

## CHAPTER XI - THE TEA-PARTY

It was quite a large tea-party, and was held in what had been the school-room; nothing there now, however, to recall an academic past, for even the space against which a map of the world (Mercator's projection) had once hung was gone the colour of the rest of the walls, and with it had faded away the last relic of the Hanky School.

"It will not fade so quickly from my memory," Tommy said, to please Mrs. McLean. His affection for his old schoolmistress was as sincere as hers for him. I could tell you of scores of pretty things he had done to give her pleasure since his return, all carried out, too, with a delicacy which few men could rival, and never a woman; but they might make you like him, so we shall pass them by.

Ailie said, blushing, that she had taught him very little. "Everything I know," he replied, and then, with a courteous bow to the gentleman opposite, "except what I learned from Mr. Cathro."

"Thank you," Cathro said shortly. Tommy had behaved splendidly to him, and called him his dear preceptor, and yet the Dominie still itched to be at him with the tawse as of old. "And fine he knows I'm itching," he reflected, which made him itch the more.

It should have been a most successful party, for in the rehearsals between the hostess and her maid Christina every conceivable difficulty had been ironed out. Ailie was wearing her black silk, but without the Honiton lace, so that Miss Sophia Innes need not become depressed; and she had herself taken the chair with the weak back. Mr. Cathro, who, though a lean man, needed a great deal of room at table, had been seated far away from the spinet, to allow Christina to pass him without climbing. Miss Sophia and Grizel had the doctor between them, and there was also a bachelor, but an older one, for Elspeth. Mr. McLean, as stout and humoursome as of yore, had solemnly promised his wife to be jocular but not too jocular. Neither minister could complain, for if Mr. Dishart had been asked to say grace, Mr. Gloag knew that he was to be called on for the benediction. Christina, obeying strict orders, glided round the table leisurely, as if she were not in the least excited, though she could be heard rushing along the passage like one who had entered for a race. And, lastly, there was, as chief guest, the celebrated Thomas

Sandys. It should have been a triumph of a tea-party, and yet it was not. Mrs. McLean could not tell why.

Grizel could have told why; her eyes told why every time they rested scornfully on Mr. Sandys. It was he, they said, who was spoiling the entertainment, and for the pitiful reason that the company were not making enough of him. He was the guest of the evening, but they were talking admiringly of another man, and so he sulked. Oh, how she scorned Tommy!

That other man was, of course, the unknown Captain Ure, gallant rescuer of boys, hero of all who admire brave actions except the jealous Sandys. Tommy had pooh-poohed him from the first, to Grizel's unutterable woe.

"Have you not one word of praise for such a splendid deed?" she had asked in despair.

"I see nothing splendid about it," he replied coldly.

"I advise you in your own interests not to talk in that way to others," she said. "Don't you see what they will say?"

"I can't help that," answered Tommy the just. "If they ask my opinion, I must give them the truth. I thought you were fond of the truth, Grizel." To that she could only wring her hands and say nothing; but it had never struck her that the truth could be so bitter.

And now he was giving his opinion at Mrs. McLean's party, and they were all against him, except, in a measure, Elspeth's bachelor, who said cheerily, "We should all have done it if we had been in Captain Ure's place; I would have done it myself, Miss Elspeth, though not fond of the water." He addressed all single ladies by their Christian name with a Miss in front of it. This is the mark of the confirmed bachelor, and comes upon him at one-and-twenty.

"I could not have done it," Grizel replied decisively, though she was much the bravest person present, and he explained that he meant the men only. His name was James Bonthron; let us call him Mr. James.

"Men are so brave!" she responded, with her eyes on Tommy, and he received the stab in silence. Had the blood spouted from the wound, it would have been an additional gratification to him. Tommy was like

those superb characters of romance who bare their breast to the enemy and say, "Strike!"

"Well, well," Mr. Cathro observed, "none of us was on the spot, and so we had no opportunity of showing our heroism. But you were near by, Mr. Sandys, and if you had fished up the water that day, instead of down, you might have been called upon. I wonder what you would have done?"

Yes, Tommy was exasperating to him still as in the long ago, and Cathro said this maliciously, yet feeling that he did a risky thing, so convinced was he by old experience that you were getting in the way of a road-machine when you opposed Thomas Sandys.

"I wonder," Tommy replied quietly.

The answer made a poor impression, and Cathro longed to go on. "But he was always most dangerous when he was quiet," he reflected uneasily, and checked himself in sheer funk.

