

CHAPTER XXIX - TOMMY THE SCHOLAR

So Miss Ailie could be brave, but what a poltroon she was also! Three calls did she make on dear friends, ostensibly to ask how a cold was or to instruct them in a new device in Shetland wool, but really to announce that she did not propose keeping school after the end of the term--because--in short, Mr. Ivie McLean and she--that is he--and so on. But though she had planned it all out so carefully, with at least three capital ways of leading up to it, and knew precisely what they would say, and pined to hear them say it, on each occasion shyness conquered and she came away with the words unspoken. How she despised herself, and how Mr. McLean laughed! He wanted to take the job off her hands by telling the news to Dr. McQueen, who could be depended on to spread it through the town, and Miss Ailie discovered with horror that his simple plan was to say, "How are you, doctor? I just looked in to tell you that Miss Ailie and I are to be married. Good afternoon." The audacity of this captivated Miss Ailie even while it outraged her sense of decency. To Redlintie went Mr. McLean, and returning next day drew from his pocket something which he put on Miss Ailie's finger, and then she had the idea of taking off her left glove in church, which would have announced her engagement as loudly as though Mr. Dishart had included it in his pulpit intimations. Religion, however, stopped her when she had got the little finger out, and the Misses Finlayson, who sat behind and knew she had an itchy something inside her glove, concluded that it was her threepenny for the plate. As for Gavinia, like others of her class in those days, she had never heard of engagement rings, and so it really seemed as if Mr. McLean must call on the doctor after all. But "No," said he, "I hit upon a better notion to-day in the Den," and to explain this notion he produced from his pocket a large, vulgar bottle, which shocked Miss Ailie, and indeed that bottle had not passed through the streets uncommented on.

Mr. McLean having observed this bottle afloat on the Silent Pool, had fished it out with his stick, and its contents set him chuckling. They consisted of a sheet of paper which stated that the bottle was being flung into the sea in lat. 20, long. 40, by T. Sandys, Commander of the Ailie, then among the breakers. Sandys had little hope of weathering the gale, but he was indifferent to his own fate so long as his enemy did not escape, and he called upon whatsoever loyal subjects of the Queen

should find this document to sail at once to lat. 20, long. 40, and there cruise till they had captured the Pretender, alias Stroke, and destroyed his Lair. A somewhat unfavorable personal description of Stroke was appended, with a map of the coast, and a stern warning to all loyal subjects not to delay as one Ailie was in the villain's hands and he might kill her any day. Victoria Regina would give five hundred pounds for his head. The letter ended in manly style with the writer's sending an affecting farewell message to his wife and little children.

"And so while we are playing ourselves," said Mr. McLean to Miss Ailie, "your favorite is seeking my blood."

"Our favorite," interposed the school-mistress, and he accepted the correction, for neither of them could forget that their present relations might have been very different had it not been for Tommy's faith in the pass-book. The boy had shown a knowledge of the human heart, in Miss Ailie's opinion, that was simply wonderful; inspiration she called it, and though Ivie thought it a happy accident, he did not call it so to her. Tommy's father had been the instrument in bringing these two together originally, and now Tommy had brought them together again; there was fate in it, and if the boy was of the right stuff McLean meant to reward him.

"I see now," he said to Miss Ailie, "a way of getting rid of our fearsome secret and making my peace with Sandys at one fell blow." He declined to tell her more, but presently he sought Gavinia, who dreaded him nowadays because of his disconcerting way of looking at her inquiringly and saying "I do!"

"You don't happen to know, Gavinia," he asked, "whether the good ship Ailie weathered the gale of the 15th instant? If it did," he went on, "Commander Sandys will learn something to his advantage from a bottle that is to be cast into the ocean this evening."

Gavinia thought she heard the chink of another five shillings, and her mouth opened so wide that a chaffinch could have built therein. "Is he to look for a bottle in the pond?" she asked, eagerly.

"I do," replied McLean with such solemnity that she again retired to the coal-cellar.

That evening Mr. McLean cast a bottle into the Silent Pool, and subsequently called on Mr. Cathro, to whom he introduced himself as one interested in Master Thomas Sandys. He was heartily received, but at the name of Tommy, Cathro heaved a sigh that could not pass unnoticed. "I see you don't find him an angel," said Mr. McLean, politely.

"Deed, sir, there are times when I wish he was an angel," the dominie replied so viciously that McLean laughed. "And I grudge you that laugh," continued Cathro, "for your Tommy Sandys has taken from me the most precious possession a teacher can have--my sense of humor."

"He strikes me as having a considerable sense of humor himself."

"Well he may, Mr. McLean, for he has gone off with all mine. But bide a wee till I get in the tumblers, and. I'll tell you the latest about him--if what you want to hear is just the plain exasperating truth.

