The Mill on the Floss

Compact Editions

George Eliot

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Extract

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BOOK FIRST

Boy and Girl

1

Outside Dorlcote Mill

A wide plain, where the broadening Floss hurries on between its green banks to the sea, and the loving tide, rushing to meet it, checks its passage with an impetuous embrace. On this mighty tide the black ships – laden with the fresh-scented fir-planks, with rounded sacks of oil-bearing seed, or with the dark glitter of coal – are borne along to the town of St Ogg's, which shows its aged, fluted red roofs and the broad gables of its wharves between the low wooded hill and the river brink, tinging the water with a soft purple hue under the transient glance of this February sun. Far away on each hand stretch the rich pastures, and the patches of dark earth, made ready for the seed of broad-leaved green crops, or touched already with the tint of the tender-bladed autumn-sown corn. The distant ships seem to be lifting their masts and stretching their red-brown sails close among the branches of the spreading ash. Just by the red-roofed town the tributary Ripple flows with a lively current into the Floss. How lovely the little river is! It seems to me like a living companion while I wander along the bank and listen to its low placid voice. I remember those large dipping willows. I remember the stone bridge.

And this is Dorlcote Mill. I must stand a minute or two here on the bridge and look at it, though the clouds are threatening, and it is far on in the afternoon. Perhaps the chill damp season adds a charm to the trimly-kept, comfortable house, as old as the elms

and chestnuts that shelter it from the northern blast. The stream is brimful now, and lies high in this little withy plantation, and half drowns the grassy fringe of the croft in front of the house.

The rush of the water, and the booming of the mill, bring a dreamy deafness, which seems to heighten the peacefulness of the scene. I turn my eyes towards the mill again. That little girl is watching it too; she has been standing on just the same spot at the edge of the water ever since I paused on the bridge. And that queer white cur with the brown ear seems to be leaping and barking in ineffectual remonstrance with the wheel; perhaps he is jealous, because his playfellow in the beaver bonnet is so rapt in its movement. It is time the little playfellow went in, I think; and there is a very bright fire to tempt her: the red light shines out under the deepening grey of the sky. It is time, too, for me to leave off resting my arms on the cold stone of this bridge …

Ah, my arms are really benumbed. I have been pressing my elbows on the arms of my chair, and dreaming that I was standing on the bridge in front of Dorlcote Mill, as it looked one February afternoon many years ago. Before I dozed off, I was going to tell you what Mr and Mrs Tulliver were talking about, as they sat by the bright fire in the left-hand parlour on that very afternoon I have been dreaming of.

2

Mr Tulliver, of Dorlcote Mill, Declares His Resolution about Tom

'What I want, you know,' said Mr Tulliver – 'is to give Tom a good eddication; an eddication as'll be a bread to him. That was what I was thinking of when I gave notice for him to leave th' academy at Ladyday. I mean to put him to a downright good school at Midsummer. The two years at th' academy 'ud ha' done well enough, if I'd meant to make a miller and farmer of him; for he's had a fine sight more schoolin' nor I ever got. But I should like Tom to be a bit of a scholard, so as he might be up to the

tricks o' these fellows as talk fine and write with a flourish. It 'ud be a help to me wi' these lawsuits, and arbitrations, and things. I wouldn't make a downright lawyer o' the lad – I should be sorry for him to be a raskill – but a sort o' engineer, or a surveyor, or an auctioneer and vallyer, like Riley, or one o' them smartish businesses as are all profits and no outlay, only for a big watch-chain and a high stool. They're pretty nigh all one, and they're not far off being even wi' the law, *I* believe; for Riley looks Lawyer Wakem i' the face as hard as one cat looks another. *He's* none frightened at him.'

Mr Tulliver was speaking to his wife, a blond comely woman nearly forty, in a fan-shaped cap which were new at St Ogg's, and considered sweet things.

'Well, Mr Tulliver, you know best; *I've* no objections. But hadn't I better kill a couple o' fowl and have th' aunts and uncles to dinner next week, so as you may hear what sister Glegg and sister Pullet have got to say about it? There's a couple o' fowl *wants* killing!'

