

Miss Mackenzie

CHAPTER VIII

Mrs Tom Mackenzie's Dinner Party

Mrs Tom was ever so gracious on the arrival of her sister-in-law, but even in her graciousness there was something which seemed to Margaret to tell of her dislike. Near relatives, when they are on good terms with each other, are not gracious. Now, Mrs Tom, though she was ever so gracious, was by no means cordial. Susanna, however, was delighted to see her aunt, and Margaret, when she felt the girl's arms round her neck, declared to herself that that should suffice for her,--that should be her love, and it should be enough. If indeed, in after years, she could make Jack love her too, that would be better still. Then her mind went to work upon a little marriage scheme that would in due time make a baronet's wife of Susanna. It would not suit her to become Lady Ball, but it might suit Susanna.

"We are going to have a little dinner party to-day," said Mrs Tom.

"A dinner party!" said Margaret. "I didn't look for that, Sarah."

"Perhaps I ought not to call it a party, for there are only one or two coming. There's Dr Slumpy and his wife; I don't know whether you ever met Dr Slumpy. He has attended us for ever so long; and there is Miss Colza, a great friend of mine. Mademoiselle Colza I ought to call her, because her father was a Portuguese. Only as she never saw him, we call her Miss. And there's Mr Rubb,--Samuel Rubb, junior. I think you met him at Littlebath."

"Yes; I know Mr Rubb."

"That's all; and I might as well say how it will be now. Mr Rubb will take you down to dinner. Tom will take Mrs Slumpy, and the doctor will take me. Young Tom,--" Young Tom was her son, who was now beginning his career at Rubb and Mackenzie's,--"Young Tom will take Miss Colza, and Mary Jane and Susanna will come down by themselves. We might have managed twelve, and Tom did think of asking Mr Hancock and one of the other clerks, but he did not know whether you would have liked it."

"I should not have minded it. That is, I should have been very glad to meet Mr Hancock, but I don't care about it."

"That's just what we thought, and therefore we did not ask him. You'll remember, won't you, that Mr Rubb takes you down?" After that Miss Mackenzie took her nieces to the Zoological Gardens, leaving Mary Jane at home to assist her mother in the cares for the coming festival, and thus the day wore itself away till it was time for them to prepare themselves for the party.

Miss Colza was the first to come. She was a young lady somewhat older than Miss Mackenzie; but the circumstances of her life had induced her to retain many of the propensities of her girlhood. She was as young looking as curls and pink bows could

make her, and was by no means a useless guest at a small dinner party, as she could chatter like a magpie. Her claims to be called "Mademoiselle" were not very strong, as she had lived in Finsbury Square all her life. Her father was connected in trade with the Rubb and Mackenzie firm, and dealt, I think, in oil. She was introduced with great ceremony, and having heard that Miss Mackenzie lived at Littlebath, went off at once about the pleasures of that delicious place.

"I do so hate London, Miss Mackenzie."

"I lived here all my life, and I can't say I liked it."

"It is such a crowd, isn't it? and yet so dull. Give me Brighton! We were down for a week in November, and it was nice."

"I never saw Brighton."

"Oh, do go to Brighton. Everybody goes there now; you really do see the world at Brighton. Now, in London one sees nothing."

Then came in Mr Rubb, and Miss Colza at once turned her attention to him. But Mr Rubb shook Miss Colza off almost unceremoniously, and seated himself by Miss Mackenzie. Immediately afterwards arrived the doctor and his wife. The doctor was a very silent man, and as Tom Mackenzie himself was not given to much talking, it was well that Miss Colza should be there. Mrs Slumpy could take her share in conversation with an effort, when duly assisted; but she could not lead the van, and required more sprightly aid than her host was qualified to give her. Then there was a whisper between Tom and Mrs Tom and the bell was rung, and the dinner was ordered. Seven had been the time named, and a quarter past seven saw the guests assembled in the drawing-room. A very dignified person in white cotton gloves had announced the names, and the same dignified person had taken the order for dinner. The dignified person had then retreated downstairs slowly, and what was taking place for the next half-hour poor Mrs Mackenzie, in the agony of her mind, could not surmise. She longed to go and see, but did not dare. Even for Dr Slumpy, or even for his wife, had they been alone with her she would not have cared much. Miss Colza she could have treated with perfect indifference--could even have taken her down into the kitchen with her. Rubb, her own junior partner, was nothing, and Miss Mackenzie was simply her sister-in-law. But together they made a party. Moreover she had on her best and stiffest silk gown, and so armed she could not have been effective in the kitchen. And so came a silence for some minutes, in spite of the efforts of Miss Colza. At last the hostess plucked up her courage to make a little effort.

