

The Mill on the Floss

By
George Eliot.

BOOK FIRST — BOY AND GIRL.
(VI. Instalment.)

"I know the chap as owns the ferrets," said Bob in a hoarse treble voice, as he shuffled along, keeping his blue eyes fixed on the river, like an amphibious animal who foresees occasion for darting in. "He lives up the Kennel Yard at Subbogg's—he does. He's the biggest rot-catcher anywhere—he is. I'd sooner be a rot-catcher nor anything—I would. The moles is nothing to the rats. But Lora you must ha' ferrets. Dogs is no good. Why, there's that dog, now?" Bob continued, pointing with an air of disgust towards Yap, "he's no more good wi' a rot nor nothin' I see it myself—I did—at the rot-catchin' i' your feyther's barn."

Yap, feeling the withering influence of this scorn, tucked his tail and shrank close to Tom's leg, who felt a little hurt for him, but had not the superhuman courage to seem behindhand with Bob in contempt for a dog who made so poor a figure.

"No, no," he said, "Yap's no good at sport. I'll have regular good dogs for rats and everything, when I've done school."

"Hev ferrets, Measter Tom," said Bob eagerly. "Them white ferrets wi' pink eyes; Lora, you might catch your own rats, an' you might put a rat in a cage wi' a ferret, an' see 'em fight—you might. That's what I'd do, I know, an' it 'ud be better fun a'most nor seein' two chaps fight—if it wasn't them chaps as sold cakes an' oranges at the Fair, as the things flew out o' their baskets, an' some o' the cakes were smashed.... But they tasted just as good," added Bob, by way of note or addendum, after a moment's pause.

"But, I say, Bob," said Tom, in a tone of deliberation, "ferrets are nasty biting things—they'll bite a fellow without being set on."

"Lora! why, that's the beauty on 'em. If a chap lays hold o' your ferret, he won't be long before he hollows out a good un—he won't."

At this moment a striking incident made the boys pause suddenly in their walk. It was the plunging of some small body in the water from among the neighbouring bushes: if it was not a water-rat, Bob intimated that he was ready to undergo the most unpleasant consequences.

"Hoigh! Yap—hoigh! there he is," said Tom, clapping his hands, as the little black snout made its arrowy course to the opposite bank. "Seize him, lad! seize him!"

Yap agitated his ears and wrinkled his brows, but declined to plunge, trying whether barking would not answer the purpose just as well.

"Ugh! you coward!" said Tom, and kicked him over, feeling humiliated as a sportsman to possess so poor-spirited an animal. Bob abstained from remark and passed on, choosing, however, to walk in the shallow edge of the overflowing river by way of escape.

"He's none so full now, the Floss isn't," said Bob, as he kicked the water up, before him, with an agreeable sense of being insolent to it. "Why, last year, the meadows was all one sheet o' water, they was."

"Ay, but," said Tom, whose mind was prone to see an opposition between statements that were really quite accordant—"but there was a big flood once, when the Round Pool was made. I know there was, 'cause father says so. And the sheep and cows were all drowned, and the boats went all over the fields ever such a way."

"I don't care about a flood comin'," said Bob. "I don't mind the water, no more, nor the land. I'd swim—I would."

"Ah, but if you got nothing to eat for ever so long?" said Tom, his imagination becoming quite active under the stimulus of that dread. "When I'm a man, I shall make a boat with a wooden house on the top of it, like Noah's ark, and keep plenty to eat in it—rabbits and things—all ready. And then if the flood came, you know, Bob, I shouldn't mind.... And I'd take you in, if I saw you swimming," he added, in the tone of a benevolent patron.

"I aren't frightened," said Bob, to whom hunger did not appear so appalling. "But I'd get in an' knock the rabbits on th' head when you wanted to eat 'em."

"Ah, and I should have half-pence, and we'd play at heads-and-tails," said Tom, not contemplating the possibility that this recreation might have fewer charms for his nature age. "I'd divide fair to begin with, and then we'd see who'd win."

"I've got a halfpenny o' my own," said Bob proudly, coming out of the water and tossing his halfpenny in the air. "Yeeds or tails?"

"Tails," said Tom, instantly fired with the desire to win.

"It's yeeds," said Bob hastily, snatching up the halfpenny as it fell.

"It wasn't," said Tom loudly and peremptorily. "You give me the halfpenny—I've won it fair."

"I shan't," said Bob, holding it tight in his pocket.

"Then I'll make you—see if I don't," said Tom.

"You can't make me do nothing, you can't," said Bob.

"Yes, I can."

"No, you can't."

"I'm master."

"I don't care for you."

"But I'll make you care, you cheat," said Tom, collaring Bob and shaking him.

"You get out wi' you," said Bob, giving Tom a kick.

Tom's blood was thoroughly up; he went at Bob with a lunge and threw him down, but Bob seized hold and kept it like a cat, and pulled Tom down after him. They struggled fiercely on the ground for a moment or two, till Tom, pinning Bob down by the shoulders, thought he had the mastery.

"You say you'll give me the halfpenny now," he said, with difficulty, while he exerted himself to keep the command of Bob's arms.

But at this moment, Yap, who had been running on before, returned barking to the scene of action, and saw a favourable opportunity for biting Bob's bare leg not only with impunity but with honour. The pain from Yap's teeth, instead of surprising Bob into a relaxation of his hold, gave it a fierce tenacity, and with a new exertion of his force, he pushed Tom backward and got uppermost. But now Yap, who could get no sufficient purchase before, set his teeth in a new place, so that Bob, harassed in this way, let go his hold of Tom, and almost throttling Yap, flung him into the river. By this time Tom was up again, and before Bob had quite recovered his balance after the act of swinging Yap, Tom fell upon him, threw him down, and got his knees firmly on Bob's chest.

