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Teatime in Kenilworth Square

The raindrops made little silvery pings as they hit the bottom of the metal buckets that Amelia had set to catch them, so that she wouldn't have to sit and watch the floor all muddying and puddling. She'd found a dry spot to sit in, in a lumpy old armchair her mother had banished from the drawing room, and she'd kicked off her boots and drawn her stockinged feet up under her pinafore.

Sometimes, when she had to sit very still and quiet – at Meeting on Sundays, for instance, when you had to think godly thoughts and attend upon the Spirit, as Grandmama solemnly put it – Amelia would long to jump up and run around and make a rumpus. She had to concentrate very hard on just not fidgeting.

But when she had a plan she wanted to think about, Amelia found sitting still no problem at all. She could sit for ages and just think and imagine and work things out in her head. This is what she was doing now.

As she sat, she looked up at the streaming roof. It was a funny sensation to look up into the rain and not get wet. You could see the rain slithering quickly along the roof, and gathering at a corner to gush down in a splashy waterfall onto the garden path.

This was the room Amelia liked best in the house. In a

way, though, the orangery wasn't a room at all. It was a glass structure that you entered through elegant french doors from the dining room, at the back of the house. It had a black and white diamond-patterned tiled floor. It was more like part of the garden, really, than part of the house, because everywhere you looked, all you could see was sky and garden – apple trees and damson trees, sad and dripping today, and a long stretch of lawn leading to a garden bench, which stood, wet and lonely, against a red-brick wall. Even if you looked back into the house, you couldn't really see in. You could only see the garden reflected back at you in the glass panels of the french doors.

When Amelia's grandpapa had built the orangery at the end of the nineteenth century, some years before Amelia herself was born, it had been very fashionable. People really did grow oranges in orangeries in those days. Ornamental ones, of course – you couldn't expect to grow edible oranges in the Irish climate, even if you had the most beautiful orangery in Rathgar.

Amelia often imagined what the orangery would have looked like then. In fact, she thought she could just remember it as it had been when she was much younger. There had been bamboo furniture and smart little orange trees in spick-and-span tubs, globes of shiny dark leaves clustered on top of slender trunks, with here and there a miniature fruit glowing among the foliage. The whole glass pavilion had been filled with light and scented with a sweet citrus tang.

But the orangery had fallen into disuse since Grandpapa's death. 'Vainglory,' Grandmama had pronounced one day, standing in the orangery and shaking her head sorrowfully. Amelia had been too small to know what that meant, but it sounded rather wonderful. And then somehow all the lovely slender bamboo furniture with its exotic leopard-like mark-

ings had disappeared, and goodness knows what had happened to the orange trees.

After that, the orangery was simply left to moulder. The glass was grimy now, and Mick Moriarty, the outdoor man who looked after the garden and cleaned the gutters and mended the roof, kept his tools in it, and odd pieces of furniture that people wanted to get rid of from other rooms in the house found their way there. And of course Amelia used it as her special place when she wanted to get away for a quiet think and to look at the sky. Not that you could hide very well in it, because it was all open and bright, but for some reason people didn't seem to think of looking for her there, and Amelia often managed a whole hour or more on her own in her special inside-outside place.

Mama would peer into the orangery from time to time from the dining room and make vague promises out loud to herself about clearing it out, but then she would close the lace curtains that hung before the french doors, and forget all about it again. Mama was like that. She thought that if she spoke grimly enough to herself about the necessity of attending to little household tasks, they were as good as done, and then she was free to get on with her real life, as she called it.

Amelia had mixed feelings about her mother's mutterings. Of course she would have liked to see the orangery restored to its former splendour, with the orange trees reinstated in their vainglorious tubs, the leaky roof mended and the floor polished and gleaming again. But at the same time, she didn't like the idea of a spring-cleaning. That would make people remember the orangery, and they might start to regard it as a place where any of the family might sit on spring afternoons, doing their beastly darning or reading their rotten old books and magazines or even scratching away with their fountain pens writing their unspeakable let-

ters and making dull grown-uppish conversation about nothing at all, and it wouldn't be Amelia's special place any more.

But for now, it was still the last place anyone thought of looking, and that afternoon Amelia sat so long and so still in the sagging old chair, listening to the rainy music, that when she finally stood up because it must surely be teatime, she had pins and needles in her foot and she had to put it down on the floor very gently and hold her breath until the delicious but almost unbearable tingling stopped and she could put her weight on it and prise it into her boot.

