

CHAPTER XXV - A PENNY PASS-BOOK

Elspeth conveyed the gift to Tommy in a brown paper wrapping, and when it lay revealed as an aging volume of Mamma's Boy, a magazine for the Home, nothing could have looked more harmless. But, ah, you never know. Hungrily Tommy ran his eye through the bill of fare for something choice to begin with, and he found it. "The Boy Pirate" it was called. Never could have been fairer promise, and down he sat confidently.

It was a paper on the boys who have been undone by reading pernicious fiction. It gave their names, and the number of pistols they had bought, and what the judge said when he pronounced sentence. It counted the sensational tales found beneath the bed, and described the desolation of the mothers and sisters. It told the color of the father's hair before and afterwards.

Tommy flung the thing from him, picked it up again, and read on uneasily, and when at last he rose he was shrinking from himself. In hopes that he might sleep it off he went early to bed, but his contrition was still with him in the morning. Then Elspeth was shown the article which had saved him, and she, too, shuddered at what she had been, though her remorse was but a poor display beside his, he was so much better at everything than Elspeth. Tommy's distress of mind was so genuine and so keen that it had several hours' start of his admiration of it; and it was still sincere, though he himself had become gloomy, when he told his followers that they were no more. Grizel heard his tale with disdain, and said she hated Miss Ailie for giving him the silly book, but he reproved these unchristian sentiments, while admitting that Miss Ailie had played on him a scurvy trick.

"But you're glad you've repented, Tommy," Elspeth reminded him, anxiously.

"Ay, I'm glad," he answered, without heartiness.

"Well, gin you repent I'll repent too," said Corp, always ready to accept Tommy without question.

"You'll be happier," replied Tommy, sourly.

"Ay, to be good's the great thing," Corp growled; "but, Tommy, could we no have just one michty blatter, methinks, to end up wi'?"

This, of course, could not be, and Saturday forenoon found Tommy wandering the streets listlessly, very happy, you know, but inclined to kick at any one who came near, such, for instance, as the stranger who asked him in the square if he could point out the abode of Miss Ailie Cray.

Tommy led the way, casting some converted looks at the gentleman, and judging him to be the mysterious unknown in whom the late Captain Stroke had taken such a reprehensible interest. He was a stout, red-faced man, stepping firmly into the fifties, with a beard that even the most converted must envy, and a frown sat on his brows all the way, proving him possibly ill-tempered, but also one of the notable few who can think hard about one thing for at least five consecutive minutes. Many took a glint at him as he passed, but missed the frown, they were wondering so much why the fur of his heavy top-coat was on the inside, where it made little show, save at blasty corners.

Miss Ailie was in her parlor, trying to give her mind to a blue and white note-book, but when she saw who was coming up the garden she dropped the little volume and tottered to her bedroom. She was there when Gavinia came up to announce that she had shown a gentleman into the blue-and-white room, who gave the name of Ivie McLean. "Tell him--I shall come down--presently," gasped Miss Ailie, and then Gavinia was sure this was the man who was making her mistress so unhappy.

"She's so easily flichtered now," Gavinia told Tommy in the kitchen, "that for fear o' starting her I never whistle at my work without telling her I'm to do't, and if I fall on the stair, my first thought is to jump up and cry, 'It was just me tum'ling.' And now I believe this brute'll be the death o' her."

"But what can he do to her?"

"I dinna ken, but she's greeting sair, and yon can hear how he's rampaging up and down the blue-and-white room. Listen to his thrawn feet! He's raging because she's so long in coming down, and come she daurna. Oh, the poor crittur!"

Now, Tommy was very fond of his old school-mistress, and he began to be unhappy with Gavinia.

"She hasna a man-body in the world to take care o' her," sobbed the girl.

"Has she no?" cried Tommy, fiercely, and under one of the impulses that so easily mastered him he marched into the blue-and-white room.

"Well, my young friend, and what may you want?" asked Mr. McLean, impatiently.

Tommy sat down and folded his arms. "I'm going to sit here and see what you do to Miss Ailie," he said, determinedly.

Mr. McLean said "Oh!" and then seemed favorably impressed, for he added quietly: "She is a friend of yours, is she? Well, I have no intention of hurting her."

"You had better no," replied Tommy, stoutly.

"Did she send you here?"

"No; I came mysel'."

"To protect her?"

There was the irony in it that so puts up a boy's dander. "Dinna think," said Tommy, hotly, "that I'm fleid at you, though I have no beard--at least, I hinna it wi' me."

At this unexpected conclusion a smile crossed Mr. McLean's face, but was gone in an instant. "I wish you had laughed," said Tommy, on the watch; "once a body laughs he canna be angry no more," which was pretty good even for Tommy. It made Mr. McLean ask him why he was so fond of Miss Ailie.

"I'm the only man-body she has," he answered.

"Oh? But why are you her man-body?"

The boy could think of no better reason than this: "Because--because she's so sair in need o' are." (There were moments when one liked Tommy.)

Mr. McLean turned to the window, and perhaps forgot that he was not alone. "Well, what are you thinking about so deeply?" he asked by and by.