"Tom," she said, "I really think you had better ring again."

"It will be all right, soon," said Tom, considering that upon the whole it would be better not to disturb the gentleman downstairs just yet.

"Upon my word, I never felt it so cold in my life as I did to-day," he said, turning on Dr Slumpy for the third time with that remark.

"Very cold," said Dr Slumpy, pulling out his watch and looking at it.

"I really think you'd better ring the bell," said Mrs Tom.

Tom, however, did not stir, and after another period of five minutes dinner was announced. It may be as well, perhaps, to explain, that the soup had been on the table for the last quarter of an hour or more, but that after placing the tureen on the table, the dignified gentleman downstairs had come to words with the cook, and had refused to go on further with the business of the night until that ill-used woman acceded to certain terms of his own in reference to the manner in which the foods should be served. He had seen the world, and had lofty ideas, and had been taught to be a tyrant by the weakness of those among whom his life had been spent. The cook had alleged that the dinner, as regarded the eating of it, would certainly be spoiled. As to that, he had expressed a mighty indifference. If he was to have any hand in them, things were to be done according to certain rules, which, as he said, prevailed in the world of fashion. The cook, who had a temper and who regarded her mistress, stood out long and boldly, but when the housemaid, who was to assist Mr Grandairs upstairs, absolutely deserted her, and sitting down began to cry, saying: "Sairey, why don't you do as he tells you? What signifies its being greasy if it hain't never to go hup?" then Sarah's courage gave way, and Mr Grandairs, with all the conqueror in his bosom, announced that dinner was served.

It was a great relief. Even Miss Colza's tongue had been silent, and Mr Rubb had found himself unable to carry on any further small talk with Miss Mackenzie. The minds of men and women become so tuned to certain positions, that they go astray and won't act when those positions are confused. Almost every man can talk for fifteen minutes, standing in a drawing-room, before dinner; but where is the man who can do it for an hour? It is not his appetite that impedes him, for he could well have borne to dine at eight instead of seven; nor is it that matter lacks him, for at other times his eloquence does not cease to flow so soon. But at that special point of the day he is supposed to talk for fifteen minutes, and if any prolonged call is then made upon him, his talking apparatus falls out of order and will not work. You can sit still on a Sunday morning, in the cold, on a very narrow bench, with no comfort appertaining, and listen for half an hour to a rapid outflow of words, which, for any purpose of instruction or edification, are absolutely useless to you. The reading to you of the "Quæ genus," or "As in præsentî," could not be more uninteresting. Try to undergo the same thing in your own house on a Wednesday afternoon, and see where you will be. To those ladies and gentlemen who had been assembled in Mrs Mackenzie's drawing-room this prolonged waiting had been as though the length of the sermon had been doubled, or as if it had fallen on them at some unexpected and unauthorised time.

But now they descended, each gentleman taking his allotted lady, and Colza's voice was again heard. At the bottom of the stairs, just behind the dining-room door, stood the tyrant, looking very great, repressing with his left hand the housemaid who was behind him. She having observed Sarah at the top of the kitchen stairs telegraphing for assistance, had endeavoured to make her way to her friend while Tom Mackenzie and Mrs Slumpy were still upon the stairs; but the tyrant, though he had seen the cook's distress, had refused and sternly kept the girl a prisoner behind him. Ruat dinner, fiat genteel deportment.

The order of the construction of the dinner was no doubt à la Russe; and why should it not have been so, as Tom Mackenzie either had or was supposed to have as much as eight hundred a year? But I think it must be confessed that the architecture was in some degree composite. It was à la Russe, because in the centre there was a green arrangement of little boughs with artificial flowers fixed on them, and because there were figs and raisins, and little dishes with dabs of preserve on them, all around the green arrangement; but the soups and fish were on the table, as was also the wine, though it was understood that no one was to be allowed to help himself or his neighbour to the contents of the bottle. When Dr Slumpy once made an attempt at the sherry, Grandairs was down upon him instantly, although laden at the time with both potatoes and sea-kale; after that he went round and frowned at Dr Slumpy, and Dr Slumpy understood the frown.