Then she did up her laces quickly, slipped through the french doors back into the house and arrived in the drawing room just as Mary Ann brought in the tea-tray.

A huge fire was blazing in the drawing-room grate, and an occasional raindrop found its way down the chimney and spat and fizzled as it hit the flames and died. Grandmama sat in her usual straight-backed chair beside the fire, doing her cross-stitch. 'Love thy neighbour,' was the motto on her sampler, and some modest little wildflowers wound through the lettering.

Amelia's younger brother Edmund lay on his tummy on the hearthrug, waving his feet in the air. He must have been playing trains because he was making tiresome chugging and puffing noises. Amelia never took much notice of Edmund, but you couldn't ignore him entirely, because he made a great deal of noise for such a small boy.

'Oh, do be quiet, Edmund,' said Amelia automatically, for this was what she always said as soon as she caught sight of him anywhere about the house.

'Shan't!' said Edmund, just as automatically, and without looking up from his game.

'Children! Children!' said Grandmama, also automatically, and Amelia went over to her corner to give the old lady a

kiss. 'Sorry, Grandmama,' she murmured into the old lady's ear. Her face smelt of tea and rosewater, as it always did, and her old cheek was dry and soft.

Amelia's grandmama wore an old-fashioned plain dress that buttoned up the front like a shirt. This wasn't just because she was an old lady, and old ladies can't be expected to keep up with the fashions, but because she had always dressed that way, as all Quaker ladies had done in her youth. Nowadays, even the most pious Quaker ladies wore whatever they chose, but some of the very oldest ones still clung to the old way of dress.

Grandmama poured the tea into large white teacups for herself and Amelia. Cook had sent up a glass of Jersey milk for Edmund, who was too young for tea. And there was brown bread and butter, white bread and butter and a plate of warm scones and a glass dish of strawberry jam. Grandmama put the plate of scones by the fire, to keep warm until all the bread and butter was eaten, for you weren't allowed to have any scones until then.

Edmund sat up and drank his milk carefully. He had only just been promoted from nursery tea in the schoolroom to family tea in the drawing room, and he didn't want to be sent back, so for once he kept quiet and sat still, all except for his feet, which he couldn't resist swinging softly under his chair.

The children had almost worked their way through the bread and butter and were about to ask Grandmama if they might have a scone, when Mama breezed in, bringing a swirl of cold air and a small shower of raindrops with her.

'Oh, I'm just in time!' she laughed, stuffing her single glove into her coat pocket and shaking more raindrops out of her coat as she swung out of it and sat down. (Mama generally left the house with two gloves, but she rarely returned with two.) As she took off her dripping hat, a large lock of dark hair came loose and hung down the side of her face. Mama

swept it aside impatiently, not bothering to pin it back up again, as anyone else's mama would have done. She tossed her hat onto the ottoman in a way that Amelia would never have got away with, and alternately blew on her fingers and held them out to the fire, as if she didn't know perfectly well that that was a sure way to get chilblains.

'Well, not quite in time,' said Grandmama, who had a fine respect for the truth, 'but not quite late either.' Amelia and Edmund watched in consternation as Mama tucked into the scones and jam straight away without having to go through the bread-and-butter course.

Amelia's mama was a great disappointment to Amelia in many ways. Though she didn't dress as plainly as Grandmama, still she took no trouble at all, and went about the house in an old blue serge thing that Amelia couldn't abide. Sometimes Amelia had to remind her to change out of it if she was going out or expecting company, and then she would drag on her grey silk, which was dull but at least had the advantage of being nicely cut and of a good quality material.

Amelia was too young for real frocks. She wore drab dresses with buttoned cuffs and neat little collars under her everyday pinafores, and even for Sunday she only had a dull tartan with no sash. But that was all about to change. For soon Amelia would be not a little girl but a Young Lady, and that meant good frocks and fine stockings and putting her hair up. She would soon be thirteen, and that was almost fourteen, and at fifteen one could certainly put one's hair up. For the moment, it hung in yellow and brass streaks down her back and was pinned behind her ears so that you could see how they stuck out, to Amelia's great grief.

Mama didn't even notice Grandmama's little reproof. 'Tea's cold!' she spluttered on her first gulp.

