CHAPTER XIV - THE HANKY SCHOOL

The Dovecot was a prim little cottage standing back from the steepest brae in Thrums and hidden by high garden walls, to the top of which another boy's shoulders were, for apple-lovers, but one step up. Jargonelle trees grew against the house, stretching their arms round it as if to measure its girth, and it was also remarkable for several "dumb" windows with the most artful blinds painted on them. Miss Ailie's fruit was famous, but she loved her flowers best, and for long a notice board in her garden said, appealingly: "Persons who come to steal the fruit are requested not to walk on the flower-beds." It was that old bachelor, Dr. McQueen, who suggested this inscription to her, and she could never understand why he chuckled every time he read it.

There were seven rooms in the house, but only two were of public note, the school-room, which was downstairs, and the blue-and-white room above. The school-room was so long that it looked very low in the ceiling, and it had a carpet, and on the walls were texts as well as maps. Miss Ailie's desk was in the middle of the room, and there was another desk in the corner; a cloth had been hung over it, as one covers a cage to send the bird to sleep. Perhaps Miss Ailie thought that a bird had once sung there, for this had been the desk of her sister, Miss Kitty, who died years before Tommy came to Thrums. Dainty Miss Kitty, Miss Kitty with the roguish curls, it is strange to think that you are dead, and that only Miss Ailie hears you singing now at your desk in the corner! Miss Kitty never sang there, but the playful ringlets were once the bright thing in the room, and Miss Ailie sees them still, and they are a song to her.

The pupils had to bring handkerchiefs to the Dovecot, which led to its being called the Hanky School, and in time these handkerchiefs may be said to have assumed a religious character, though their purpose was merely to protect Miss Ailie's carpet. She opened each scholastic day by reading fifteen verses from the Bible, and then she said sternly, "Hankies!" whereupon her pupils whipped out their handkerchiefs, spread them on the floor and kneeled on them while Miss Ailie repeated the Lord's Prayer. School closed at four o'clock, again with hankies.

Only on great occasions were the boys and girls admitted to the blue-and-white room, when they were given shortbread, but had to eat it with

their heads flung back so that no crumbs should fall. Nearly everything in this room was blue or white, or both. There were white blinds and blue curtains, a blue table-cover and a white crumb-cloth, a white sheepskin with a blue footstool on it, blue chairs dotted with white buttons. Only white flowers came into this room, where there were blue vases for them, not a book was to be seen without a blue alpaca cover. Here Miss Ailie received visitors in her white with the blue braid, and enrolled new pupils in blue ink with a white pen. Some laughed at her, others remembered that she must have something to love after Miss Kitty died.

Miss Ailie had her romance, as you may hear by and by, but you would not have thought it as she came forward to meet you in the blue-and-white room, trembling lest your feet had brought in mud, but too much a lady to ask you to stand on a newspaper, as she would have liked dearly to do. She was somewhat beyond middle-age, and stoutly, even squarely, built, which gave her a masculine appearance; but she had grown so timid since Miss Kitty's death that when she spoke you felt that either her figure or her manner must have been intended for someone else. In conversation she had a way of ending a sentence in the middle which gave her a reputation of being "thro'ither," though an artificial tooth was the cause. It was slightly loose, and had she not at times shut her mouth suddenly, and then done something with her tongue, an accident might have happened. This tooth fascinated Tommy, and once when she was talking he cried, excitedly, "Quick, it's coming!" whereupon her mouth snapped close, and she turned pink in the blue-and-white room.

Nevertheless Tommy became her favorite, and as he had taught himself to read, after a fashion, in London, where his lesson-books were chiefly placards and the journal subscribed to by Shovel's father, she often invited him after school hours to the blue-and-white room, where he sat on a kitchen chair (with his boots off) and read aloud, very slowly, while Miss Ailie knitted. The volume was from the Thrums Book Club, of which Miss Ailie was one of the twelve members. Each member contributed a book every year, and as their tastes in literature differed, all sorts of books came into the club, and there was one member who invariably gave a ro-ro-romance. He was double-chinned and forty, but the school-mistress called him the dashing young banker, and for months she avoided his dangerous contribution. But always there came a black day when a desire to read the novel seized her, and she hurried home with it beneath her rokelay. This year the dashing banker's choice was a lady's

novel called "I Love My Love with an A," and it was a frivolous tale, those being before the days of the new fiction, with its grand discovery that women have an equal right with men to grow beards. The hero had such a way with him and was so young (Miss Ailie could not stand them a day more than twenty) that the school-mistress was enraptured and scared at every page, but she fondly hoped that Tommy did not understand. However, he discovered one day what something printed thus, "D--n," meant, and he immediately said the word with such unction that Miss Ailie let fall her knitting. She would have ended the readings then had not Agatha been at that point in the arms of an officer who, Miss Ailie felt almost certain, had a wife in India, and so how could she rest till she knew for certain? To track the officer by herself was not to be thought of, to read without knitting being such shameless waste of time, and it was decided to resume the readings on a revised plan: Tommy to say "stroke" in place of the "D--ns," and "word we have no concern with" instead of "Darling" and "Little One."

Miss Ailie was not the only person at the Dovecot who admired Tommy. Though in duty bound, as young patriots, to jeer at him for having been born in the wrong place, the pupils of his own age could not resist the charm of his reminiscences; even Gav Dishart, a son of the manse, listened attentively to him. His great topic was his birthplace, and whatever happened in Thrums, he instantly made contemptible by citing something of the same kind, but on a larger scale, that had happened in London; he turned up his nose almost farther than was safe when they said Catlaw was a stiff mountain to climb. ("Oh, Gav, if you just saw the London mountains!") Snow! why they didn't know what snow was in Thrums. If they could only see St. Paul's or Hyde Park or Shovel! he couldn't help laughing at Thrums, he couldn't--Larfing, he said at first, but in a short time his Scotch was better than theirs, though less unconscious. His English was better also, of course, and you had to speak in a kind of English when inside the Hanky School; you got your revenge at "minutes." On the whole, Tommy irritated his fellow-pupils a good deal, but they found it difficult to keep away from him.