Mr. Gloag came, as he thought, to Tommy's defence. "If Mr. Sandys questions," he said heavily, "whether courage would have been vouchsafed to him at that trying hour, it is right and fitting that he should admit it with Christian humility."

"Quite so, quite so," Mr. James agreed, with heartiness. He had begun to look solemn at the word "vouchsafed."

"For we are differently gifted," continued Mr. Gloag, now addressing his congregation. "To some is given courage, to some learning, to some grace. Each has his strong point," he ended abruptly, and tucked reverently into the jam, which seemed to be his.

"If he would not have risked his life to save the boy," Elspeth interposed hotly, "it would have been because he was thinking of me."

"I should like to believe that thought of you would have checked me," Tommy said.

"I am sure it would," said Grizel.

Mr. Cathro was rubbing his hands together covertly, yet half wishing he could take her aside and whisper: "Be canny; it's grand to hear you, but be canny; he is looking most extraordinary meek, and unless he has cast

his skin since he was a laddie, it's not chancey to meddle with him when he is meek."

The doctor also noticed that Grizel was pressing Tommy too hard, and though he did not like the man, he was surprised--he had always thought her so fair-minded.

"For my part," he said, "I don't admire the unknown half so much for what he did as for his behaviour afterwards. To risk his life was something, but to disappear quietly without taking any credit for it was finer and I should say much more difficult."

"I think it was sweet of him," Grizel said.

"I don't see it," said Tommy, and the silence that followed should have been unpleasant to him; but he went on calmly: "Doubtless it was a mere impulse that made him jump into the pool, and impulse is not courage." He was quoting Grizel now, you observe, and though he did not look at her, he knew her eyes were fixed on him reproachfully. "And so," he concluded, "I suppose Captain Ure knew he had done no great thing, and preferred to avoid exaggerated applause."

Even Elspeth was troubled; but she must defend her dear brother. "He would have avoided it himself," she explained quickly. "He dislikes praise so much that he does not understand how sweet it is to smaller people."

This made Tommy wince. He was always distressed when timid Elspeth blurted out things of this sort in company, and not the least of his merits was that he usually forbore from chiding her for it afterwards, so reluctant was he to hurt her. In a world where there were no women except Elspeths, Tommy would have been a saint. He saw the doctor smiling now, and at once his annoyance with her changed to wrath against him for daring to smile at little Elspeth. She saw the smile, too, and blushed; but she was not angry: she knew that the people who smiled at her liked her, and that no one smiled so much at her as Dr. Gemmell.

The Dominie said fearfully: "I have no doubt that explains it, Miss Sandys. Even as a boy I remember your brother had a horror of vulgar applause."

"Now," he said to himself, "he will rise up and smite me." But no; Tommy replied quietly;

"I am afraid that was not my character, Mr. Cathro; but I hope I have changed since then, and that I could pull a boy out of the water without wanting to be extolled for it."

That he could say such things before her was terrible to Grizel. It was perhaps conceivable that he might pull the boy out of the water, as he so ungenerously expressed it; but that he could refrain from basking in the glory thereof, that, she knew, was quite impossible. Her eyes begged him to take back those shameful words, but he bravely declined; not even to please Grizel could he pretend that what was not was. No more sentiment for T. Sandys.

"The spirit has all gone out of him; what am I afraid of?" reflected the Dominie, and he rose suddenly to make a speech, tea-cup in hand. "Cathro, Cathro, you tattie-doolie, you are riding to destruction," said a warning voice within him, but against his better judgment he stifled it and began. He begged to propose the health of Captain Ure. He was sure they would all join with him cordially in drinking it, including Mr. Sandys, who unfortunately differed from them in his estimation of the hero; that was only, however, as had been conclusively shown, because he was a hero himself, and so could make light of heroic deeds--with other sly hits at Mr. Sandys. But when all the others rose to drink the toast, Tommy remained seated. The Dominie coughed. "Perhaps Mr. Sandys means to reply," Grizel suggested icily. And it was at this uncomfortable moment that Christina appeared suddenly, and in a state of suppressed excitement requested her mistress to speak with her behind the door. All the knowing ones were aware that something terrible must have happened in the kitchen. Miss Sophia thought it might be the china tea-pot. She smiled reassuringly to signify that, whatever it was, she would help Mrs. McLean through, and so did Mr. James. He was a perfect lady.