'You may kill every fowl i' the yard, if you like, Bessy; but I shall ask neither aunt nor uncle what I'm to do wi' my own lad,' said Mr Tulliver, defiantly.

'Dear heart!' said Mrs Tulliver, shocked at this sanguinary rhetoric, 'how can you talk so, Mr Tulliver? But it's your way to speak disrespectful o' my family; and sister Glegg throws all the blame upo' me. Howiver, if Tom's to go to a new school, I should like him to go where I can wash him and mend him.'

'Well, well, we won't send him out o' reach o' the carrier's cart, if other things fit in,' said Mr Tulliver. 'But you mustn't put a spoke i' the wheel about the washin', if we can't get a school near enough. That's the fault I have to find wi' you, Bessy: if you see a stick in the road, you're allays thinkin' you can't step over it. You'd want me not to hire a good waggoner, 'cause he'd got a mole on his face.'

'Dear heart!' said Mrs Tulliver, in mild surprise, 'when did I iver make objections to a man because he'd got a mole on his face?'

'No, no, Bessy; I didn't mean justly the mole; I meant it to stand for summat else; but niver mind – it's puzzling work, talking is. What I'm thinking on is how to find the right sort o' school to send Tom to. It's an uncommon puzzling thing to know what school to pick.'

Mr Tulliver paused a minute or two, and dived with both hands into his breeches pockets as if he hoped to find some suggestion there. Apparently he was not disappointed, for he presently said, 'I know what I'll do – I'll talk it over wi' Riley: he's coming tomorrow, t'arbitrate about the dam. Riley's as likely a man as any to know o' some school; he's had schooling himself, an' goes about to all sorts o' places; arbitratin' and vallyin' and that. I want Tom to be such a sort o' man as Riley, you know – as can talk pretty nigh as well as if it was all wrote out for him, and knows a good lot o' words as don't mean much; and a good solid knowledge o' business too. But,' continued Mr Tulliver after a pause, 'what I'm a bit afraid on is, as Tom hasn't got the right sort o' brains for a smart fellow. I doubt he's a bit slowish. He takes after your family, Bessy.'

'Yes, that he does,' said Mrs Tulliver, accepting the last proposition entirely on its own merits; 'he's wonderful for liking a deal o' salt in his broth.'

'It seems a bit of a pity, though,' said Mr Tulliver, 'as the lad should take after the mother's side instead o' the little wench. The little un takes after my side, now: she's twice as 'cute as Tom. Too 'cute for a woman, I'm afraid,' continued Mr Tulliver. 'It's no mischief much while she's a little un, but an over-'cute woman's no better nor a long-tailed sheep – she'll fetch none the bigger price for that.'

'Yes, it *is* a mischief while she's a little un, Mr Tulliver, for it all runs to naughtiness. How to keep her in a clean pinafore two hours together passes my cunning. An' now you put me i' mind,' continued Mrs Tulliver, rising and going to the window, 'I don't know where she is now. Ah, I thought so – wanderin' up an' down by the water, like a wild thing: she'll tumble in some day.'

Mrs Tulliver rapped the window sharply, beckoned, and shook

her head more than once before she returned to her chair.

'You talk o' 'cuteness, Mr Tulliver,' she observed as she sat down, 'but I'm sure the child's half an idiot i' some things; for if I send her upstairs to fetch anything, she forgets what she's gone for, an' perhaps 'ull sit down on the floor i' the sunshine an' sing to herself all the while I'm waiting for her downstairs. That niver run i' my family, thank God, no more nor a brown skin as makes her look like a mulatter.'

'Pooh, nonsense!' said Mr Tulliver; 'she's a straight black-eyed wench as anybody need wish to see. I don't know i' what she's behind other folk's children; and she can read almost as well as the parson.'

'But her hair won't curl and I've such work as never was to make her stand and have it pinched with th' irons.'