He also contrived to enrage the less genteel boys of Monypenny. Their leader was Corp Shiach, three years Tommy's senior, who had never been inside a school except once, when he broke hopefully into Ballingall's because of a stirring rumor (nothing in it) that the dominie had hangit himself with his remaining brace; then in order of merit came

Birkie Fleemister; then, perhaps, the smith's family, called the Haggerty-Taggertys, they were such slovens. When school was over Tommy frequently stepped out of his boots and stockings, so that he no longer looked offensively genteel, and then Monypenny was willing to let him join in spyo, smuggle bools, kickbonnety, peeries, the preens, suckers pilly, or whatever game was in season, even to the baiting of the Painted Lady, but they would not have Elspeth, who should have been content to play dumps with the female Haggerty-Taggertys, but could enjoy no game of which Tommy was not the larger half. Many times he deserted her for manlier joys, but though she was out of sight he could not forget her longing face, and soon he sneaked off to her; he upbraided her, but he stayed with her. They bore with him for a time, but when they discovered that she had persuaded him (after prayer) to put back the spug's eggs which he had brought home in triumph, then they drove him from their company, and for a long time afterwards his deadly enemy was the hard-hitting Corp Shiach.

Elspeth was not invited to attend the readings of "I Love My Love with an A," perhaps because there were so many words in it that she had no concern with, but she knew they ended as the eight-o'clock bell began to ring, and it was her custom to meet Tommy a few yards from Aaron's door. Farther she durst not venture in the gloaming through fear of the Painted Lady, for Aaron's house was not far from the fearsome lane that led to Double Dykes, and even the big boys who made faces at this woman by day ran from her in the dusk. Creepy tales were told of what happened to those on whom she cast a blighting eye before they could touch cold iron, and Tommy was one of many who kept a bit of cold iron from the smithy handy in his pocket. On his way home from the readings he never had occasion to use it, but at these times he sometimes met Grizel, who liked to do her shopping in the evenings when her persecutors were more easily eluded, and he forced her to speak to him. Not her loneliness appealed to him, but that look of admiration she had given him when he was astride of Francie Crabb. For such a look he could pardon many rebuffs; without it no praise greatly pleased him; he was always on the outlook for it.

"I warrant," he said to her one evening, "you want to have some man-body to take care of you the way I take care of Elspeth."

"No, I don't," she replied, promptly.

"Would you no like somebody to love you?"

"Do you mean kissing?" she asked.

"There's better things in it than that," he said guardedly; "but if you want kissing, I--I--Elspeth'll kiss you."

"Will she want to do it?" inquired Grizel, a little wistfully.

"I'll make her do it," Tommy said.

"I don't want her to do it," cried Grizel, and he could not draw another word from her. However he was sure she thought him a wonder, and when next they met he challenged her with it.

"Do you not now?"

"I won't tell you," answered Grizel, who was never known to lie.

"You think I'm a wonder," Tommy persisted, "but you dinna want me to know you think it."

Grizel rocked her arms, a quaint way she had when excited, and she blurted out, "How do you know?"

The look he liked had come back to her face, but he had no time to enjoy it, for just then Elspeth appeared, and Elspeth's jealousy was easily aroused.

"I dinna ken you, lassie," he said coolly to Grizel, and left her stamping her foot at him. She decided never to speak to Tommy again, but the next time they met he took her into the Den and taught her how to fight.

It is painful to have to tell that Miss Ailie was the person who provided him with the opportunity. In the readings they arrived one evening at the scene in the conservatory, which has not a single Stroke in it, but is so full of Words We have no Concern with that Tommy reeled home blinking, and next day so disgracefully did he flounder in his lessons that the gentle school-mistress cast up her arms in despair.

"I don't know what to say to you," she exclaimed.

"Fine I know what you want to say," he retorted, and unfortunately she asked, "What?"

"Stroke!" he replied, leering horridly.

"I Love My Love with an A" was returned to the club forthwith (whether he really did have a wife in India Miss Ailie never knew) and "Judd on the Shorter Catechism" took its place. But mark the result. The readings ended at a quarter to eight now, at twenty to eight, at half-past seven, and so Tommy could loiter on the way home without arousing Elspeth's suspicion. One evening he saw Grizel cutting her way through the Haggerty-Taggerty group, and he offered to come to her aid if she would say "Help me." But she refused.

When, however, the Haggerty-Taggertys were gone she condescended to say, "I shall never, never ask you to help me, but--if you like--you can show me how to hit without biting my tongue."

"I'll learn you Shovel's curly ones," replied Tommy, cordially, and he adjourned with her to the Den for that purpose. He said he chose the Den so that Corp Shiach and the others might not interrupt them, but it was Elspeth he was thinking of.

"You are like Miss Ailie with her cane when she is pandying," he told Grizel. "You begin well, but you slacken just when you are going to hit."

"It is because my hand opens," Grizel said.

"And then it ends in a shove," said her mentor, severely. "You should close your fists like this, with the thumbs inside, and then play dab, this way, that way, yon way. That's what Shovel calls, 'You want it, take it, you've got it.'"

Thus did the hunted girl get her first lesson in scientific warfare in the Den, and neither she nor Tommy saw the pathos of it. Other lessons followed, and during the rests Grizel told Tommy all that she knew about herself. He had won her confidence at last by--by swearing dagont that he was English also.