

CHAPTER XX - THE SHADOW OF SIR WALTER

Tommy was in Miss Ailie's senior class now, though by no means at the top of it, and her mind was often disturbed about his future. On this subject Aaron had never spoken to anyone, and the problem gave Tommy himself so little trouble that all Elspeth knew was that he was to be great and that she was to keep his house. So the school-mistress braved an interview with Aaron for the sake of her favorite.

"You know he is a remarkable boy," she said.

"At his lessons, ma'am?" asked Aaron, quietly.

Not exactly at his lessons, she had to admit.

"In what way, then, ma'am?"

Really Miss Ailie could not say. There was something wonderful about Tommy, you felt it, but you could not quite give it a name. The warper must have noticed it himself.

"I've heard him saying something o' the kind to Elspeth," was Aaron's reply.

"But sometimes he is like a boy inspired," said the school-mistress. "You must have seen that?"

"When he was thinking o' himsel'," answered Aaron.

"He has such noble sentiments."

"He has."

"And I think, I really think," said Miss Ailie, eagerly, for this was what she had come to say, "that he has got great gifts for the ministry."

"I'm near sure o't," said Aaron, grimly.

"Ah, I see you don't like him."

"I dinna," the warper acknowledged quietly, "but I've been trying to do my duty by him for all that. It's no every laddie that gets three years' schooling straight on end."

This was true, but Miss Ailie used it to press her point. "You have done so well by him," she said, "that I think you should keep him at school for another year or two, and so give him a chance of carrying a bursary. If he carries one it will support him at college; if he does not--well, then I suppose he must be apprenticed to some trade."

"No," Aaron said, decisively; "if he gets the chance of a college education and flings it awa', I'll waste no more siller on his keep. I'll send him straight to the herding."

"And I shall not blame you," Miss Ailie declared eagerly.

"Though I would a hantle rather," continued the warper, "waur my money on Elspeth."

"What you spend on him," Miss Ailie argued, "you will really be spending on her, for if he rises in the world he will not leave Elspeth behind. You are prejudiced against him, but you cannot deny that."

"I dinna deny but what he's fond o' her," said Aaron, and after considering the matter for some days he decided that Tommy should get his chance. The school-mistress had not acted selfishly, for this decision, as she knew, meant that the boy must now be placed in the hands of Mr. Cathro, who was a Greek and Latin scholar. She taught Latin herself, it is true, but as cautiously as she crossed a plank bridge, and she was never comfortable in the dominie's company, because even at a tea-table he would refer familiarly to the ablative absolute instead of letting sleeping dogs lie.

"But Elspeth couldna be happy if we were at different schools," Tommy objected instantly.

"Yes, I could," said Elspeth, who had been won over by Miss Ailie; "it will be so fine, Tommy, to see you again after I hinna seen you for three hours."

Tommy was little known to Mr. Cathro at this time, except as the boy who had got the better of a rival teacher in the affair of Corp, which had delighted him greatly. "But if the sacket thinks he can play any of his tricks on me," he told Aaron, "there is an awakening before him," and he began the cramming of Tommy for a bursary with perfect confidence.

But before the end of the month, at the mere mention of Tommy's name, Mr. Cathro turned red in the face, and the fingers of his laying-on hand would clutch an imaginary pair of tawse. Already Tommy had made him self-conscious. He peered covertly at Tommy, and Tommy caught him at it every time, and then each quickly looked another way, and Cathro vowed never to look again, but did it next minute, and what enraged him most was that he knew Tommy noted his attempts at self-restraint as well as his covert glances. All the other pupils knew that a change for the worse had come over the dominie's temper. They saw him punish Tommy frequently without perceptible cause, and that he was still unsatisfied when the punishment was over. This apparently was because Tommy gave him a look before returning to his seat. When they had been walloped they gave Cathro a look also, but it merely meant, "Oh, that this was a dark road and I had a divot in my hand!" while his look was unreadable, that is unreadable to them, for the dominie understood it and writhed. What it said was, "You think me a wonder, and therefore I forgive you."

"And sometimes he fair beats Cathro!" So Tommy's schoolmates reported at home, and the dominie had to acknowledge its truth to Aaron. "I wish you would give that sacket a thrashing for me," he said, half furiously, yet with a grin on his face, one day when he and the warper chanced to meet on the Monypenny road.

"I'll no lay a hand on bairn o' Jean Myles," Aaron replied. "Ay, and I understood you to say that he should meet his match in you."

"Did I ever say that, man? Well, well, we live and learn."

"What has he been doing now?"

"What has he been doing!" echoed Cathro. "He has been making me look foolish in my own class-room. Yes, sir, he has so completely got the better of me (and not for the first time) that when I tell the story of how he diddled Mr. Ogilvy, Mr. Ogilvy will be able to cap it with the story of how the little whelp diddled me. Upon my soul, Aaron, he is running away with all my self-respect and destroying my sense of humor."