'Cut it off – cut it off short,' said her father, rashly.

'How can you talk so, Mr Tulliver? She's too big a gell, gone nine, and tall of her age, to have her hair cut short; an' there's her cousin Lucy's got a row o' curls round her head, an' not a hair out o' place. It seems hard as my sister Deane should have that pretty child; I'm sure Lucy takes more after me nor my own child does. Maggie, Maggie,' continued the mother, in a tone of half-coaxing fretfulness, as this small mistake of nature entered the room, 'where's the use o' my telling you to keep away from the water? You'll tumble in and be drownded some day, an' then you'll be sorry you didn't do as mother told you.'

Maggie's hair, as she threw off her bonnet, painfully confirmed her mother's accusation: Mrs Tulliver, desiring her daughter to have a curled crop, 'like other folks's children,' had had it cut too short in front to be pushed behind the ears.

'Oh, dear, oh, dear, Maggie, what are you thinkin' of, to throw your bonnet down there? Take it upstairs, there's a good gell, an' let your hair be brushed, an' put your other pinafore on, an' change your shoes – do, for shame; an' come an' go on with your patchwork.'

'Oh, mother,' said Maggie, in a vehemently cross tone, 'I don't *want* to do my patchwork. It's foolish work, tearing things to

pieces to sew 'em together again.'

Exit Maggie, dragging her bonnet by the string, while Mr Tulliver laughs audibly.

'I wonder at you, as you'll laugh at her, Mr Tulliver,' said the mother, with feeble fretfulness in her tone. 'You encourage her i' naughtiness. An' her aunts will have it as it's me spoils her.'

3

Mr Riley Gives His Advice Concerning a School for Tom

The gentleman in the ample white cravat and shirt-frill, taking his brandy-and-water so pleasantly with his good friend Tulliver, is Mr Riley, a gentleman with a waxen complexion and fat hands, rather highly educated for an auctioneer and appraiser, but large-hearted enough to show a great deal of *bonhomie* towards simple country acquaintances of hospitable habits.

The conversation had come to a pause. Mr Tulliver was on the whole a man of safe traditional opinions; but on one or two points he had trusted to his unassisted intellect, and had arrived at several questionable conclusions; among the rest, that rats, weevils, and lawyers were created by Old Harry. But today it was clear that the good principle was triumphant: this affair of the water-power had been a tangled business somehow, for all it seemed – look at it one way – as plain as water's water; but, big a puzzle as it was, it hadn't got the better of Riley.

But the dam was a subject of conversation that would keep; there was another subject, as you know, on which Mr Tulliver was in pressing want of Mr Riley's advice.

'There's a thing I've got i' my head,' said Mr Tulliver at last, in rather a lower tone than usual, as he turned his head and looked steadfastly at his companion.

'Ah!' said Mr Riley, in a tone of mild interest.

'It's a very particular thing,' he went on; 'it's about my boy Tom.'

At the sound of this name, Maggie, who was seated on a low stool close by the fire, with a large book open on her lap, looked up eagerly. There were few sounds that roused Maggie when she was dreaming over her book, but Tom's name served as well as the shrillest whistle.

'You see, I want to put him to a new school at Midsummer,' said Mr Tulliver; 'he's comin' away from the 'cademy at Ladyday, an' I shall let him run loose for a quarter; but after that I want to send him to a downright good school, where they'll make a scholard of him.'

'Well,' said Mr Riley, 'there's no greater advantage you can give him than a good education. Not,' he added, with polite significance – 'not that a man can't be an excellent miller and farmer, and a shrewd sensible fellow into the bargain, without much help from the schoolmaster.'

'I believe you,' said Mr Tulliver, 'but I don't *mean* Tom to be a miller and farmer. I shall give Tom an eddication an' put him to a business, as he may make a nest for himself, an' not want to push me out o' mine. Pretty well if he gets it when I'm dead an' gone.'