How dramatic it all was, as Ailie said frequently afterwards. She was back in a moment, with her hand on her heart. "Mr. Sandys," were her astounding words, "a lady wants to see you."

Tommy rose in surprise, as did several of the others.

"Was it really you?" Ailie cried. "She says it was you!"

"I don't understand, Mrs. McLean," he answered; "I have done nothing."

"But she says--and she is at the door!"

All eyes turned on the door so longingly that it opened under their pressure, and a boy who had been at the keyhole stumbled forward.

"That's him!" he announced, pointing a stern finger at Mr. Sandys.

"But he says he did not do it," Ailie said.

"He's a liar," said the boy. His manner was that of the police, and it had come so sharply upon Tommy that he looked not unlike a detected criminal.

Most of them thought he was being accused of something vile, and the Dominie demanded, with a light heart, "Who is the woman?" while Mr. James had a pleasant feeling that the ladies should be requested to retire. But just then the woman came in, and she was much older than they had expected.

"That's him, granny," the boy said, still severely; "that's the man as saved my life at the Slugs." And then, when the truth was dawning on them all, and there were exclamations of wonder, a pretty scene suddenly presented itself, for the old lady, who had entered with the timidest courtesy, slipped down on her knees before Tommy and kissed his hand. That young rascal of a boy was all she had.

They were all moved by her simplicity, but none quite so much as Tommy. He gulped with genuine emotion, and saw her through a maze of beautiful thoughts that delayed all sense of triumph and even made him forget, for a little while, to wonder what Grizel was thinking of him now. As the old lady poured out her thanks tremblingly, he was excitedly planning her future. He was a poor man, but she was to be brought by him into Thrums to a little cottage overgrown with roses. No more hard work for these dear old hands. She could sell scones, perhaps. She should have a cow. He would send the boy to college and make a minister of him; she should yet hear her grandson preach in the church to which as a boy--

But here the old lady somewhat imperilled the picture by rising actively and dumping upon the table the contents of the bag--a fowl for Tommy.

She was as poor an old lady as ever put a halfpenny into the church plate on Sundays; but that she should present a hen to the preserver of

her grandson, her mind had been made up from the moment she had reason to think she could find him, and it was to be the finest hen in all the country round. She was an old lady of infinite spirit, and daily, dragging the boy with her lest he again went a-fishing, she trudged to farms near and far to examine and feel their hens. She was a brittle old lady who creaked as she walked, and cracked like a whin-pod in the heat, but she did her dozen miles or more a day, and passed all the fowls in review, and could not be deceived by the craftiest of farmers' wives; and in the tail of the day she became possessor, and did herself thraw the neck of the stoutest and toughest hen that ever entered a linen bag head foremost. By this time the boy had given way in the legs, and hence the railway journey, its cost defrayed by admiring friends.

With careful handling he should get a week out of her gift, she explained complacently, besides two makes of broth; and she and the boy looked as if they would like dearly to sit opposite Tommy during those seven days and watch him gorging.

If you look at the matter aright it was a handsomer present than many a tiara, but if you are of the same stuff as Mr. James it was only a hen. Mr. James tittered, and one or two others made ready to titter. It was a moment to try Tommy, for there are doubtless heroes as gallant as he who do not know how to receive a present of a hen. Grizel, who had been holding back, moved a little nearer. If he hurt that sweet old woman's feelings, she could never forgive him--never!

He heard the titter, and ridicule was terrible to him; but he also knew why Grizel had come closer, and what she wanted of him. Our Tommy, in short, had emerged from his emotion, and once more knew what was what. It was not his fault that he stood revealed a hero: the little gods had done it; therefore let him do credit to the chosen of the little gods. The way he took that old lady's wrinkled hand, and bowed over it, and thanked her, was an ode to manhood. Everyone was touched. Those who had been about to titter wondered what on earth Mr. James had seen to titter at, and Grizel almost clapped her hands with joy; she would have done it altogether had not Tommy just then made the mistake of looking at her for approval. She fell back, and, intoxicated with himself, he thought it was because her heart was too full for utterance. Tommy was now splendid, and described the affair at the Slugs with an adorable modesty.

"I assure you, it was a much smaller thing to do than you imagine; it was all over in a few minutes; I knew that in your good nature you would make too much of it, and so--foolishly, I can see now--I tried to keep it from you. As for the name Captain Ure, it was an invention of that humourous dog, Corp."