'Shall I ring for a fresh pot, Mama?' asked Amelia primly,

practising for being a Young Lady.

‘Well ...’ Mama looked at Grandmama doubtfully, for it was a family rule not to make life difficult for the servants. ‘Well, I’ll tell you what, why don’t you run down to the kitchen yourself, and save Mary Ann a trip, darling?’

‘Yes, Mama,’ said Amelia.

She closed the door behind her carefully, because she would have slammed it if she hadn’t tried very hard not to. Amelia was cross with Mama. Here she was as usual, whirling in late to meals, looking like something the cat brought in – and with only one glove again – and then expecting Amelia to be her serving girl and run errands for her. Well, all this would have to change when Amelia became a Young Lady.

But in the meantime, little girls had to be seen and not heard, and Amelia would simply have to put up with it.

Although it was only just after five o’clock, it was quite dark at the back of the house, because of the grey weather outside. Amelia had to peer to see the stone steps that led down to the kitchen.

The kitchen was warm but gloomy. The kitchen lamps were never lit until six, whatever the weather. But it smelt good there. Cook had started on the dinner already, although the grown-ups didn’t dine until eight. Steak and kidney pudding, it must be, because Amelia could smell the kidneys frying and Cook was rolling out pastry. The children had their dinner at one o’clock. They had a cup of cocoa going to bed, but tea was their last meal of the day, and Amelia often felt envious of the grown-ups when she smelt the good warm cooking smells in the evening.

There was no sign of Mary Ann. She must be in the scullery, peeling potatoes or scrubbing saucepans.

‘Could we have a hot drop, please, Cook?’ asked Amelia politely, putting the teapot on the kitchen table. ‘You see, Mama was late and the tea was cold.’

‘Certainly, my dear,’ said Cook. ‘But will you ask Mary Ann to get it? My hands are all flour. She’s out in the scullery.’

The scullery was cold after the warmth of the kitchen with its big hot range, and was even darker than the kitchen.

‘Mary Ann?’ said Amelia into the chilly gloom. She could hear the rain whooshing down the drainpipe outside the back door. She felt a bit shy addressing Mary Ann, who was new. She and Amelia had never had a conversation before.

‘Oh lawny!’ yelled Mary Ann, dropping a saucepan onto the black flagged floor with a terrible clatter. She had been humming to herself as she worked, and what with the noise of the rain and the roar of the fire in the kitchen chimney, she mustn’t have heard Amelia’s approach.

‘I’m sorry I made you jump,’ said Amelia stiffly, to Mary Ann’s stooped back. ‘I’m Amelia Pim.’ And she held out her hand in the semi-darkness.

Mary Ann straightened up with the retrieved saucepan in her hand and peered at Amelia. Amelia stared back. She had never seen such a very angular girl before. Mary Ann looked younger than Amelia, and was much thinner. She seemed to be all elbows and legs, and she held her arms out at an angle from her skinny body as if she were about to lurch into awkward flight at any moment.

Mary Ann mustn’t have seen Amelia’s outstretched hand. At any rate, she didn’t take any notice of it. Instead, she burst into peals of laughter. ‘Are you indeed?’ she asked heartily, but Amelia understood from her tone that it wasn’t a real question. ‘And I’m the Queen of Sheba!’ she added with another laugh.

‘Oh!’ said Amelia, not quite sure how to respond to this piece of information.

‘Only I’m in disguise, see? I’m running away from my father, the evil Tsar, who wants to lock me up in a nunnery for the rest of my days, and I’m in hiding here in Dublin. My

name in exile is Mary Ann Maloney. Pleased to make your acquaintance.'

'I thought the Tsar was in Russia,' Amelia managed at last. 'Not Sheba.'

'Oh, you don't want to believe everything you hear,' said Mary Ann darkly. 'And what can I do for your ladyship?'

'Oh, I'm not a ladyship.'

'Well, I know that,' retorted Mary Ann. 'It's just a manner of speaking, so it is. A turn of phrase, don't you know.'

'Oh,' said Amelia, for the third time. What a strange girl this was! Amelia wondered if she mightn't be a bit, you know, funny in the head or something. She didn't know much about servants, although they'd been around her all her life. She had been brought up always to be polite and kind to them, but it never occurred to her that she might have a normal conversation with one, apart from asking for something or thanking them for something. Not that this was a very normal conversation. On the whole, Amelia preferred her conversations to be normal.