This was evidently a point on which Mr Tulliver felt strongly, and the impetus which had given unusual rapidity and emphasis to his speech, showed itself still unexhausted for some minutes afterwards in a defiant motion of the head from side to side.

These angry symptoms were keenly observed by Maggie. Tom, it appeared, was supposed capable of turning his father out of doors. Maggie jumped up from her stool, forgetting all about her heavy book, which fell with a bang within the fender; and going up between her father's knees, said, in a half-crying, half-indignant voice—

'Father, Tom wouldn't be naughty to you ever; I know he wouldn't.'

Mrs Tulliver was out of the room superintending a choice supper-dish, and Mr Tulliver's heart was touched; so Maggie was not scolded about the book. Mr Riley quietly picked it up and looked at it, while the father laughed and held her hands.

'What! they mustn't say any harm o' Tom, eh?' said Mr Tulliver, looking at Maggie with a twinkling eye. Then, in a lower voice, turning to Mr Riley, as though Maggie couldn't hear, 'She understands what one's talking about so as never was. And you should hear her read – straight off, as if she knowed it all beforehand. But it's bad – it's bad,' Mr Tulliver added, sadly, checking this blamable exultation; 'a woman's no business wi' being so clever; it'll turn to trouble, I doubt. But, bless you!' – here the exultation was clearly recovering the mastery – 'she'll read the books and understand 'em better nor half the folks as are growed up.'

Mr Riley was turning over the leaves of the book, and he presently looked at her and said—

'"The History of the Devil" by Daniel Defoe; not quite the right book for a little girl. How came it among your books, Tulliver?'

Maggie looked hurt and discouraged, while her father said—

'Why, it's one o' the books I bought at Partridge's sale. They were all bound alike – sermons mostly, I think; but they've all got the same covers and I thought they were all o' one sample, as you may say. But it seems one mustn't judge by th' outside. This is a puzzlin' world.'

'Well,' said Mr Riley, in a patronising tone, as he patted Maggie on the head, 'have you no prettier books?'

'Oh, yes,' said Maggie, reviving a little in the desire to vindicate the variety of her reading, 'I've got "Aesop's Fables" and a book about Kangaroos and things, and the "Pilgrim's Progress …"'

'Ah, a beautiful book,' said Mr Riley; 'you can't read a better.'

'Well, but there's a great deal about the devil in that,' said Maggie, triumphantly, 'and I'll show you the picture of him, as he fought with Christian.'

Maggie ran in an instant to the corner of the room, jumped on a chair, and reached down from the small book-case a shabby old copy of Bunyan, which opened at once at the picture she wanted.

'Here he is,' she said, running back to Mr Riley, 'and Tom coloured him for me with his paints when he was at home last holidays – the body all black, you know, and the eyes red, like

fire, because he's all fire inside, and it shines out at his eyes.'

'Go, go!' said Mr Tulliver, peremptorily, beginning to feel rather uncomfortable at these free remarks on the personal appearance of a being powerful enough to create lawyers; 'shut up the book, and let's hear no more o' such talk. It is as I thought – the child 'ull learn more mischief nor good wi' the books. Go, go and see after your mother.'

Maggie shut up the book at once, with a sense of disgrace, but not being inclined to see after her mother, she compromised by going into a dark corner behind her father's chair, and nursing her doll, towards which she had an occasional fit of fondness in Tom's absence.

'Did you ever hear the like on't?' said Mr Tulliver, as Maggie retired. 'It's a pity but what she'd been the lad – she'd ha' been a match for the lawyers, *she* would. It's the wonderful'st thing' – here he lowered his voice – 'as I picked the mother because she wasn't o'er 'cute – bein' a good-looking woman too, an' come of a rare family for managing; but I picked her from her sisters o' purpose, 'cause she was a bit weak, like; for I wasn't a-goin' to be told the rights o' things by my own fireside. But you see, when a man's got brains himself, there's no knowing where they'll run to; an' a pleasant sort o' soft woman may go on breeding you stupid lads and 'cute wenches. It's an uncommon puzzlin' thing.'