And so on, with the most considerate remarks when they insisted on shaking hands with him: "I beseech you, don't apologize to me; I see clearly that the fault was entirely my own. Had I been in your place, Mr. James, I should have behaved precisely as you have done, and had you been at the Slugs you would have jumped in as I did. Mr. Cathro, you pain me by holding back; I assure you I esteem my old Dominie more than ever for the way in which you stuck up for Captain Ure, though you must see why I could not drink that gentleman's health."

And Mr. Cathro made the best of it, wringing Tommy's hand effusively, while muttering, "Fool, donnard stirk, gowk!" He was addressing himself and any other person who might be so presumptuous as to try to get the better of Thomas Sandys. Cathro never tried it again. Had Tommy died that week his old Dominie would have been very chary of what he said at the funeral.

They were in the garden now, the gentlemen without their hats. "Have you made your peace with him?" Cathro asked Grizel, in a cautious voice. "He is a devil's buckie, and I advise you to follow my example, Miss McQueen, and capitulate. I have always found him reasonable so long as you bend the knee to him."

"I am not his enemy," replied Grizel, loftily, "and if he has done a noble thing I am proud of him and will tell him so."

"I would tell him so," said the Dominie, "whether he had done it or not."

"Do you mean," she asked indignantly, "that you think he did not do it?"

"No, no, no," he answered hurriedly; "or mercy's sake, don't tell him I think that." And then, as Tommy was out of ear-shot: "But I see there is no necessity for my warning you against standing in his way again, Miss McQueen, for you are up in arms for him now."

"I admire brave men," she replied, "and he is one, is he not?"

"You'll find him reasonable," said the Dominie, drily.



But though it was thus that she defended Tommy when others hinted doubts, she had not yet said she was proud of him to the man who wanted most to hear it. For one brief moment Grizel had exulted on learning that he and Captain Ure were one, and then suddenly, to all the emotions now running within her, a voice seemed to cry, "Halt!" and she fell to watching sharply the doer of noble deeds. Her eyes were not wistful, nor were they contemptuous, but had Tommy been less elated with himself he might have seen that they were puzzled and suspicious. To mistrust him in face of such evidence seemed half a shame; she was indignant with herself even while she did it; but she could not help doing it, the truth about Tommy was such a vital thing to Grizel. She had known him so well, too well, up to a minute ago, and this was not the man she had known.

How unfair she was to Tommy while she watched! When the old lady was on her knees thanking him, and every other lady was impressed by the feeling he showed, it seemed to Grizel that he was again in the arms of some such absurd sentiment as had mastered him in the Den. When he behaved so charmingly about the gift she was almost sure he looked at her as he had looked in the old days before striding his legs and screaming out, "Oh, am I not a wonder? I see by your face that you think me a wonder!" All the time he was so considerately putting those who had misjudged him at their ease she believed he did it considerately that they might say to each other, "How considerate he is!" When she misread Tommy in such comparative trifles as these, is it to be wondered that she went into the garden still tortured by a doubt about the essential? It was nothing less than torture to her; when you discover what is in her mind, Tommy, you may console yourself with that.

He discovered what was in her mind as Mr. Cathro left her. She felt shy, he thought, of coming to him after what had taken place, and, with the generous intention of showing that she was forgiven, he crossed good-naturedly to her.

"You were very severe, Grizel," he said, "but don't let that distress you for a moment; it served me right for not telling the truth at once."

She did not flinch. "Do we know the truth now?" she asked, looking at him steadfastly. "I don't want to hurt you--you know that; but please tell me, did you really do it? I mean, did you do it in the way we have been led to suppose?"

It was a great shock to Tommy. He had not forgotten his vows to change his nature, and had she been sympathetic now he would have confessed to her the real reason of his silence. He wanted boyishly to tell her, though of course without mention of the glove; but her words hardened him.

"Grizel!" he cried reproachfully, and then in a husky voice: "Can you really think so badly of me as that?"

"I don't know what to think," she answered, pressing her hands together, "I know you are very clever."

He bowed slightly.

"Did you?" she asked again. She was no longer chiding herself for being over-careful; she must know the truth.

He was silent for a moment. Then, "Grizel," he said, "I am about to pain you very much, but you give me no option. I did do it precisely as you have heard. And may God forgive you for doubting me," he added with a quiver, "as freely as I do."

You will scarcely believe this, but a few minutes afterwards, Grizel having been the first to leave, he saw her from the garden going, not home, but in the direction of Corp's house, obviously to ask him whether Tommy had done it. Tommy guessed her intention at once, and he laughed a bitter ho-ho-ha, and wiped her from his memory.