"I was trying to think o' something that would gar you laugh," answered Tommy, very earnestly, and was surprised to see that he had nearly done it.

The blue and white note-book was lying on the floor where Miss Ailie had dropped it. Often in Tommy's presence she had consulted this work, and certainly its effect on her was the reverse of laughter; but once he had seen Dr. McQueen pick it up and roar over every page. With an inspiration Tommy handed the book to Mr. McLean. "It made the doctor laugh," he said persuasively.

"Go away," said Ivie, impatiently; "I am in no mood for laughing."

"I tell you what," answered Tommy, "I'll go, if you promise to look at it," and to be rid of him the man agreed. For the next quarter of an hour Tommy and Gavinia were very near the door of the blue-and-white room, Tommy whispering dejectedly, "I hear no laughing," and Gavinia replying, "But he has quieted down."

Mr. McLean had a right to be very angry, but God only can say whether he had a right to be as angry as he was. The book had been handed to him open, and he was laying it down unread when a word underlined caught his eye. It was his own name. Nothing in all literature arrests our attention quite so much as that. He sat down to the book. It was just about this time that Miss Ailie went on her knees to pray.

It was only a penny pass-book. On its blue cover had been pasted a slip of white paper, and on the paper was written, in blue ink, "Alison Cray," with a date nearly nine years old. The contents were in Miss Ailie's prim handwriting; jottings for her own use begun about the time when the sisters, trembling at their audacity, had opened school, and consulted and added to fitfully ever since. Hours must have been spent in erasing the blots and other blemishes so carefully. The tiny volume was not yet full, and between its two last written pages lay a piece of blue blotting-paper neatly cut to the size of the leaf.

Some of these notes were transcripts from books, some contained the advice of friends, others were doubtless the result of talks with Miss Kitty (from whom there were signs that the work had been kept a secret), many were Miss Ailie's own. An entry of this kind was frequent: "If you are uncertain of the answer to a question in arithmetic, it is advisable to leave the room on some pretext and work out the sum swiftly in the

passage." Various pretexts were suggested, and this one (which had an insufficient line through it) had been inserted by Dr. McQueen on that day when Tommy saw him chuckling, "You pretend that your nose is bleeding and putting your handkerchief to it, retire hastily, the supposition being that you have gone to put the key of the blue-and-white room down your back." Evidently these small deceptions troubled Miss Ailie, for she had written, "Such subterfuge is, I hope, pardonable, the object being the maintenance of scholastic discipline." On another page, where the arithmetic was again troubling her, this appeared: "If Kitty were aware that the squealing of the slate-pencils gave me such headaches, she would insist on again taking the arithmetic class, though it always makes her ill. Surely, then, I am justified in saying that the sound does not distress me." To this the doctor had added, "You are a brick."

There were two pages headed NEVER, which mentioned ten things that Miss Ailie must never do; among them, "Never let the big boys know you are afraid of them. To awe them, stamp with the foot, speak in a loud ferocious voice, and look them unflinchingly in the face."

"Punishments" was another heading, but she had written it small, as if to prevent herself seeing it each time she opened the book. Obviously her hope had been to dispose of Punishment in a few lines, but it would have none of that, and Mr. McLean found it stalking from page to page. Miss Ailie favored the cane in preference to tawse, which, "often flap round your neck as you are about to bring them down." Except in desperate cases "it will probably be found sufficient to order the offender to bring the cane to you." Then followed a note about rubbing the culprit's hand "with sweet butter or dripping" should you have struck too hard.

Dispiriting item, that on resuming his seat the chastised one is a hero to his fellows for the rest of the day. Item, that Master John James Rattray knows she hurts her own hand more than his. Item, that John James promised to be good throughout the session if she would let him thrash the bad ones. Item, that Master T. Sandys, himself under correction, explained to her (the artistic instinct again) how to give the cane a waggle when descending, which would double its nip. Item, that Elsie Dundas offered to receive Francie Crabb's punishment for two snaps. Item, that Master Gavin Dishart, for what he considered the honor of his school, though aware he was imperilling his soul, fought Hendry Dickie of Cathro's for saying Miss Ailie could not draw blood with one stroke.

The effect on Miss Ailie of these mortifying discoveries could be read in the paragraph headed A MOTHER'S METHOD, which was copied from a newspaper. Mrs. E----, it seems, was the mother of four boys (residing at D----), and she subjected them frequently to corporal chastisement without permanent spiritual result. Mrs. E----, by the advice of another lady, Mrs. K---- (mother of six), then had recourse to the following interesting experiment. Instead of punishing her children physically when they misbehaved, she now in their presence wounded herself by striking her left hand severely with a ruler held in the right. Soon their better natures were touched, and the four implored her to desist, promising with tears never to offend again. From that hour Mrs. E---- had little trouble with her boys.

