

Tabitha Mary

A LITTLE GIRL OF 1810

by Ethel Parton

Illustrated by Margaret Platt

Also by Ethel Parton

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TO
Three dear and helpful friends
of the
House of Howe:
H.H.W. — G.H. — E.M.H.
and three of the House of Whitney:
A.M.W. — M.A.W. — D.B.W.

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1. Purley's Tavern

“TABITHA MARY! Child, are you still there?” asked Mrs. Bonney looking toward the great wing-chair before the hearth. It had been pulled halfway round to face the tall clock in the corner and the little girl sitting in it was quite hidden from her sight.

“Yes’m,” said Tabitha Mary without moving. Her eyes were fixed steadily on the clock-hands as they slowly crawled nearer and nearer to the hour. A large thin leather bag and a thick squatty cloth bundle stood on the floor beside her. She was sitting very still, not a finger twitching nor an eyelash stirring. Rachel and Elizabeth Pentland had taught her that. They were two grave placid Quaker ladies with whom she had lived in this pleasant house until first Rachel had died, and then, only last week, Elizabeth too. They had not approved of wriggling children and Tabitha Mary had learned never to wriggle. She was feeling neither calm nor quiet inside, yet she held herself so still that until she spoke Mrs. Bonney thought she must have left the room.

“Yes’m, I’m here,” said Tabitha Mary. “Is it time for me to start?”

“The clock says five minutes to six, but it may be a minute or two slow,” said Mrs. Bonney, tightening the knot of the kerchief that was tied over her cap and clapping her hands together to slap the dust off, for she had been cleaning out the chimney cupboard. “I think perhaps you can go now.”

“Yes’m,” said Tabitha Mary, “I think perhaps I’d better, Mrs. Bonney.”

She had been awake and stirring since long before five o’clock, and packed and ready for a good hour. If Mrs. Bonney would have allowed her, she would have started long ago so as to be quite sure to be on time the moment Mr. Minturn the lawyer wanted her. Halfway home from a visit to his brother’s up-state farm he had stopped in the village to settle up the Pentland estate—his mother

had been a friend of the sisters in their girlhood—and to arrange how everything belonging to it was to be disposed of, including a little girl by the name of Tabitha Mary Pitpoole. She was to be sent to her very distant cousins, Cyrus Davidge and his wife, which seemed on the face of it the right and proper thing to do, for she had no other relations.

The Davidges owned a farm near the top of Puckerfold Hill, five miles out on the road Mr. Minturn would take on his way back to the coast city where he lived, so he had offered to take the child along and drop her there. She was to meet him at Purley's Tavern at six for an early start. He had not looked to her like a gentleman who would like to be kept waiting and she dreaded the thought of being late, but Mrs. Bonney considered a public tavern no place for women or children to hang about in longer than they needed to and had made her wait. Even now Mrs. Bonney was not quite sure in her mind that it was time to let her go, since it could not take half a minute to cross the road and six o'clock is six o'clock and not five minutes to six.

Tabitha Mary slipped to the window and looked over to the wide tavern door still closed, and the weatherbeaten sign that swung above it. On the sign was a spread eagle in black and white gripping a bunch of tarnished gilt thunderbolts with PURLEY'S TAVERN painted in faded scarlet letters underneath. The hinges creaked gently as it swung in the morning breeze. Purley's was a sleepy-looking old tavern at any time, though travelers found it comfortable enough. Mrs. Bonney viewed it with disapproval.

"Not a soul stirring yet, as far as I can see," she said. "I can't so much as catch a whisk of that lazy Tilda's petticoat passing a window."

"No'm, I can't either," said Tabitha Mary. "But I can hear dishes clattering back in the dining-room. I think Tilda must be clearing away Mr. Minturn's breakfast."

"As like as not she's only just putting it on," said Mrs. Bonney tartly, "and dashing and slashing to make up for lost time, the good-for-nothing! Hark to that now—something went plumb to smash that time. I never did know such a bang-whanger as that girl."

Cl'k! Cl'k! Whirr-rr-rr! Dong! Dong! Dong!— Suddenly the tall clock began to strike.

