Penguin Popular Classics

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THE MILL ON THE FLOSS

BY GEORGE ELIOT

GEORGE ELIOT (1819–80). One of the most influential of all English novelists, she is admired as much for her acute powers of observation and in-depth characterization as for her novels.

George Eliot, the pen name of Mary Ann (Marian) Evans, was born in 1819 near Nuneaton in Warwickshire, the youngest surviving daughter of Robert Evans, a respected land agent. During her childhood she was particularly close to her elder brother Isaac, and their relationship is echoed in that of Maggie Tulliver and her beloved brother Tom in *The Mill on the Floss*. Much of her childhood was spent cut off from cultural activity but she became heavily influenced by a pious and evangelical preacher, Rev. John Edmund Jones, from an early age. It was not until later, when she met the progressive intellectuals Charles and Caroline Bray, that she questioned her orthodox beliefs, a development which upset and distanced her father for a time. After the death of her mother in 1836 Marian became her father's housekeeper but still found time to continue her education, reading widely and learning German and Italian. Her friendship with the Brays, after moving to Coventry in 1841, resulted in her being offered a commission to translate Strauss's *Life of Jesus*, the only publication to bear her real name. This in turn led to her meeting the publisher John Chapman who, when he purchased the *Westminster Review* in 1851, made her his managing editor. After her father's death in 1849 she moved to London, lodging for a while at Chapman's house. Here she met many of London's intelligentsia, among them the philosopher Herbert Spencer and the versatile man of letters G. H. Lewes. She developed strong feelings for Spencer, who she might have married save for the fact that he found her too 'morbidly intellectual'. Growing closer to G. H. Lewes, she made the difficult decision to set up home with him in 1854 (marriage being out of the question as he already had an estranged wife). It proved to be a strong and loving union which

lasted until Lewes's death in 1878. A strong influence on Marian, he persuaded her to abandon philosophy in favour of fiction, resulting in her first stories in 1858. Collected as *Scenes of Clerical Life*, they were published under her adopted pen name of George Eliot, a pseudonym which caused great speculation at the time. She was immediately recognized as a writer of some significant talent and followed this success with *Adam Bede* (1859), *The Mill on the Floss* (1860), *Silas Marner* (1861), *Romola* (1863), in which she strays from her usual Midlands setting, *Felix Holt: The Radical* (1867), *Middlemarch* (1872) and *Daniel Deronda* (1876). She was also the author of a great many essays, reviews and articles. Seven months before her death in 1880 she married John W. Cross, an old friend and admirer, who was to become her first biographer. She is buried in Highgate cemetery next to Lewes. George Eliot has been highly praised by Virginia Woolf and also by F. R. Leavis, who thought her 'not as transcendently great as Tolstoy, but [she is] great, and great in the same way'.

Drawing on aspects of her own childhood, *The Mill on the Floss*, which first appeared in 1860, is a vivid portrayal of growing up in rural England, and as such it is one of Eliot's best loved works.

Readers may also find the following books of interest: Gillian Beer, *Darwin's Plots: Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Fiction* (1983), and *George Eliot* (1986); David Carroll, *George Eliot: The Critical Heritage* (1971); Gordon Haight, *A Century of George Eliot Criticism* (1965), and *George Eliot: A Biography* (1968); Barbara Hardy, *Particularities: Readings in George Eliot* (1983), and *The Novels of George Eliot* (1959); Barbara Hardy (ed.), *Critical Essays on George Eliot* (1970); W. J. Harvey, *The Art of George Eliot* (1961); F. R. Leavis, *The Great Tradition* (1948); and Jane Purkiss, *A Preface to George Eliot* (1985).

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BOOK ONE

BOY AND GIRL

CHAPTER I

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. There is a remnant still of the last year's golden clusters of beehive ricks rising at intervals beyond the hedgerows; and everywhere the hedgerows are studded with trees: 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, with its dark, changing wavelets! It seems to me like a living companion while I wander along the bank and listen to its low, placid voice, as to the voice of one who is deaf and loving. 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. Even in this leafless time of departing February it is pleasant to look at – perhaps the chill damp season adds a charm to the trimly kept, comfortable dwelling-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. As I look at the full stream, the vivid grass, the delicate bright-green powder soften-

ing the outline of the great trunks and branches that gleam from under the bare purple boughs, I am in love with moistness, and envy the white ducks that are dipping their heads far into the water here among the withes, unmindful of the awkward appearance they make in the drier world above.

The rush of the water and the booming of the mill bring a dreamy deafness which seems to heighten the peacefulness of the scene. They are like a great curtain of sound shutting one out from the world beyond. And now there is the thunder of the huge covered waggon coming home with sacks of grain. That honest waggoner is thinking of his dinner, getting sadly dry in the oven at this late hour; but he will not touch it till he has fed his horses – the strong, submissive, meek-eyed beasts who, I fancy, are looking mild reproach at him from between their blinkers, that he should crack his whip at them in that awful manner as if they needed that hint! See how they stretch their shoulders up the slope towards the bridge, with all the more energy because they are so near home. Look at their grand shaggy feet that seem to grasp the firm earth, at the patient strength of their necks, bowed under the heavy collar, at the mighty muscles of their struggling haunches! I should like well to hear them neigh over their hardly earned feed of corn, and see them, with their moist necks freed from the harness, dipping their eager nostrils into the muddy pond. Now they are on the bridge, and down they go again at a swifter pace, and the arch of the covered waggon disappears at the turning behind the trees.