"Farewell, woman; I am done with you," are the terrible words you may conceive Tommy saying. Next moment, however, he was hurriedly bidding his hostess good-night, could not even wait for Elspeth, clapped his hat on his head, and was off after Grizel. It had suddenly struck him that, now the rest of the story was out, Corp might tell her about the glove. Suppose Gavinia showed it to her!

Sometimes he had kissed that glove passionately, sometimes pressed his lips upon it with the long tenderness that is less intoxicating but makes you a better man; but now, for the first time, he asked himself bluntly why he had done those things, with the result that he was striding to Corp's house. It was not only for his own sake that he hurried; let us do him that justice. It was chiefly to save Grizel the pain of thinking that he whom she had been flouting loved her, as she must think if she heard the story of the glove. That it could be nothing but pain to her he was

boyishly certain, for assuredly this scornful girl wanted none of his love. And though she was scornful, she was still the dear companion of his boyhood. Tommy was honestly anxious to save Grizel the pain of thinking that she had flouted a man who loved her.

He took a different road from hers, but, to his annoyance, they met at Couthie's corner. He would have passed her with a distant bow, but she would have none of that. "You have followed me," said Grizel, with the hateful directness that was no part of Tommy's character.

"Grizel!"

"You followed me to see whether I was going to question Corp. You were afraid he would tell me what really happened. You wanted to see him first to tell him what to say."

"Really, Grizel--"

"Is it not true?"

There are no questions so offensive to the artistic nature as those that demand a Yes or No for answer. "It is useless for me to say it is not true," he replied haughtily, "for you won't believe me."

"Say it and I shall believe you," said she.

Tommy tried standing on the other foot, but it was no help. "I presume I may have reasons for wanting to see Corp that you are unacquainted with," he said.

"Oh, I am sure of it!" replied Grizel, scornfully. She had been hoping until now, but there was no more hope left in her.

"May I ask what it is that my oldest friend accuses me of? Perhaps you don't even believe that I was Captain Ure?"

"I am no longer sure of it."

"How you read me, Grizel! I could hoodwink the others, but never you. I suppose it is because you have such an eye for the worst in anyone."

It was not the first time he had said something of this kind to her; for he knew that she suspected herself of being too ready to find blemishes in others, to the neglect of their better qualities, and that this made her uneasy and also very sensitive to the charge. To-day, however, her own

imperfections did not matter to her; she was as nothing to herself just now, and scarcely felt his insinuations.

"I think you were Captain Ure," she said slowly, "and I think you did it, but not as the boy imagines."

"You may be quite sure," he replied, "that I would not have done it had there been the least risk. That, I flatter myself, is how you reason it out."

"It does not explain," she said, "why you kept the matter secret."

"Thank you, Grizel! Well, at least I have not boasted of it."

"No, and that is what makes me----" She paused.

"Go on," said he, "though I can guess what agreeable thing you were going to say."

But she said something else: "You may have noticed that I took the boy aside and questioned him privately."

"I little thought then, Grizel, that you suspected me of being an impostor."

She clenched her hands again; it was all so hard to say, and yet she must say it! "I did not. I saw he believed his story. I was asking him whether you had planned his coming with it to Mrs. McLean's house at that dramatic moment."

"You actually thought me capable of that!"

"It makes me horrid to myself," she replied wofully, "but if I thought you had done that I could more readily believe the rest."

"Very well, Grizel," he said, "go on thinking the worst of me; I would not deprive you of that pleasure if I could."

"Oh, cruel, cruel!" she could have replied; "you know it is no pleasure; you know it is a great pain." But she did not speak.

"I have already told you that the boy's story is true," he said, "and now you ask me why I did not shout it from the housetops myself. Perhaps it was for your sake, Grizel; perhaps it was to save you the distress of knowing that in a momentary impulse I could so far forget myself as to act the part of a man."

She pressed her hands more tightly. "I may be wronging you," she answered; "I should love to think so; but--you have something you want to say to Corp before I see him."

"Not at all," Tommy said; "if you still want to see Corp, let us go together." She hesitated, but she knew how clever he was. "I prefer to go alone," she replied. "Forgive me if I ask you to turn back."

"Don't go," he entreated her. "Grizel, I give you my word of honour it is to save you acute pain that I want to see Corp first." She smiled wanly at that, for though, as we know, it was true, she misunderstood him. He had to let her go on alone.