“Mercy me!” cried Mrs. Bonney in a flurry. “Six o’clock! You must hurry right over. Maybe I’d ought to go with you, but land, how can I? This time o’ day and with all that’s ahead of me to do getting settled, and dressed not fit to be seen—well, it can’t be helped. Good-by, Tabitha Mary. These few days we’ve been together I’ve found you a good, useful child. You may tell Hannah Davidge so from me when you get there, and tell her I say you don’t need driving either. Good-by.”

“Good-by, Mrs. Bonney,” said Tabitha Mary very soberly. She took a tighter grip of her thin battered bag and her fat square bundle and went to the door, but both her hands were full and Mrs. Bonney had to reach past her and open it. The house was set so close to the highway that its broad doorstone stretched out into the road. Tabitha Mary’s heart beat fast as she stepped out upon it and down to the dusty road beyond, and across to the broad green door of Purley’s Tavern, which swung invitingly open for the day just as she approached. The leather bag she carried in one hand was so light, and the square bundle tied neatly in a piece of old quilt that she carried in the other was so heavy, that she walked with her slim body bent far sideways to balance the weight, like a person carrying a pail of water. There were books in the bundle, for her father had been a schoolmaster, and these were the last few of his little library. And books are heavy things to carry. Along the front of the tavern ran a narrow platform and there she set her burden down to rest and rub her arm while she turned to look sorrowfully at the comfortable Pentland house behind her that she was leaving for always. It belonged to the Widow Bonney now.

Then she went inside the tavern looking anxiously about her for Mr. Minturn, but the long hall lay cool and empty before her; he was not as punctual as Tabitha Mary. Near the foot of the stairs a high-backed settle stood against the wall, almost opposite the door into the dining-room where Tilda seemed still to be slamming dishes about with dangerous vigor. There Tabitha Mary sat herself down again to wait with her bag on one side of her and her bundle on the other.

Her feet were crossed as she sat and her crossed hands lay quietly in her brown calico lap. She was very still. Nothing about her moved except a stray lock of brown hair that stirred a little beneath the brim of a brown hat in a waft of air. Her eyes were brown too,

but they were not dark eyes; they were a golden brown like a trout pool in the sun. Her eyelashes were yellow-brown like her hair. Only her eyebrows were dark and had a lifting quirk at the corner that gave to her face an anxious look which it only lost when she smiled. If she had smiled oftener, and if her small nose had not been quite so peaked, nor her shoulders quite so bony, nor her chin quite so pointed, nor her thin tight-sleeved arms all elbows, she might have been a very pretty little girl.

She put up her hand to brush the tickling lock of hair out of her eyes and her lips moved silently, saying something over and over under her breath. It was something Elizabeth Pentland used to say whenever there was trouble and she did not see a way out. Tabitha Mary had been more nearly fond of Elizabeth Pentland than she had been of Rachel, though she had not been as fond of either of them as she would have been if they had seemed to want her affection. But they had been calm, silent, busy women, not warmhearted though they were always kind. They had taken her out of kindness when she had been left an orphan, though they had meant her to earn her keep as soon as she was able and to make up for the care they gave her while she was young by taking care of them as they grew old and feeble. They had told her so from the beginning; it was a perfectly fair arrangement. But they had only lived long enough to need her care for a little while, and before she was really old enough to give it, though she had tried her best.

“Wait with patience till deliverance comes,” said Tabitha Mary’s lips silently. “Wait with patience till deliverance comes. Wait with patience—”

She uncrossed her feet and crossed them the other way, unclasped her hands and struck them softly together. “But I’m not patient,” Tabitha Mary told herself desperately, “not really. And I’ve done so much waiting! And deliverance doesn’t always come, even Elizabeth Pentland said it didn’t. Except inside thee, so thee grows ready to bear anything and doesn’t repine. But that’s different, and it isn’t the kind of deliverance I mean. Only I suppose if thee waits patiently Providence is more likely to vouchsafe thee the real kind than if thee doesn’t— Wait with patience till deliverance comes. Wait with patience—”

Tabitha Mary had lived so long with Rachel and Elizabeth Pentland, who always said *thee* and *thou* as Quakers do, that she had

fallen into the way of saying it too when she talked with them. Sometimes she forgot and said it in talking to other people or to herself, especially if her mind was running on the words and ways of the Pentland sisters. She never quite knew herself when she opened her mouth whether a *thee* or a *you* would come out of it! But her mouth was not open now and the *thees* in her mind had not been really spoken.