Mr Riley's gravity gave way, and he shook a little under the application of his pinch of snuff, before he said—

'But your lad's not stupid, is he?'

'Well, he isn't not to say stupid – he's got a notion o' things out o' door, an' a sort o' common-sense, as he'd lay hold o' things by the right handle. But he's slow with his tongue, you see, and he reads but poorly, and spells all wrong, they tell me, an' as shy as can be wi' strangers, an' you never hear him say 'cute things like the little wench. Now, what I want is to send him to a school where they'll make a smart chap of him. I want my son to be even wi' these fellows as have got the start o' me with having better schooling. Not but what, if the world had been left as God made it, I could ha' seen my way, and held my own wi' the best of 'em;

but things have got so twisted round and wrapped up i' unreasonable words, as arn't a bit like 'em, as I'm clean at fault, often an' often. Everything winds about so – the more straightforrard you are, the more you're puzzled.'

'You're quite in the right of it, Tulliver,' observed Mr Riley. 'Better spend an extra hundred or two on your son's education, than leave it him in your will.'

'I daresay, now, you know of a school as 'ud be just the thing for Tom?' said Mr Tulliver.

Mr Riley took a pinch of snuff, and kept Mr Tulliver in suspense by a silence that seemed deliberative, before he said—

'I know of a very fine chance for any one that's got the necessary money, and that's what you have, Tulliver. The fact is, I wouldn't recommend any friend of mine to send a boy to a regular school, if he could afford to do better. But if any one wanted his boy to get superior instruction and training, where he would be the companion of his master, and that master a first-rate fellow, I know his man. I wouldn't mention the chance to everybody, but I mention it to you, Tulliver – between ourselves.'

Mr Tulliver became quite eager.

'Ay, now, let's hear,' he said, with the complacency of a person who is thought worthy of important communications.

'He's an Oxford man,' said Mr Riley, looking at Mr Tulliver to observe the effect of this stimulating information.

'What! a parson?' said Mr Tulliver, rather doubtfully.

'Yes – and an MA. The bishop, I understand, thinks very highly of him; why, it was the bishop who got him his present curacy.'

'Ah!' said Mr Tulliver. 'But what can he want wi' Tom, then?'

'Why, the fact is, he's fond of teaching, and wishes to take one or two boys as pupils to fill up his time profitably. The boys would be quite of the family – the finest thing in the world for them; under Stelling's eye continually.'

'And what money 'ud he want?' said Mr Tulliver. Instinct told him the services of this admirable MA would bear a high price.

'Why, I know of a clergyman who asks a hundred and fifty with his youngest pupils, and he's not to be mentioned with Stelling.'

'Ah,' said Mr Tulliver; 'but a hundred and fifty's an uncommon price. I never thought o' payin' so much as that.'

'A good education, let me tell you, Tulliver – a good education is cheap at the money. But Stelling is moderate in his terms – I've no doubt he'd take your boy at a hundred. I'll write to him about it, if you like.'

Mr Tulliver rubbed his knees, and looked at the carpet in a meditative manner.

'But belike he's a bachelor,' observed Mrs Tulliver, who was now in her place again. 'It 'ud break my heart to send Tom where there's a housekeeper, an' I hope you won't think of it, Mr Tulliver.'

'You may set your mind at rest on that score, Mrs Tulliver,' said Mr Riley, 'for Stelling is married to as nice a little woman as any man need wish for a wife. There isn't a kinder little soul in the world; I know her family well. She has very much your complexion – light curly hair. She comes of a good Mudport family. Stelling's rather a particular fellow as to the people he chooses to be connected with. But I *think* he would have no objection to take your son – I *think* he would not, on my representation.'

'I don't know what he could have *against* the lad,' said Mrs Tulliver, with a slight touch of motherly indignation.