It was recorded in the blue and white book how Miss Ailie gave this plan a fair trial, but her boys must have been darker characters than Mrs. E---'s, for it merely set them to watching each other, so that they might cry out, "Pandy yourself quick, Miss Ailie; Gavin Dishart's drawing the devil on his slate." Nevertheless, when Miss Ailie announced a return to more conventional methods, Francie was put up (with threats) to say that he suffered agonies of remorse every time she pandied herself for him, but the thing had been organized in a hurry and Francie was insufficiently primed, and on cross-examination he let out that he thought remorse was a swelling of the hands.

Miss Ailie was very humble-minded, and her entries under THE TEACHER TAUGHT were all admonitions for herself. Thus she chided herself for cowardice because "Delicate private reasons have made me avoid all mention of India in the geography classes. Kitty says quite calmly that this is fair neither to our pupils nor to I---- M----. The courage of Kitty in this matter is a constant rebuke to me." Except on a few occasions Mr. McLean found that he was always referred to as I---- M----.

Quite early in the volume Miss Ailie knew that her sister's hold on life was loosening. "How bright the world suddenly seems," Mr. McLean read, "when there is the tiniest improvement in the health of an invalid one loves." Is it laughable that such a note as this is appended to a recipe for beef-tea? "It is surely not very wicked to pretend to Kitty that I keep some of it for myself; she would not take it all if she knew I dined on the beef it was made from." Other entries showed too plainly that Miss Ailie stinted herself of food to provide delicacies for Miss Kitty. No doubt her expenses

were alarming her when she wrote this: "An interesting article in the Mentor says that nearly all of us eat and drink too much. Were we to mortify our stomachs we should be healthier animals and more capable of sustained thought. The word animal in this connection is coarse, but the article is most impressive, and a crushing reply to Dr. McQueen's assertion that the editor drinks. In the school-room I have frequently found my thoughts of late wandering from classwork, and I hastily ascribed it to sitting up during the night with Kitty or to my habit of listening lest she should be calling for me. Probably I had over-eaten, and I must mortify the stomach. A glass of hot water with half a spoonful of sugar in it is highly recommended as a light supper."

"How long ago it may seem since yesterday!" Do you need to be told on what dark day Miss Ailie discovered that? "I used to pray that I should be taken first, but I was both impious and selfish, for how could fragile Kitty have fought on alone?"

In time happiness again returned to Miss Ailie; of all our friends it is the one most reluctant to leave us on this side of the grave. It came at first disguised, in the form of duties, old and new; and stealthily, when Miss Ailie was not looking, it mixed with the small worries and joys that had been events while Miss Kitty lived, and these it converted once more into events, where Miss Ailie found it lurking, and at first she would not take it back to her heart, but it crept in without her knowing. And still there were I---- M----'s letters. "They are all I have to look forward to," she wrote in self-defence. "I shall never write to I---- M---- again," was another entry, but Mr. McLean found on the same page, "I have written to I---- M----, but do not intend posting it," and beneath that was, "God forgive me, I have posted it."

The troubles with arithmetic were becoming more terrible. "I am never really sure about the decimals," she wrote.

A Professor of Memory had appeared at the Muckley, and Miss Ailie admits having given him half-a-crown to explain his system to her. But when he was gone she could not remember whether you multiplied everything by ten before dividing by five and subtracting a hundred, or began by dividing and doing something underhand with the cube root. Then Mr. Dishart, who had a microscope, wanted his boy to be taught science, and several experiments were described at length in the book, one of them dealing with a penny, H, and a piston, X Y, and you do

things to the piston "and then the penny comes to the surface." "But it never does," Miss Ailie wrote sorrowfully; perhaps she was glad when Master Dishart was sent to another school.

"Though I teach the girls the pianoforte I find that I cannot stretch my fingers as I used to do. Kitty used to take the music, and I often remember this suddenly when superintending a lesson. It is a pain to me that so many wish to acquire 'The Land o' the Leal,' which Kitty sang so often to I---- M---- at Magenta Cottage."

Even the French, of which Miss Ailie had once been very proud, was slipping from her. "Kitty and I kept up our French by translating I---- M-- --'s letters and comparing our versions, but now that this stimulus is taken away I find that I am forgetting my French. Or is it only that I am growing old? too old to keep school?" This dread was beginning to haunt Miss Ailie, and the pages between which the blotting-paper lay revealed that she had written to the editor of the Mentor asking up to what age he thought a needy gentlewoman had a right to teach. The answer was not given, but her comment on it told everything. "I asked him to be severely truthful, so that I cannot resent his reply. But if I take his advice, how am I to live? And if I do not take it, I fear I am but a stumbling-block in the way of true education."

That is a summary of what Mr. McLean read in the blue and white book; remember, you were warned not to expect much. And Tommy and Gavinia listened, and Tommy said, "I hear no laughing," and Gavinia answered, "But he has quieted down," and upstairs Miss Ailie was on her knees. A time came when Mr. McLean could find something to laugh at in that little pass-book, but it was not then, not even when he reached the end. He left something on the last page instead. At least I think it must have been he: Miss Ailie's tears could not have been so long a-drying.

You may rise, now, Miss Ailie; your prayer is granted.