“Wait with patience— Wait with patience— Wait—”

A door into the hall opened suddenly and Mr. Minturn came out, leaving it open behind him. He flipped a crumb off his fine ruffled shirt as he came, and was followed by a pleasant smell of frying ham. He was a tall, handsome gentleman in his forties who carried his elegant figure with careless dignity. His dark, brilliant eyes seemed to look Tabitha Mary through and through.

Tabitha Mary stood up as he came in. Her nostrils widened and she sniffed, though she had not meant to. How good that ham did smell! It made her remember everything she had heard about Cy Davidge and his wife and the mean scraps they lived on, and how their old horse’s ribs nearly stuck through its skin, and how their watchdog was so fierce because it was really half-starved and longed for a bite of anybody by way of a snack. Deliverance wasn’t coming; no, it wasn’t, but then she hadn’t really thought it would. Mr. Minturn would take her to Puckerfold just as she had really known all along must happen, and now the time had come to go. That was all. It was nothing she had not expected. But she felt very queer and hollow inside and her voice sounded queer when she spoke.

“If you please, Mr. Minturn,” she said, “I’m ready. I hope my bundle isn’t going to be in the way, sir. It’s quite a fat bundle but I couldn’t make it any smaller.”

“Not at all,” said Mr. Minturn good-naturedly. His breakfast had put him in a pleasant humor. “It’s a fat bundle to be sure, but then you’re a thin little girl. In fact, you’re a much too thin little girl. All bones, and not a dimple anywhere! Didn’t you know that every little girl of your age ought to keep a dimple or so tucked about her somewhere? If not in her cheek, then in her chin; if not in her chin, then in her elbows; if not in her elbows, then in her shoulders; if not in her shoulders, then in her knuckles. A good plump little girl like my niece Peggy has at least half a dozen dim-

ples playing hide-and-seek here and there—now you see them and now you don't! There's a touch of fall in the air this morning—enough to give anybody a good appetite. It gave me one. Did you eat a good breakfast, Tabitha Mary?"

"Not very, sir," answered Tabitha Mary truthfully. "There was nobody else up but Mrs. Bonney and she was so busy she said for me to pick up a bite for myself. I didn't seem to want anything—I don't know why I wasn't hungry, but I wasn't. I drank most of a cup of milk though."

"Joe's mending a place in the harness that he promised to see to last night and didn't," said Mr. Minturn. "Plenty of time yet for a real breakfast before we start. Tilda! Tilda, my girl"—he herded Tabitha Mary firmly before him to the dining-room while he talked— "Tilda, bring this young lady something to eat. Ham and eggs—and cakes—and bread-and-butter—and apple-pie—and doughnuts—and milk—and— Oh, well, bring everything there is and plenty of it! That's it, that's it— Now, child, clear your plate, no need to hurry."

"I'll try to clear it," said Tabitha Mary a little doubtfully. "I've been brought up not to leave anything on my plate, only generally there hasn't been quite so much. But I'll try, and I *am* hungry."

"She'd better eat all she can, Matt Minturn, if she's going to Cy Davidge's," called a jovial elderly man who had just strolled in and seated himself at the far end of the table. He was a lawyer also, and on a journey, but he had been born in East Village. "She's the child the Pentland sisters took, isn't she? That was Miser Davidge all over, to let a pair of good Quaker ladies who were no relation look after her when she was too young to be more than taken care of, and hurry to put in a claim on the ground of cousinship now she's getting big enough to be useful. Well, he and Hannah will make her useful—there's no doubt about that!"

Another gentleman who had come in at the same time touched him on the arm. "Sh-sh!" he said warningly. "Think what you're saying, Frisbee! She has to go anyway and it's not fair to frighten her about the place beforehand. She'll have her troubles soon enough when she gets there, overworked and underfed as she's sure to be by that precious pair of skinflints."

He had whispered, but in one of those hissing whispers that are always heard farther than they are meant to be. Tabitha Mary heard