What had so crushed the dominie was the affair of Francie Crabb. Francie was now a pupil, like Gavin Dishart and Tommy, of Mr. Cathro's, who detested the boy's golden curls, perhaps because he was bald himself. They were also an incentive to evil-doing on the part of other

boys, who must give them a tug in passing, and on a day the dominie said, in a fury, "Give your mother my compliments, Francie, and tell her I'm so tired of seeing your curls that I mean to cut them off to-morrow morning."

"Say he shall not," whispered Tommy.

"You shanna!" blurted out Francie.

"But I will," said Cathro; "I would do it now if I had the shears."

It was only an empty threat, but an hour afterwards the dominie caught Tommy wagering in witchy marbles and other coin that he would not do it, and then instead of taking the tawse to him he said, "Keep him to his bargains, laddies, for whatever may have been my intention at the time, I mean to be as good as my word now."

He looked triumphantly at Tommy, who, however, instead of seeming crestfallen, continued to bet, and now the other boys were eager to close with him, for great was their faith in Cathro. These transactions were carried out on the sly, but the dominie knew what was going on, and despite his faith in himself he had his twitches of uneasiness.

"However, the boy can only be trusting to fear of Mrs. Crabb restraining me," he decided, and he marched into the school-room next morning, ostentatiously displaying his wife's largest scissors. His pupils crowded in after him, and though he noticed that all were strangely quiet and many wearing scared faces, he put it down to the coming scene. He could not resist giving one triumphant glance at Tommy, who, however, instead of returning it, looked modestly down. Then--"Is Francie Crabb here?" asked Mr. Cathro, firmly.

"He's hodding ahint the press," cried a dozen voices.

"Come forward, Francie," said the dominie, clicking the shears to encourage him.

There was a long pause, and then Francie emerged in fear from behind the press. Yes, it was Francie, but his curls were gone!

The shears fell to the floor. "Who did this?" roared the terrible Cathro.

"It was Tommy Sandys," blurted out Francis, in tears.

The school-master was unable to speak, and, alarmed at the stillness, Francie whined, "He said it would be done at any rate, and he promised me half his winnings."

It is still remembered by bearded men and married women who were at school that day how Cathro leaped three forms to get at Tommy, and how Tommy cried under the tawse and yet laughed ecstatically at the same time, and how subsequently he and Francie collected so many dues that the pockets of them stood out like brackets from their little persons.

The dominie could not help grinning a little at his own discomfiture as he told this story, but Aaron saw nothing amusing in it. "As I telled you," he repeated, "I winna touch him, so if you're no content wi' what you've done yoursel', you had better put Francie's mither on him."

"I hear she has taken him in hand already," Mr. Cathro replied dryly. "But, Aaron, I wish you would at least keep him closer to his lessons at night, for it is seldom he comes to the school well prepared."

"I see him sitting lang ower his books," said Aaron.

"Ay, maybe, but is he at them?" responded the dominie with a shake of the head that made Aaron say, with his first show of interest in the conversation, "You have little faith in his carrying a bursary, I see."

But this Mr. Cathro would not admit, for if he thought Tommy a numskull the one day he often saw cause to change his mind the next, so he answered guardedly, "It's too soon to say, Aaron, for he has eighteen months' stuffing to undergo yet before we send him to Aberdeen to try his fortune, and I have filled some gey toom wimes in eighteen months. But you must lend me a hand."

The weaver considered, and then replied stubbornly, "No, I give him his chance, but I'll have nocht to do wi' his use o't. And, dominie, I want you to say not another word to me about him atween this and examination time, for my mind's made up no to say a word to him. It's well kent that I'm no more fit to bring up bairns than to have them (dinna conter me, man, for the thing was proved lang syne at the Cuttle Well), and so till that time I'll let him gang his ain gait. But if he doesna carry a bursary, to the herding he goes. I've said it and I'll stick to it."

So, as far as Aaron was concerned, Tommy was left in peace to the glory of collecting his winnings from those who had sworn by Cathro, and

among them was Master Gavin Ogilvy Dishart, who now found himself surrounded by a debt of sixpence, a degrading position for the son of an Auld Licht minister.

Tommy would not give him time, but was willing to take his copy of "Waverley" as full payment.

Gavin offered him "Ivanhoe" instead, because his mother had given a read of "Waverley" to Gavinia, Miss Ailie's servant, and she read so slowly, putting her finger beneath each word, that she had not yet reached the middle. Also, she was so enamoured of the work that she would fight anyone who tried to take it from her.

Tommy refused "Ivanhoe," as it was not about Jacobites, but suggested that Gavinia should be offered it in lieu of "Waverley," and told that it was a better story.

The suggestion came too late, as Gavinia had already had a loan of "Ivanhoe," and read it with rapture, inch by inch. However, if Tommy would wait a month, or--

Tommy was so eager to read more about the Jacobites that he found it trying to wait five minutes. He thought Gavin's duty was to get his father to compel Gavinia to give the book up.