"His humor that you spoke of," resumed the school-master presently, addressing his words to the visitor, and his mind to a toddy ladle of horn, "is ill to endure in a school where the understanding is that the dominie makes all the jokes (except on examination-day, when the ministers get their yearly fling), but I think I like your young friend worst when he is deadly serious. He is constantly playing some new part--playing is hardly the word though, for into each part he puts an earnestness that cheats even himself, until he takes to another. I suppose you want me to give you some idea of his character, and I could tell you what it is at any particular moment; but it changes, sir, I do assure you, almost as quickly as the circus-rider flings off his layers of waistcoats. A single puff of wind blows him from one character to another, and he may be noble and vicious, and a tyrant and a slave, and hard as granite and melting as butter in the sun, all in one forenoon. All you can be sure of is that whatever he is he will be it in excess."

"But I understood," said McLean, "that at present he is solely engaged on a war of extermination in the Den."

"Ah, those exploits, I fancy, are confined to Saturday nights, and unfortunately his Saturday debauch does not keep him sober for the rest of the week, which we demand of respectable characters in these parts. For the last day or two, for instance, he has been in mourning."

"I had not heard of that."

"No, I daresay not, and I'll give you the facts, if you'll fill your glass first. But perhaps--" here the dominie's eyes twinkled as if a gleam of humor had been left him after all--"perhaps you have been more used of late to ginger wine?"

The visitor received the shock impassively as if he did not know he had been hit, and Cathro proceeded with his narrative. "Well, for a day or two Tommy Sandys has been coming to the school in a black jacket with crape on the cuffs, and not only so, he has sat quiet and forlorn-like at his desk as if he had lost some near and dear relative. Now I knew that he had not, for his only relative is a sister whom you may have seen at the Hanky School, and both she and Aaron Latta are hearty. Yet, sir (and this shows the effect he has on me), though I was puzzled and curious I dared not ask for an explanation."

"But why not?" was the visitor's natural question.

"Because, sir, he is such a mysterious little sacket," replied Cathro, testily, "and so clever at leading you into a hole, that it's not chancey to meddle with him, and I could see through the corner of my eye that, for all this woeful face, he was proud of it, and hoped I was taking note. For though sometimes his emotion masters him completely, at other times he can step aside as it were, and take an approving look at it. That is a characteristic of him, and not the least maddening one."

"But you solved the mystery somehow, I suppose?"

"I got at the truth to-day by an accident, or rather my wife discovered it for me. She happened to call in at the school on a domestic matter I need not trouble you with (sal, she needna have troubled me with it either!), and on her way up the yard she noticed a laddie called Lewis Doig playing with other ungodly youths at the game of kickbonnety. Lewis's father, a gentleman farmer, was buried jimply a fortnight since, and such want of respect for his memory made my wife give the loon a dunt on the head with a pound of sugar, which she had just bought at the 'Sosh. He turned on her, ready to scart or spit or run, as seemed wisest, and in a klink her woman's eye saw what mine had overlooked, that he was not even wearing a black jacket. Well, she told him what the slap was for, and his little countenance cleared at once. 'Oh' says he, 'that's all right, Tommy and me has arranged it,' and he pointed blithely to a corner of the yard where Tommy was hunkering by himself in Lewis's jacket, and wiping his mournful eyes with Lewis's hanky. I daresay you can jalouse

the rest, but I kept Lewis behind after the school skaled, and got a full confession out of him. He had tried hard, he gave me to understand, to mourn fittingly for his father, but the kickbonnety season being on, it was up-hill work, and he was relieved when Tommy volunteered to take it off his hands. Tommy's offer was to swop jackets every morning for a week or two, and thus properly attired to do the mourning for him."

The dominie paused, and regarded his guest quizzically. "Sir," he said at length, "laddies are a queer growth; I assure you there was no persuading Lewis that it was not a right and honorable compact."

"And what payment," asked McLean, laughing, "did Tommy demand from Lewis for this service?"

"Not a farthing, sir--which gives another uncanny glint into his character. When he wants money there's none so crafty at getting it, but he did this for the pleasure of the thing, or, as he said to Lewis, 'to feel what it would be like.' That, I tell you, is the nature of the sacket, he has a devouring desire to try on other folk's feelings, as if they were so many suits of clothes."

"And from your account he makes them fit him too."

"My certie, he does, and a lippie in the bonnet more than that."

So far the school-master had spoken frankly, even with an occasional grin at his own expense, but his words came reluctantly when he had to speak of Tommy's prospects at the bursary examinations. "I would rather say nothing on that head," he said, almost coaxingly, "for the laddie has a year to reform in yet, and it's never safe to prophesy."

"Still I should have thought that you could guess pretty accurately how the boys you mean to send up in a year's time are likely to do? You have had a long experience, and, I am told, a glorious one."

"Deed, there's no denying it," answered the dominie, with a pride he had won the right to wear. "If all the ministers, for instance, I have turned out in this bit school were to come back together, they could hold the General Assembly in the square."

