *you*,' he exclaimed, suddenly lifting the light of his lantern on Maggie, as she stood in the rain with the oar in her hand and her black hair streaming.

Maggie had no time to answer, for a new tidal current swept along the line of the houses, and drove both the boats out on to the wide water, with a force that carried them far past the meeting current of the river.

In the first moments Maggie felt nothing, thought of nothing, but that she had suddenly passed away from that life which she had been dreading; it was the transition of death, without its agony, - and she was alone in the darkness with God.

The whole thing had been so rapid, so dreamlike, that the threads of ordinary association were broken; she sank down on the seat clutching the oar mechanically, and for a long while had no distinct conception of her position. The first thing that waked her to fuller consciousness was the cessation of the rain, and a perception that the darkness was divided by the faintest light, which parted the overhanging gloom from the immeasurable watery level below. She was driven out upon the flood, - that awful visitation of God which her father used to talk of; which had made the nightmare of her childish dreams. And with that thought there rushed in the vision of the old home, and Tom, and her mother, - they had all listened together.

'O God, where am I? Which is the way home?' she cried out, in the dim loneliness.

What was happening to them at the Mill? The flood had once nearly destroyed it. They might be in danger, in distress, - her mother and her brother, alone there, beyond reach of help! Her whole soul was strained now on that thought; and she saw the long-loved faces looking for help into the darkness, and finding none.

She was floating in smooth water now, - perhaps far on the overflowed fields. There was no sense of present danger to check the outgoing of her mind to the old home; and she strained her eyes against the curtain of gloom that she might seize the first sight of her whereabouts, - that she might catch some faint suggestion of the spot toward which all her anxieties tended. Oh, how welcome, the widening of that dismal watery level, the gradual uplifting of the cloudy firmament, the slowly defining blackness of objects above the glassy dark! Yes, she must be out on the fields; those were the tops of

hedgerow trees. Which way did the river lie? Looking behind her, she saw the lines of black trees; looking before her, there were none; then the river lay before her. She seized an oar and began to paddle the boat forward with the energy of wakening hope; the dawning seemed to advance more swiftly, now she was in action; and she could soon see the poor dumb beasts crowding piteously on a mound where they had taken refuge. Onward she paddled and rowed by turns in the growing twilight; her wet clothes clung round her, and her streaming hair was dashed about by the wind, but she was hardly conscious of any bodily sensations, - except a sensation of strength, inspired by mighty emotion. Along with the sense of danger and possible rescue for those long-remembered beings at the old home, there was an undefined sense of reconciliation with her brother; what quarrel, what harshness, what unbelief in each other can subsist in the presence of a great calamity, when all the artificial vesture of our life is gone, and we are all one with each other in primitive mortal needs? Vaguely Maggie felt this, in the strong resurgent love toward her brother that swept away all the later impressions of hard, cruel offence and misunderstanding, and left only the deep, underlying, unshakable memories of early union.

But now there was a large dark mass in the distance, and near to her Maggie could discern the current of the river. The dark mass must be - yes, it was - St. Ogg's. Ah, now she knew which way to look for the first glimpse of the well-known trees - the gray willows, the now yellowing chestnuts - and above them the old roof! But there was no color, no shape yet; all was faint and dim. More and more strongly the energies seemed to come and put themselves forth, as if her life were a stored-up force that was being spent in this hour, unneeded for any future.

She must get her boat into the current of the Floss, else she would never be able to pass the Ripple and approach the house; this was the thought that occurred to her, as she imagined with more and more vividness the state of things round the old home. But then she might be carried very far down, and be unable to guide her boat out of the current again. For the first time distinct ideas of danger began to press upon her; but there was no choice of courses, no room for hesitation, and she floated into the current. Swiftly she went now without effort; more and more clearly in the lessening distance and the growing light she began to discern the objects that she knew must be the well-known trees and roofs; nay, she was not far off a rushing, muddy current that must be the strangely altered Ripple.

Great God! there were floating masses in it, that might dash against her boat as she passed, and cause her to perish too soon. What were those masses?

For the first time Maggie's heart began to beat in an agony of dread. She sat helpless, dimly conscious that she was being floated along, more intensely conscious of the anticipated clash. But the horror was transient; it passed away before the oncoming warehouses of St. Ogg's. She had passed the mouth of the Ripple, then; *now*, she must use all her skill and power to manage the boat and get it if possible out of the current. She could see now that the bridge was broken down; she could see the masts of a stranded vessel far out over the watery field. But no boats were to be seen moving on the river, - such as had been laid hands on were employed in the flooded streets.