"You give me the halfpenny now," said Tom.

"Take it," said Bob sulkily.

"No, I shan't take it; you give it me."

Bob took the halfpenny out of his pocket, and threw it away from him on the ground.

Tom loosed his hold, and left Bob to rise.

"There the halfpenny lies," he said. "I don't want your halfpenny; I wouldn't have kept it. But you wanted to cheat: I hate a cheat. I shan't go along with you any more," he added, turning round homeward, not without casting a regret towards the fat-catch and other pleasures which he must relinquish along with Bob's society.

"You may let it alone, then," Bob called out after him. "I shall cheat if I like; there's no fun in playing else; and I know where there's a goldfinch's nest, but I'll take care you don't.... An' you're a nasty fightin' turkey-cock, you are...."

Tom walked on without looking round, and Yap followed his example, the cold bath having moderated his passions.

"Go along wi' you, then wi' your drowned dog; I wouldn't own such a dog—I wouldn't," said Bob, getting louder, in a last effort to sustain his defiance. But Tom was not to be provoked into turning round, and Bob's voice began to falter a little as he said—

"An' I'n gi'en you everything, an' showed you everything, an' niver wanted nothin' from you.... An' there's your horn-handled knife, then, as you gi'en me...."

Here Bob flung the knife as far as he could after Tom's retreating footsteps. But it produced no effect, except the sense in Bob's mind that there was a terrible void in his lot, now that knife was gone.

He stood still till Tom had passed through the gate and disappeared behind the hedge. The knife would do no good on the ground there—it wouldn't vex Tom, and pride or resentment was a feeble passion in Bob's mind compared with the love of a pocket-knife. His very fingers sent entreating thrills that he would go and clutch that familiar rough buck's-horn handle, which they had so often grasped for mere affection, as it lay idle in his pocket. An there were two blades, and they had just been sharpened! What is life without a pocket-knife to him who has once tasted a higher existence? No: to throw the handle after the hatchet is a comprehensible act of desperation, but to throw one's pocket-knife after an implacable friend is clearly in every sense a hyperbole, or throwing beyond the mark. So Bob shuffled back to the spot where the beloved knife lay in the dirt, and felt quite a new pleasure in clutching it again after the temporary separation, in opening one blade after the other, and feeling their edge with his well-hardened thumb. Poor Bob! he was not sensitive on the point of honour—not a chivalrous character. That fine moral aroma would not have been thought much of by the public opinion of Kennel Yard, which was the very focus or heart of Bob's world, even if it could have made itself perceptible there; yet, for all



that, he was not utterly a sneak and a thief, as our friend Tom had hastily decided.

But Tom, you perceive, was rather a Rhadamanthine personage, having more than the usual share of boys' justice in him—the justice that desires to hurt culprits as much as they deserve to be hurt, and is troubled with no doubts concerning the exact amount of their deserts. Maggie saw a cloud on his brow when he came home, which checked her joy at his coming so much sooner than she had expected, and she dared hardly speak to him as he stood silently throwing the small gravel-stones into the mill-dam. It is not pleasant to give up a rat-catch when you have set your mind on it. But if Tom had told his strongest feeling at that moment, he would have said, "I'd do just the same again."

That was his usual mode of viewing his past actions; whereas Maggie was always wishing she had done something different.

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But Bessy was always weak!

So if Mrs. Glegg's front to-day was more fuzzy and lax than usual, she had a design under it: she intended the most pointed and cutting allusion to Mrs. Tulliver's bunches of blonde curls, separated from each other by a due wave of smoothness on each side of the parting. Mrs. Tulliver had shed tears several times at sister Glegg's unkindness on the subject of these unmannerly curls, but the consciousness of looking the handsomer for them, naturally administered support. Mrs. Glegg chose to wear her bonnet in the house to-day—untied and tilted slightly, of course—a frequent practice of hers when she was on a visit, and happened to be in a severe humour: she didn't know what draughts there might be in strange houses. For the same reason she wore a small sable tippet, which reached just to her shoulders, and was very far from meeting across her well-formed chest, while her long neck was protected by a *chevaux-de-frise* of miscellaneous frilling. One would need to be learned in the fashions of those times to know how far in the rear of them Mrs. Glegg's slate-coloured silk gown must have been; but from certain constellations of small yellow spots upon it, and a mouldy odour about it suggestive of a damp clothes-chest, it was probable that it belonged to a stratum of garments just old enough to have come recently into wear.

Mrs. Glegg held her large gold watch in her hand, with the many-doubled chain round her fingers, and observed to Mrs. Tulliver, who had just returned from a visit to the kitchen, that whatever it might be by other people's clocks and watches, it was gone half-past twelve by hers.

(To be continued.)

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Enter the Aunts and Uncles.

The Dodsons were certainly a handsome family, and Mrs. Glegg was not the least handsome of the sisters. As she sat in Mrs. Tulliver's arm-chair, no impartial observer could have denied that for a woman of fifty she had a very comely face and figure, though Tom and Maggie considered their aunt Glegg as the type of ugliness.

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WOMAN'S WORLD

Training Little Children

By Mrs. Lenore E. Ranus

Everyone knows that a normal child has an active mind, but many parents do nothing to strengthen or train this vital part of their child's life, leaving all mental development to the teachers in the schools. Those parents are indeed fortunate who have kindergartens in their towns or