That the soup should be cold, everybody no doubt expected. It was clear soup, made chiefly of Marsala, and purchased from the pastry cook's in Store Street. Grandairs, no doubt, knew all about it, as he was connected with the same establishment. The fish--Mrs Mackenzie had feared greatly about her fish, having necessarily trusted its fate solely to her own cook--was very ragged in its appearance, and could not be very warm; the melted butter too was thick and clotted, and was brought round with the other condiments too late to be of much service; but still the fish was eatable, and Mrs Mackenzie's heart, which had sunk very low as the unconsumed soup was carried away, rose again in her bosom. Poor woman! she had done her best, and it was hard that she should suffer. One little effort she made at the moment to induce Elizabeth to carry round the sauce, but Grandairs had at once crushed it; he had rushed at the girl and taken the butter-boat from her hand. Mrs Mackenzie had seen it all; but what could she do, poor soul?

The thing was badly managed in every way. The whole hope of conversation round the table depended on Miss Colza, and she was deeply offended by having been torn away from Mr Rubb. How could she talk seated between the two Tom Mackenzies? From Dr Slumpy Mrs Mackenzie could not get a word. Indeed, with so great a weight on her mind, how could she be expected to make any great effort in that direction? But Mr Mackenzie might have done something, and she resolved that she would tell him so before he slept that night. She had slaved all day in order that he might appear respectable before his own relatives, at the bottom of his own table--and now he would do nothing! "I believe he is thinking of his own dinner!" she said to herself. If her accusation was just his thoughts must have been very sad.

In a quiet way Mr Rubb did talk to his neighbour. Upstairs he had spoken a word or two about Littlebath, saying how glad he was that he had been there. He should always remember Littlebath as one of the pleasantest places he had ever seen. He wished that he lived at Littlebath; but then what was the good of his wishing anything, knowing as he did that he was bound for life to Rubb and Mackenzie's counting house!

"And you will earn your livelihood there," Miss Mackenzie had replied.

"Yes; and something more than that I hope. I don't mind telling you,--a friend like you,--that I will either spoil a horn or make a spoon. I won't go on in the old groove, which hardly gives any of us salt to our porridge. If I understand anything of English

commerce, I think I can see my way to better things than that." Then the period of painful waiting had commenced, and he was unable to say anything more.

That had been upstairs. Now below, amidst all the troubles of Mrs Mackenzie and the tyranny of Grandairs, he began again:

"Do you like London dinner parties?"

"I never was at one before."

"Never at one before! I thought you had lived in London all your life."

"So I have; but we never used to dine out. My brother was an invalid."

"And do they do the thing well at Littlebath?"

"I never dined out there. You think it very odd, I dare say, but I never was at a dinner party in my life--not before this."

"Don't the Balls see much company?"

"No, very little; none of that kind."

"Dear me. It comes so often to us here that we get tired of it. I do, at least. I'm not always up to this kind of thing. Champagne--if you please. Miss Mackenzie, you will take some champagne?"

Now had come the crisis of the evening, the moment that was all important, and Grandairs was making his round in all the pride of his vocation. But Mrs Mackenzie was by no means so proud at the present conjuncture of affairs. There was but one bottle of champagne. "So little wine is drank now, that, what is the good of getting more? Of course the children won't have it." So she had spoken to her husband. And who shall blame her or say where economy ends, or where meanness begins? She had wanted no champagne herself, but had wished to treat her friends well. She had seized a moment after Grandairs had come, and Mrs Slumpy was not yet there, to give instructions to the great functionary.

"Don't mind me with the champagne, nor yet Mr Tom, nor the young ladies."

Thus she had reduced the number to six, and had calculated that the bottle would certainly be good for that number, with probably a second glass for the doctor and Mr Rubb. But Grandairs had not condescended to be put out of his way by such orders as these. The bottle had first come to Miss Colza, and then Tom's glass had been filled, and Susanna's--through no fault of theirs, innocent bairns, "but on purpose!" as Mrs Mackenzie afterwards declared to her husband when speaking of the man's iniquity. And I think it had been done on purpose. The same thing occurred with Mary Jane--till Mrs Mackenzie, looking on, could have cried. The girl's glass was filled full, and she did give a little shriek at last. But what availed shrieking? When the bottle came round behind Mrs Mackenzie back to Dr Slumpy, it was dry, and the wicked wretch held the useless nozzle triumphantly over the doctor's glass.