Now I can turn my eyes towards the mill again and watch the unresting wheel sending out its diamond jets of water. 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.

CHAPTER 2

Mr Tulliver, of Dorlcote Mill, declares his resolution about Tom

'WHAT I want, you know,' said Mr Tulliver '– what I want 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 the 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; all the learnin' *my* father ever paid for was a bit o' birch at one end and the alphabet at th' other. 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 blonde comely woman in a fan-shaped cap. (I am afraid to think how long it is since fan-shaped caps were worn – they must be so near coming in again. At that time, when Mrs Tulliver was nearly

forty, they 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, though I'm sure I'm as innocent as the babe unborn. For nobody's ever heard *me* say as it wasn't lucky for my children to have aunts and uncles as can live independent. Howiver, if Tom's to go to a new school, I should like him to go where I can wash him and mend him; else he might as well have calico as linen, for they'd be one as yallow as th' other before they'd been washed half a dozen times. And then, when the box is goin' backards and forrards, I could send the lad a cake, or a pork-pie, or an apple, for he can do with an extry bit, bless him, whether they stint him at the meals or no. My children can eat as much victuals as most, thank God.'

'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 i' 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? I'm sure I'm rether fond o' the moles, for my brother, as is dead an' gone, had a mole on his brow. But I can't remember your iver offering to hire a waggoner with a mole, Mr Tulliver. There was John Gibbs hadn't a mole on his face no more nor you have, an' I was all for having you hire *him*, an' so you did hire him, an' if he hadn't died o' th' inflammation, as we paid Dr Turnbull for attending him, he'd very like ha' been driving

the waggon now. He might have a mole somewhere out o' sight, but how was I to know that, Mr Tulliver?'

'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, for I might be ta'en in again, as I've been wi' th' academy. I'll have nothing to do wi' a 'cademy again; whativer school I send Tom to, it shan't be a 'cademy; it shall be a place where the lads spend their time i' summat else besides blacking the family's shoes and getting up the potatoes. 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.'

'Well, Mr Tulliver, I've put the sheets out for the best bed, and Kezia's got 'em hanging at the fire. They aren't the best sheets, but they're good enough for anybody to sleep in, be he who he will; for as for them best holland sheets, I should repent buying 'em, only they'll do to lay us out in. An' if you was to die tomorrow, Mr Tulliver, they're mangled beautiful, an' all ready, an' smell o' lavender as it 'ud be a pleasure to lay 'em out; an' they lie at the left-hand corner o' the big oak linen-chest at the back, not as I should trust anybody to look 'em out but myself.'

As Mrs Tulliver uttered the last sentence, she drew a bright bunch of keys from her pocket and singled out one, rubbing her thumb and finger up and down it with a placid smile while she looked at the clear fire. If Mr Tulliver had been a susceptible man in his conjugal relation, he might have supposed that she drew out the key to aid her imagination in anticipating the moment when he would be in a state to justify the production of the best holland sheets. Happily he was not so; he was only susceptible in respect of his right to water-power; moreover, he had the marital habit of not listening very closely, and since his mention of Mr Riley, had been apparently occupied in a tactile examination of his woollen stockings.

'I think I've hit it, Bessy,' was his first remark after a short silence. '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. And we shall have time to talk it over tomorrow night when the business is done. 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, so as you can't lay hold of 'em i' law, and a good solid knowledge o' business too.'

'Well,' said Mrs Tulliver, 'so far as talking proper, and knowing everything, and walking with a bend in his back, and setting his hair up, I shouldn't mind the lad being brought up to that. But them fine-talking men from the big towns mostly wear the false shirt-fronts; they wear a frill till it's all a mess, and then hide it with a bib; I know Riley does. And then, if Tom's to go and live at Mudport, like Riley, he'll have a house with a kitchen hardly big enough to turn in, an' niver get a fresh egg for his breakfast, an' sleep up three pair o' stairs – or four, for what I know – an' be burnt to death before he can get down.'

'No, no,' said Mr Tulliver, 'I've no thoughts of his going to Mudport; I mean him to set up his office at St Ogg's, close by us, an' live at home. 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. That was my brother's way, and my father's before him.'

'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. That's the worst on't wi' the crossing o' breeds: you can never justly calkilate what'll come on't. 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, turning his head dubiously first on one side and then on the other. '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, an' it's pretty nigh tea-time. 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, a process which she repeated 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' plait her hair an' sing to herself like a Bedlam creatur', 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. I don't like to fly i' the face o' Providence, but it seems hard as I should have but one gell, an' her so comical.'

'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 folks's children, and she can read almost as well as the parson.'

'But her hair won't curl all I can do with it, and she's so franzy about having it put i' paper, 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 the 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 drowned 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 con-