'Could I have a pot of tea, please?' she asked.

'Indeed and you could, Miss Amelia,' said Mary Ann, in a much more normal, servantish sort of voice.

'Oh, just Amelia, please. Not Miss. It's a sort of principle with us, you see.'

'What is?' asked Mary Ann, moving into the kitchen and setting about making the tea. Cook was nowhere to be seen, but Amelia could hear her rattling about in the pantry.

'Not to use titles like Miss or Mister,' explained Amelia. 'Because we're Friends, you see.'

'Oh, I'm sure we are, Miss Amelia, the best of friends, but all the same, if you don't mind, I know my place and I like to keep in it. Just because I make a little joke every now and again, it doesn't mean I don't know how to behave to my betters, thank you very much.'

‘Oh, not that sort of friends, I didn’t mean that. I meant it’s against our religion.’

Now it was Mary Ann’s turn to wonder if Amelia wasn’t a bit soft in the head. Blathering on about Russia, saying they were friends and in the next breath seeming to change her mind about it, and now it seemed that something was against this girl’s religion. Mary Ann was blowed if she knew what exactly it was that was supposed to be against her religion, but she thought it best just to go along with her. Other people’s religion could be a touchy subject.

‘Whatever you say, Miss.’ Mary Ann adjusted the cosy around the teapot again and handed it back to Amelia. ‘Mind your step now, Miss. It’s getting dusk. Three steps up, remember. And don’t bother with the door. I’ll close it after you.’

And Mary Ann shook her head at Amelia’s retreating back. She was beginning to wonder if this service lark was such a good idea. She had very nearly landed a nice little job in Mr Murphy’s grocer’s shop not half-a-mile from her own front door, and she might have been there now at this very minute among the jars and the tins and the sacks of meal and flour, weighing out sugar into nice neat bags and learning to twist a brown-paper poke for a ha’porth of boiled sweets and living at home with her Ma and her Da and the little ones and not having to sleep in an iron bed all by herself and talk to rich folks and polish their silver and scrub their saucepans.

But then Mr Murphy had got a boy who wanted to be apprenticed to the trade, and who could blame the elderly grocer for preferring a strong lad willing to serve his time to a slip of a girl who didn’t know a pennyweight from a bushel of oats and might be off getting married and having babies before she could write a receipt?

In bed that night Amelia once more took her plan out of the drawer she had put it in at the back of her mind at teatime and shook it out to think about it some more. She liked to do that, unfolding it carefully and turning it this way and that and admiring it as various thoughts and ideas fell on it and lit it from this angle or that. But she couldn't settle to thinking about her plan properly. Every time she tried to picture the dress, for example – cherry red silk, with a big sash and a flounce at the hem – other things kept floating into her head and pushing it aside. It had been rather an eventful afternoon after all.

Papa had come home to tea, which was unusual for him, bursting in out of the rain just as Amelia was coming back from the kitchen with the teapot and wondering if maybe Mary Ann was suffering from delusions – there *was* such a thing, you know.

Unlike Mama, Papa shook his umbrella out in the porch and then stood it in the drip tray in the umbrella stand and took off his greatcoat in the hall and hung it up carefully on its peg on the hallstand. The Pims didn't have a manservant to open the door and look after the coats. They considered this 'excessive'. The grown-ups in Amelia's family considered a lot of things excessive, to Amelia's mortification.

'My princess!' cried Papa, and Amelia knew that if she hadn't been carrying a nuisance of a hot teapot he would have swung her off her feet in a big bear-hug. Instead, he took the teapot from her, kissed her on the forehead and swung open the door to the drawing room. Both of Amelia's parents made a great deal of coming into a room. You certainly knew when they were around.

Amelia adored her papa. He was tall, and fair-haired like her, only that, unlike hers, his hair curled magnificently, and his face was big and brown and his eyes sharp and blue and his voice deep and cheerful, and he told jokes. He dressed elegantly and carefully, and he never lost his gloves. And he

had a big fair moustache that he fingered when he was thinking.