"Give me some sherry, then," said the doctor.

The little dishes which had been brought round after the fish, three in number,--and they in the proper order of things should have been spoken of before the champagne,--had been in their way successful. They had been so fabricated, that all they who attempted to eat of their contents became at once aware that they had got hold of something very nasty, something that could hardly have been intended by Christian cooks as food for men; but, nevertheless, there had been something of glory attending them. Little dishes require no concomitant vegetables, and therefore there had been no scrambling. Grandairs brought one round after the other with much majesty, while Elizabeth stood behind looking on in wonder. After the second little dish Grandairs changed the plates, so that it was possible to partake of two, a feat which was performed by Tom Mackenzie the younger. At this period Mrs Mackenzie, striving hard for equanimity, attempted a word or two with the doctor. But immediately upon that came the affair of the champagne, and she was crushed, never to rise again.

Mr Rubb at this time had settled down into so pleasant a little series of whispers with his neighbour, that Miss Colza resolved once more to exert herself, not with the praiseworthy desire of assisting her friend Mrs Mackenzie, but with malice prepense in reference to Miss Mackenzie.

Miss Mackenzie seemed to be having "a good time" with her neighbour Samuel Rubb, junior, and Miss Colza, who was a woman of courage, could not see that and not make an effort. It cannot be told here what passages there had been between Mr Rubb and Miss Colza. That there had absolutely been passages I beg the reader to understand. "Mr Rubb," she said, stretching across the table, "do you remember when, in this very room, we met Mr and Mrs Talbot Green?"

"Oh yes, very well," said Mr Rubb, and then turning to Miss Mackenzie, he went on with his little whispers.

"Mr Rubb," continued Miss Colza, "does anybody put you in mind of Mrs Talbot Green?"

"Nobody in particular. She was a thin, tall, plain woman, with red hair, wasn't she? Who ought she to put me in mind of?"

"Oh dear! how can you forget so? That wasn't her looks at all. We all agreed that she was quite interesting-looking. Her hair was just fair, and that was all. But I shan't say anything more about it."

"But who do you say is like her?"

"Miss Colza means Aunt Margaret," said Mary Jane.

"Of course I do," said Miss Colza. "But Mrs Talbot Green was not at all the person that Mr Rubb has described; we all thought her very nice-looking. Mr Rubb, do you remember how you would go on talking to her, till Mr Talbot Green did not like it at all?"

"No, I don't."

"Oh, but you did; and you always do."

Then Miss Colza ceased, having finished that effort. But she made others from time to time as long as they remained in the dining-room, and by no means gave up the battle. There are women who can fight such battles when they have not an inch of ground on which to stand.

After the little dishes there came, of course, a saddle of mutton, and, equally of course, a pair of boiled fowls. There was also a tongue; but the à la Russe construction of the dinner was maintained by keeping the tongue on the sideboard, while the mutton and chickens were put down to be carved in the ordinary way. The ladies all partook of the chickens, and the gentlemen all of the mutton. The arrangement was very tedious, as Dr Slumpy was not as clever with the wings of the fowls as he perhaps would have been had he not been defrauded in the matter of the champagne; and then every separate plate was carried away to the sideboard with reference to the tongue. Currant jelly had been duly provided, and, if Elizabeth had been allowed to dispense it, might have been useful. But Grandairs was too much for the jelly, as he had been for the fish-sauce, and Dr Slumpy in vain looked up, and sighed, and waited. A man in such a condition measures the amount of cold which his meat may possibly endure against the future coming of the potatoes, till he falls utterly to the ground between two stools. So was it now with Dr Slumpy. He gave one last sigh as he saw the gravy congeal upon his plate, but, nevertheless, he had finished the unpalatable food before Grandairs had arrived to his assistance.

Why tell of the ruin of the macaroni, of the fine-coloured pyramids of shaking sweet things which nobody would eat, and by the non-consumption of which nothing was gained, as they all went back to the pastrycook's,--or of the ice-puddings flavoured with onions? It was all misery, wretchedness, and degradation. Grandairs was king, and Mrs Mackenzie was the lowest of his slaves. And why? Why had she done this thing? Why had she, who, to give her her due, generally held her own in her own house pretty firmly,--why had she lowered her neck and made a wretched thing of herself? She knew that it would be so when she first suggested to herself the attempt. She did it for fashion's sake, you will say. But there was no one there who did not as accurately know as she did herself, how absolutely beyond fashion's way lay her way. She was making no fight to enter some special portal of the world, as a lady may do who takes a house suddenly in Mayfair, having come from God knows where. Her place in the world was fixed, and she made no contest as to the fixing. She hoped for no great change in the direction of society. Why on earth did she perplex her mind and bruise her spirit, by giving a dinner à la anything? Why did she not have the roast mutton alone, so that all her guests might have eaten and have been merry?