With new resolution, Maggie seized her oar, and stood up again to paddle; but the now ebbing tide added to the swiftness of the river, and she was carried along beyond the bridge. She could hear shouts from the windows overlooking the river, as if the people there were calling to her. It was not till she had passed on nearly to Tofton that she could get the boat clear of the current. Then with one yearning look toward her uncle Deane's house that lay farther down the river, she took to both her oars and rowed with all her might across the watery fields, back toward the Mill. Color was beginning to awake now, and as she approached the Dorlcote fields, she could discern the tints of the trees, could see the old Scotch firs far to the right, and the home chestnuts, - oh, how deep they lay in the water, - deeper than the trees on this side the hill! And the roof of the Mill - where was it? Those heavy fragments hurrying down the Ripple, - what had they meant? But it was not the house, - the house stood firm; drowned up to the first story, but still firm, - or was it broken in at the end toward the Mill?

With panting joy that she was there at last, - joy that overcame all distress, - Maggie neared the front of the house. At first she heard no sound; she saw no object moving. Her boat was on a level with the upstairs window. She called out in a loud, piercing voice, -

'Tom, where are you? Mother, where are you? Here is Maggie!'

Soon, from the window of the attic in the central gable, she heard Tom's voice, -

'Who is it? Have you brought a boat?'

'It is I, Tom, - Maggie. Where is mother?'

'She is not here; she went to Garum the day before yesterday. I'll come down to the lower window.'

'Alone, Maggie?' said Tom, in a voice of deep astonishment, as he opened the middle window, on a level with the boat.



'Yes, Tom; God has taken care of me, to bring me to you. Get in quickly. Is there no one else?'

'No,' said Tom, stepping into the boat; 'I fear the man is drowned; he was carried down the Ripple, I think, when part of the Mill fell with the crash of trees and stones against it; I've shouted again and again, and there has been no answer. Give me the oars, Maggie.'

It was not till Tom had pushed off and they were on the wide water, - he face to face with Maggie, - that the full meaning of what had happened rushed upon his mind. It came with so overpowering a force, - it was such a new revelation to his spirit, of the depths in life that had lain beyond his vision, which he had fancied so keen and clear, - that he was unable to ask a question. They sat mutely gazing at each other, - Maggie with eyes of intense life looking out from a weary, beaten face; Tom pale, with a certain awe and humiliation. Thought was busy though the lips were silent; and though he could ask no question, he guessed a story of almost miraculous, divinely protected effort. But at last a mist gathered over the blue-gray eyes, and the lips found a word they could utter, - the old childish 'Magsie!'

Maggie could make no answer but a long, deep sob of that mysterious, wondrous happiness that is one with pain.

As soon as she could speak, she said, 'We will go to Lucy, Tom; we'll go and see if she is safe, and then we can help the rest.'

Tom rowed with untired vigor, and with a different speed from poor Maggie's. The boat was soon in the current of the river again, and soon they would be at Tofton.

'Park House stands high up out of the flood,' said Maggie. 'Perhaps they have got Lucy there.'

Nothing else was said; a new danger was being carried toward them by the river. Some wooden machinery had just given way on one of the wharves, and huge fragments were being floated along. The sun was rising now, and the wide area of watery desolation was spread out in dreadful clearness around them; in dreadful clearness floated onward the hurrying, threatening masses. A large company in a boat that was working its way along under the Tofton houses observed their danger, and shouted, 'Get out of the current!'

But that could not be done at once; and Tom, looking before him, saw death rushing on them. Huge fragments, clinging together in fatal fellowship, made one wide mass across the stream.

'It is coming, Maggie!' Tom said, in a deep, hoarse voice, loosing the oars, and clasping her.

The next instant the boat was no longer seen upon the water, and the huge mass was hurrying on in hideous triumph.

But soon the keel of the boat reappeared, a black speck on the golden water.

The boat reappeared, but brother and sister had gone down in an embrace never to be parted; living through again in one supreme moment the days when they had clasped their little hands in love, and roamed the daisied fields together.

### **Conclusion**

Nature repairs her ravages, - repairs them with her sunshine, and with human labor. The desolation wrought by that flood had left little visible trace on the face of the earth, five years after. The fifth autumn was rich in golden cornstacks, rising in thick clusters among the distant hedgerows; the wharves and warehouses on the Floss were busy again, with echoes of eager voices, with hopeful lading and unlading.

And every man and woman mentioned in this history was still living, except those whose end we know.

Nature repairs her ravages, but not all. The uptorn trees are not rooted again; the parted hills are left scarred; if there is a new growth, the trees are not the same as the old, and the hills underneath their green vesture bear the marks of the past rending. To the eyes that have dwelt on the past, there is no thorough repair.

Dorlcote Mill was rebuilt. And Dorlcote churchyard - where the brick grave that held a father whom we know, was found with the stone laid prostrate upon it after the flood - had recovered all its grassy order and decent quiet.

Near that brick grave there was a tomb erected, very soon after the flood, for two bodies that were found in close embrace; and it was visited at different moments by two men who both felt that their keenest joy and keenest sorrow were forever buried there.

One of them visited the tomb again with a sweet face beside him; but that was years after.

The other was always solitary. His great companionship was among the trees of the Red Deeps, where the buried joy seemed still to hover, like a revisiting spirit.

The tomb bore the names of Tom and Maggie Tulliver, and below the names it was written, -

'In their death they were not divided.'

**The End**