'But there's one thing I'm thinking on,' said Mr Tulliver, looking at Mr Riley, after a long perusal of the carpet. 'Wouldn't a parson be almost too high-learnt to bring up a lad to be a man o' business? I want Tom to know figures, and write like print, and see into things quick, and know what folks mean, and how to wrap things up in words as aren't actionable. It's an uncommon fine thing, that is,' concluded Mr Tulliver, 'when you can let a man know what you think of him without paying for it.'

'Oh, my dear Tulliver,' said Mr Riley, 'you're quite under a mistake about the clergy. A clergyman has the knowledge that will ground a boy, and prepare him for entering on any career with credit. Drop Stelling a hint, and that's enough. You talk of figures, now; you have only to say to Stelling, "I want my son

to be a thorough arithmetician," and you may leave the rest to him.'

Mr Riley paused a moment. 'You see, my dear Tulliver,' he continued, 'when you get a thoroughly educated man, he's at no loss to take up any branch of instruction. When a workman knows the use of his tools, he can make a door as well as a window.'

'Ay, that's true,' said Mr Tulliver, almost convinced now that the clergy must be the best of schoolmasters.

'Well, I'll tell you what I'll do for you,' said Mr Riley, 'and I wouldn't do it for everybody. I'll see Stelling's father-in-law, or drop him a line when I get back to Mudport, to say that you wish to place your boy with his son-in-law, and I daresay Stelling will write to you and send you his terms.'

'But there's no hurry, is there?' said Mrs Tulliver; 'for I hope, Mr Tulliver, you won't let Tom begin at his new school before Midsummer.'

'It might be as well not to defer the arrangement too long,' said Mr Riley quietly, 'for Stelling may have propositions from other parties, and I know he would not take more than two or three boarders. If I were you, I would enter on the subject with Stelling at once: there's no necessity for sending the boy before Midsummer, but I would make sure that nobody forestalls you.'

'Ay, there's summat in that,' said Mr Tulliver.

'Father,' broke in Maggie, who had stolen unperceived to her father's elbow again, listening with parted lips – 'Father, is it a long way off where Tom is to go? Shan't we ever go to see him?'

'I don't know, my wench,' said the father, tenderly.

'About fifteen miles, that's all,' said Mr Riley. 'You can drive there and back in a day quite comfortably.'

'But it's too far off for the linen, I doubt,' said Mrs Tulliver, sadly.

The entrance of supper opportunely adjourned this difficulty, and relieved Mr Riley from the labour of suggesting some solution or compromise – a labour which he would otherwise doubtless have undertaken; for, as you perceive, he was a man of very obliging manners. And he had really given himself the trouble

of recommending Mr Stelling to his friend Tulliver without any positive expectation of a solid, definite advantage resulting to himself.

4
Tom Is Expected

Maggie was not allowed to go with her father in the gig when he went to fetch Tom home from the academy; the morning was too wet, Mrs Tulliver said, for a little girl to go out in her best bonnet. Maggie took the opposite view very strongly, and it was a direct consequence of this difference of opinion that when her mother was in the act of brushing out the reluctant black crop, Maggie suddenly rushed from under her hands and dipped her head in a basin of water standing near – in the vindictive determination that there should be no chance of curls that day.

'Maggie, Maggie,' exclaimed Mrs Tulliver, 'what is to become of you if you're so naughty? Oh dear, oh dear! look at your clean pinafore, wet from top to bottom. Folks 'ull think it's a judgement on me as I've got such a child – they'll think I've done summat wicked.'

Maggie was already out of hearing, making her way towards the great attic that ran under the old high-pitched roof, shaking the water from her black locks as she ran. This attic was Maggie's favourite retreat on a wet day, when the weather was not too cold; here she fretted out all her ill-humours, and here she kept a Fetish which she punished for all her misfortunes. This was a large wooden doll, now entirely defaced by a long career of vicarious suffering. Maggie had soothed herself by alternately grinding and beating the wooden head against the rough brick of the great chimneys. That was what she did this morning, sobbing all the while with a passion that expelled even the memory of the grievance that had caused it. As, at last, the sobs were getting quieter, a sudden beam of sunshine made her throw away the Fetish and