She could not have answered this question herself, and I doubt whether I can do so for her. But this I feel, that unless the question can get itself answered, ordinary Englishmen must cease to go and eat dinners at each other's houses. The ordinary Englishman, of whom we are now speaking, has eight hundred a year; he lives in London; and he has a wife and three or four children. Had he not better give it up and go back to his little bit of fish and his leg of mutton? Let him do that boldly, and he will find that we, his friends, will come to him fast enough; yes, and will make a

gala day of it. By Heavens, we have no gala time of it when we go to dine with Mrs Mackenzie à la Russe! Lady Mackenzie, whose husband has ever so many thousands a year, no doubt does it very well. Money, which cannot do everything,--which, if well weighed, cannot in its excess perhaps do much,--can do some things. It will buy diamonds and give grand banquets. But paste diamonds, and banquets which are only would-be grand, are among the poorest imitations to which the world has descended.

"So you really go to Littlebath to-morrow," Mr Rubb said to Miss Mackenzie, when they were again together in the drawing-room.

"Yes, to-morrow morning. Susanna must be at school the next day."

"Happy Susanna! I wish I were going to school at Littlebath. Then I shan't see you again before you go."

"No; I suppose not."

"I am so sorry, because I particularly wished to speak to you,--most particularly. I suppose I could not see you in the morning? But, no; it would not do. I could not get you alone without making such a fuss of the thing."

"Couldn't you say it now?" asked Miss Mackenzie.

"I will, if you'll let me; only I suppose it isn't quite the thing to talk about business at an evening party; and your sister-in-law, if she knew it, would never forgive me."

"Then she shan't know it, Mr Rubb."

"Since you are so good, I think I will make bold. Carpe diem, as we used to say at school, which means that one day is as good as another, and, if so why not any time in the day? Look here, Miss Mackenzie--about that money, you know."

And Mr Rubb got nearer to her on the sofa as he whispered the word money into her ear. It immediately struck her that her own brother Tom had said not a word to her about the money, although they had been together for the best part of an hour before they had gone up to dress.

"I suppose Mr Slow will settle all that," said Miss Mackenzie.

"Of course;--that is to say, he has nothing further to settle just as yet. He has our bond for the money, and you may be sure it's all right. The property is purchased, and is ours,--our own at this moment, thanks to you. But landed property is so hard to convey. Perhaps you don't understand much about that! and I'm sure I don't. The fact is, the title deeds at present are in other hands, a mere matter of form; and I want you to understand that the mortgage is not completed for that reason."

"I suppose it will be done soon?"

"It may, or it may not; but that won't affect your interest, you know."

"I was thinking of the security."

"Well, the security is not as perfect as it should be. I tell you that honestly; and if we were dealing with strangers we should expect to be called on to refund. And we should refund instantly, but at a great sacrifice, a ruinous sacrifice. Now, I want you to put so much trust in us,--in me, if I may be allowed to ask you to do so,--as to believe that your money is substantially safe. I cannot explain it all now; but the benefit which you have done us is immense."

"I suppose it will all come right, Mr Rubb."

"It will all come right, Miss Mackenzie."

Then there was extracted from her something which he was able to take as a promise that she would not stir in the matter for a while, but would take her interest without asking for any security as to her principal.

The conversation was interrupted by Miss Colza, who came and stood opposite to them.

"Well, I'm sure," she said; "you two are very confidential."

"And why shouldn't we be confidential, Miss Colza?" asked Mr Rubb.

"Oh, dear! no reason in life, if you both like it."

Miss Mackenzie was not sure that she did like it. But again she was not sure that she did not, when Mr Rubb pressed her hand at parting, and told her that her great kindness had been of the most material service to the firm. "He felt it," he said, "if nobody else did." That also might be a sacrificial duty and therefore gratifying.

The next morning she and Susanna left Gower Street at eight, spent an interesting period of nearly an hour at the railway station, and reached Littlebath in safety at one.