Was Tommy daft? Mr. Dishart did not know that his son possessed these books. He did not approve of story books, and when Mrs. Dishart gave them to Gavin on his birthday she--she had told him to keep them out of his father's sight. (Mr. and Mrs. Dishart were very fond of each other, but there were certain little matters that she thought it unnecessary to trouble him about.)

So if Tommy was to get "Waverley" at once, he must discover another way. He reflected, and then set off to Miss Ailie's (to whom he still read sober works of an evening, but novels never), looking as if he had found a way.

For some time Miss Ailie had been anxious about her red-armed maid, who had never before given pain unless by excess of willingness, as when she offered her garter to tie Miss Ailie's parcels with. Of late, however, Gavinia had taken to blurting out disquieting questions, to the significance of which she withheld the key, such as--

"Is there any place nowadays, ma'am, where there's tournaments? And could an able-bodied lassie walk to them? and what might be the charge to win in?"

Or, "Would you no like to be so mighty beautiful, ma'am, that as soon as the men saw your bonny face they just up wi' you in their arms and ran?"

Or again, "What's the heaviest weight o' a woman a grand lusty man could carry in his arms as if she were an infant?"

This method of conveyance seemed to have a peculiar fascination for Gavinia, and she got herself weighed at the flesher's. On another occasion she broke a glass candlestick, and all she said to the pieces was, "Wha carries me, wears me."

This mystery was troubling the school-mistress sadly when Tommy arrived with the key to it. "I'm doubting Gavinia's reading ill books on the sly," he said.

"Never!" exclaimed Miss Ailie, "she reads nothing but the Mentor."

Tommy shook his head, like one who would fain hope so, but could not overlook facts. "I've been hearing," he said, "that she reads books as are full o' Strokes and Words We have no Concern with."

Miss Ailie could not believe it, but she was advised to search the kitchen, and under Gavinia's mattress was found the dreadful work.

"And you are only fifteen!" said Miss Ailie, eying her little maid sorrowfully.

"The easier to carry," replied Gavinia, darkly.

"And you named after a minister!" Miss Ailie continued, for her maid had been christened Gavinia because she was the first child baptized in his church after the Rev. Gavin Dishart came to Thrums. "Gavinia, I must tell him of this. I shall take this book to Mr. Dishart this very day."

"The right man to take it to," replied the maid, sullenly, "for it's his ain."

"Gavinia!"

"Well, it was Mrs. Dishart that lended it to me."

"I--I never saw it on the manse shelves."

"I'm thinking," said the brazen Gavinia, "as there's hoddy corners in manses as well as in--blue-and-white rooms."

This dark suggestion was as great a shock to the gentle school-mistress as if out of a clear sky had come suddenly the word--

Stroke!

She tottered with the book that had so demoralized the once meek Gavinia into the blue-and-white room, where Tommy was restlessly awaiting her, and when she had told him all, he said, with downcast eyes:

"I was never sure o' Mrs. Dishart. When I hand her the Mentor she looks as if she didna care a stroke for't--"

"Tommy!"

"I'm doubting," he said sadly, "that she's ower fond o' Words We have no Concern with."

Miss Ailie would not listen to such talk, but she approved of the suggestion that "Waverley" should be returned not to the minister, but to his wife, and she accepted gratefully Tommy's kindly offer to act as bearer. Only happening to open the book in the middle, she--

"I'm waiting," said Tommy, after ten minutes.

She did not hear him.

"I'm waiting," he said again, but she was now in the next chapter.

"Maybe you would like to read it yoursel'!" he cried, and then she came to, and, with a shudder handed him the book. But after he had gone she returned to the kitchen to reprove Gavinia at greater length, and in the midst of the reproof she said faintly: "You did not happen to look at the end, did you?"

"That I did," replied Gavinia.

"And did she--did he--"

"No," said Gavinia, sorrowfully.

Miss Ailie sighed. "That's what I think too," said Gavinia.

"Why didn't they?" asked the school-mistress.

"Because he was just a sumph," answered Gavinia, scornfully. "If he had been like Fergus, or like the chield in 'Ivanhoe,' he wouldna have ta'en a 'no.' He would just have whipped her up in his arms and away wi' her. That's the kind for me, ma'am."

"There is a fascination about them," murmured Miss Ailie.

"A what?"

But again Miss Ailie came to. "For shame, Gavinia, for shame!" she said, severely; "these are disgraceful sentiments."

In the meantime Tommy had hurried with the book, not to the manse, but to a certain garret, and as he read, his imagination went on fire. Blinder's stories had made him half a Jacobite, and now "Waverley" revealed to him that he was born neither for the ministry nor the herding, but to restore to his country its rightful king. The first to whom he confided this was Corp, who immediately exclaimed: "Michty me! But what will the police say?"

"I ken a wy," answered Tommy, sternly.