He lay back in his big chair, a complacent dominie again. "Guess the chances of my laddies!" he cried, forgetting what he had just said, and that there was a Tommy to bother him. "I tell you, sir, that's a matter on

which I'm never deceived, I can tell the results so accurately that a wise Senatus would give my lot the bursaries I say they'll carry, without setting them down to examination-papers at all." And for the next half-hour he was reciting cases in proof of his sagacity.

"Wonderful!" chimed in McLean. "I see it is evident you can tell me how Tommy Sandys will do," but at that Cathro's rush of words again subsided into a dribble.

"He's the worst Latinist that ever had the impudence to think of bursaries," he groaned.

"And his Greek--" asked McLean, helping on the conversation as far as possible.

"His Greek, sir, could be packed in a pill-box."

"That does not sound promising. But the best mathematicians are sometimes the worst linguists."

"His Greek is better than his mathematics," said Cathro, and he fell into lamentation. "I have had no luck lately," he sighed. "The laddies I have to prepare for college are second-raters, and the vexing thing is, that when a real scholar is reared in Thrums, instead of his being handed over to me for the finishing, they send him to Mr. Ogilvy in Glenquharity. Did Miss Ailie ever mention Gavin Dishart to you--the minister's son? I just craved to get the teaching of that laddie, he was the kind you can cram with learning till there's no room left for another spoonful, and they bude send him to Mr. Ogilvy, and you'll see he'll stand high above my loons in the bursary list. And then Ogilvy will put on sic airs that there will be no enduring him. Ogilvy and I, sir, we are engaged in an everlasting duel; when we send students to the examinations, it is we two who are the real competitors, but what chance have I, when he is represented by a Gavin Dishart and my man is Tommy Sandys?"

McLean was greatly disappointed. "Why send Tommy up at all if he is so backward?" he said. "You are sure you have not exaggerated his deficiencies?"

"Well, not much at any rate. But he baffles me; one day I think him a perfect numskull, and the next he makes such a show of the small drop of scholarship he has that I'm not sure but what he may be a genius."

"That sounds better. Does he study hard?"

"Study! He is the most careless whelp that ever--"

"But if I were to give him an inducement to study?"

"Such as?" asked Cathro, who could at times be as inquisitive as the doctor.

"We need not go into that. But suppose it appealed to him?"

Cathro considered. "To be candid," he said, "I don't think he could study, in the big meaning of the word. I daresay I'm wrong, but I have a feeling that whatever knowledge that boy acquires he will dig out of himself. There is something inside him, or so I think at times, that is his master, and rebels against book-learning. No, I can't tell what it is; when we know that we shall know the real Tommy."

"And yet," said McLean, curiously, "you advise his being allowed to compete for a bursary. That, if you will excuse my saying so, sounds foolish to me."

"It can't seem so foolish to you," replied Cathro, scratching his head, "as it seems to me six days in seven."

"And you know that Aaron Latta has sworn to send him to the herding if he does not carry a bursary. Surely the wisest course would be to apprentice him now to some trade--"

"What trade would not be the worse of him? He would cut off his fingers with a joiner's saw, and smash them with a mason's melle; put him in a brot behind a counter, and in some grand, magnanimous mood he would sell off his master's things for nothing; make a clerk of him, and he would only ravel the figures; send him to the soldiering, and he would have a sudden impulse to fight on the wrong side. No, no, Miss Ailie says he has a gift for the ministry, and we must cling to that."

In thus sheltering himself behind Miss Ailie, where he had never skulked before, the dominie showed how weak he thought his position, and he added, with a brazen laugh, "Then if he does distinguish himself at the examinations I can take the credit for it, and if he comes back in disgrace I shall call you to witness that I only sent him to them at her instigation."

"All which," maintained McLean, as he put on his top-coat, "means that somehow, against your better judgment, you think he may distinguish himself after all."

"You've found me out," answered Cathro, half relieved, half sorry. "I had no intention of telling you so much, but as you have found me out I'll make a clean breast of it. Unless something unexpected happens to the laddie--unless he take to playing at scholarship as if it were a Jacobite rebellion, for instance--he shouldna have the ghost of a chance of a bursary, and if he were any other boy as ill-prepared I should be ashamed to send him up, but he is Tommy Sandys, you see, and--it is a terrible thing to say, but it's Gospel truth, it's Gospel truth--I'm trusting to the possibility of his diddling the examiners!"

It was a startling confession for a conscientious dominie, and Cathro flung out his hands as if to withdraw the words, but his visitor would have no tampering with them. "So that sums up Tommy, so far as you know him," he said as he bade his host good-night.

"It does," Cathro admitted, grimly, "but if what you wanted was a written certificate of character I should like to add this, that never did any boy sit on my forms whom I had such a pleasure in thrashing."