

3rd Ed. Tea and Sympathy

~~Laura.~~ Tell Tom I tried to see him. [*He goes out.*]

BILL. Now, Laura, what's the matter? I've got to get to the Dean's rooms to discuss this matter.

LAURA. Yes, of course. But first I'd like to discuss the boys who made him do this . . . the men and boys who made him do this.

BILL. No one made him do anything.

LAURA. Is there to be no blame, no punishment for the boys and men who taunted him into doing this? What if he had succeeded in killing himself? What then?

BILL. You're being entirely too emotional about this.

LAURA. If he had succeeded in killing himself in Ellie's rooms, wouldn't you have felt some guilt?

BILL. If?

LAURA. Yes, you.

BILL. I wish you'd look at the facts and not be so emotional about this.

LAURA. The facts! What facts! An innocent boy goes swimming with an instructor . . . an instructor whom he likes because this instructor is one of the few who encourage him, who don't ride him . . . And because he's an off-horse, you and the rest of them are only too glad to put two and two together and get a false answer . . . anything which will let you go on and persecute a boy whom you basically don't like. If it had happened with Al or anybody else, you would have done nothing.

BILL. It would have been an entirely different matter. You can't escape from what you are . . . your character. Why do they spend so much time in the law courts on character witnesses? To prove this was the kind of man who could or couldn't commit such and such a crime.

LAURA. I resent this judgment by prejudice. He's not like me, therefore, he is capable of all possible crimes. He's not one of us . . . a member of the tribe!

BILL. Now look, Laura, I know this is a shock to you, because you were fond of this boy. But you did all you could for him, more than anyone would expect. After all, your responsibility doesn't go beyond—

LAURA. I know. Doesn't go beyond giving him tea and sympathy on Sunday afternoons. Well, I want to tell you something. It's going to shock you . . . but I'm going to tell you.

BILL. Laura, it's late.

LAURA. Last night I knew what Tom had in mind to do.

BILL. How did you know?

LAURA. I heard him making the date with Ellie on the phone.

BILL. And you didn't stop him? Then you're the one responsible.

LAURA. Yes, I am responsible, but not as you think. I did try to stop him, but not by locking him in his room, or calling the school police. I tried to stop him by being nice to him, by being affectionate. By showing him that he was liked . . . yes, even loved. I knew what he was going to do . . . and why he was going to do it. He had to prove to you bullies that he was a man, and he was going to prove it with Ellie Martin. Well . . . last night . . . last night, I wished he had proved it with me.

BILL. What in Christ's name are you saying?

LAURA. Yes, I shock you. I shock myself. But you are right. I am responsible here. I know what I should have done. I knew it then. My heart cried out for this boy in his misery . . . a misery imposed by my husband. And I wanted to help him as one human being to another . . . and I failed. At the last moment, I sent him away . . . sent him to . . .

BILL. You mean you managed to overcome your exaggerated sense of pity.

LAURA. No, it was not just pity. My heart in its own loneliness . . . Yes, I've been lonely here, miserably

lonely . . . and my heart in its loneliness cried out for this boy . . . cried out for the comfort he could give me too.

BILL. You don't know what you're saying.

LAURA. But I was a good woman. Good in what sense of the word? Good to whom . . . and for whom?

BILL. Laura, we'll discuss this, if we must, later on . . .

LAURA. Bill! There'll be no later on. I'm leaving you.

BILL. Over this thing?

LAURA [*after a moment*]. Yes, this *thing*, and all the other *things* in our marriage.

BILL. For God's sake, Laura, what are you talking about?

LAURA. I'm talking about love and honor and manliness, and tenderness, and persecution. I'm talking about a lot. You haven't understood any of it.

BILL. Laura, you can't leave over a thing like this. You know what it means.

LAURA. I wouldn't worry too much about it. When I'm gone, it will probably be agreed by all that I was an off-horse too, and didn't really belong to the clan, and it's good riddance.

BILL. And you're doing this . . . all because of this . . . this fairy?

LAURA [*after a moment*]. This boy, Bill . . . this boy is more of a man than you are.

BILL. Sure. Ask Ellie.

LAURA. Because it was distasteful for him. Because for him there has to be love. He's more of a man than you are.

BILL. Yes, sure.

LAURA. Manliness is not all swagger and swearing and mountain climbing. Manliness is also tenderness, gentleness, consideration. You men think you can decide on who is a man, when only a woman can really know.

BILL. Ellie's a woman. Ask Ellie.

LAURA. I don't need to ask anyone.

BILL. What do you know about a man? Married first to that boy . . . again, a poor pitiable boy . . . You want to mother a boy, not love a man. That's why you never really loved me. Because I was not a boy you could mother.

LAURA. You're quite wrong about my not loving you. I did love you. But not just for your outward show of manliness, but because you needed me . . . For one unguarded moment you let me know you needed me, and I have tried to find that moment again the year we've been married . . . Why did you marry me, Bill? In God's name, why?

BILL. Because I loved you. Why else?

LAURA. You've resented me . . . almost from the day you married me, you've resented me. You never wanted to marry really . . . Did they kid you into it? Does a would-be headmaster have to be married? Or what was it, Bill? You would have been far happier going off on your jaunts with the boys, having them to your rooms for feeds and bull sessions . . .

BILL. That's part of being a master.

LAURA. Other masters and their wives do not take two boys always with them whenever they go away on vacations or weekends.

BILL. They are boys without privileges.

LAURA. And I became a wife without privileges.

BILL. You became a wife . . . [*He stops.*]

LAURA. Yes?

BILL. You did *not* become a wife.

LAURA. I know. I know I failed you. In some terrible way I've failed you.

BILL. You were more interested in mothering that fairy up there than in being my wife.

LAURA. But you wouldn't let me, Bill. You wouldn't let me.

BILL [*grabbing her by the shoulders*]. What do you mean I wouldn't let you?

LAURA [*quietly, almost afraid to say it*]. Did it ever



occur to you that you persecute in Tom, that boy up there, you persecute in him the thing you fear in yourself? [BILL looks at her for a long moment of hatred. She has hit close to the truth he has never let himself be conscious of. There is a moment when he might hurt her, but then he draws away, still staring at her. He backs away, slowly, and then turns to the door.] Bill!

BILL [not looking at her]. I hope you will be gone when I come back from dinner.

LAURA [quietly]. I will be . . . [Going toward him.] Oh, Bill, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that . . . it was cruel. [She reaches for him as he goes out the door.] This was the weakness you cried out for me to save you from, wasn't it . . . And I have tried. [He is gone.] I have tried. [Slowly she turns back into the room and looks at it.] I did try. [For a few minutes she stands stunned and tired from her outburst. Then she moves slowly to TOM's raincoat, picks it up and turns and goes out of the room and to the stair-landing. She goes to the boy's study door and knocks.] Tom. [She opens it and goes in out of sight. At TOM's door, she calls again.] Tom. [TOM turns his head slightly and listens. LAURA opens TOM's door and comes in.] Oh, I'm sorry. May I come in? [She sees she's not going to get an answer from him, so she goes in.] I brought back your raincoat. You left it last night. [She puts it on chair. She looks at him.] This is a nice room . . . I've never seen it before . . . As a matter of fact I've never been up here in this part of the house. [Still getting no response, she goes on. TOM slowly turns and looks at her back, while she is examining something on the walls. She turns, speaking.] It's very cozy. It's really quite . . . [She stops when she sees he has turned around looking at her.] Hello.

TOM [barely audible]. Hello.

LAURA. Do you mind my being here?

TOM. You're not supposed to be.