Amelia's papa was an importer and merchant. He dealt mostly in fine wines and tea, and he did some business also in spices and foreign produce. He had a depot at the docks where the goods he had bought from Ceylon and Brazil and Madagascar and France and Siam were stashed in tea-chests and wooden trunks and metal boxes. The depot smelt warm and fruity and spicy – it smelt of Christmas even in June. And he had warehouses and stores and cellars in several places in town where the tea was blended and the wines were stacked and aged. He had an office in town too, where he did long complicated sums in enormous ledgers and he thought out plans and strategies and hired workers and commissioned ships and barges and made telephone calls to distant places and where, no doubt, he kept large piles of money – maybe even gold – in strongboxes and safes.

Amelia was proud of her papa. He made lots of money, she knew, for there was always enough and nobody ever worried about it. He was a bit like Grandpapa, she thought, who had built the orangery, and whom Amelia could remember only dimly. He didn't read as many books as Mama, and he only went to Meeting occasionally, to Grandmama's chagrin, but he was a fine papa and he always said Amelia was his favourite daughter. He had only one daughter, of course, but he didn't ever say Edmund was his favourite son, so Amelia knew he really meant that she was his favourite child, although he couldn't say so outright for fear of offending Edmund.

'Mama!' cried Papa as he strode into the drawing room with the teapot, as if he were terribly surprised to see her. He meant Grandmama, of course, who was his mama. And he put the teapot down and bent to kiss the old lady. She said nothing, but went on stitching her sampler. 'Roberta,' he said

to Mama in a soft voice, as she handed him a cup of tea.

‘Do have a scone, Papa,’ insisted Amelia. ‘They’re deliciously fresh, and they won’t be half so good tomorrow and the jam’s strawberry, your favourite kind.’

‘What brings you home so early, Charles?’ asked Mama.

‘Petrol power!’ answered Papa with a beam.

‘Charles! You haven’t! We agreed we wouldn’t! Oh, is it very beautiful? Oh Charles, you shouldn’t. It’s excessive. We don’t need it. There’s the tram, and we have the landau. Oh, Charles!’ Mama was standing up and sitting down again and smiling and looking cross at the same time.

‘What are you talking about?’ asked Amelia. ‘What’s excessive?’

‘It’s not excessive at all,’ said Papa. ‘It’s perfectly sensible. Lots of people have motor-cars now. It’s much quicker. It’s the modern way to travel, Roberta. And we haven’t really got the landau. One or other of those horses is always lame. They’re old – beyond it. It was either this or buy a pair of horses. This was much the cheaper option, when you consider the price of feeding a pair of horses.’

Clip and Clop, the aged horses, would probably be sold now. But no-one stopped to think of such unpleasantness, not this afternoon amid such excitement.

‘Oh, Papa, Papa!’ the children cried together. ‘A motor-car! Where is it? Can we see? Can we have a ride?’

‘It’s out on the road, of course. You didn’t expect me to drive it up the garden path and into the house, did you?’

So they all scrambled into their outdoor things, tea and scones and strawberry jam completely forgotten, and put up their umbrellas and tumbled down the front steps and through the garden into the road to look at the new car.

It was magnificent! It gleamed and shone, even in the rain, and its lights were like two great eyes out in front. The hood was up because of the rain, but you could see the leather

upholstery inside and the bodywork was a shining dark green. Papa wouldn't agree to take anyone for a spin this afternoon, because, he said, the filthy weather made it difficult to drive, but he promised them all a go as soon as the rain cleared up.

Only Grandmama didn't beg to go for a drive. She stood at the hall-door and shook her head. Amelia could just hear what she said: 'Vainglory!'

And that was the reason that Amelia couldn't concentrate properly on her own thoughts that night. Her head was full of Papa and the magnificent new motor-car. At last she had something to boast of to her friends. They all had more finery and more extensive wardrobes, more servants and bigger houses, more outings and more holidays than Amelia's family, and their mamas had people to tea and gave garden parties in the summer and weren't eternally rushing around forming leagues for this and committees against that. Most of them had finer carriages than the Pims, and some already had motor-cars, but none, Amelia was convinced, had a car as handsome and as sleek and as dashing as her papa's.

Before she knew it, Amelia was drifting into a dream where Grandpapa, in his old-fashioned high collar and dark suit was driving the motor-car through the orangery, with Mama waving a single sodden glove at him and Mary Ann shouting over the din, 'Make way for the Queen of Sheba!'