The Cohansey Tea-Fight

Lucy Ellen Guernsey

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THE COHANSEY TEA-FIGHT

BY

Lucy Ellen Guernsey

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THE COHANSEY TEA-FIGHT.

"IT is pouring cats and dogs!" said Violet, looking out of the window at the storm. "There is n't a bit of use in thinking of it, is there, aunt?"

"I should say not!" answered Aunt Elisabeth. "To be sure it may clear up before five o'clock, but unless the weather improves, I think you had better give it up."

"Give up what?" asked Grandmother Howell.

"Going to Annabella Floyd's tea-fight, grandmother," I answered.

"My dear!" said Aunt Elisabeth. She had a horror of slang, and she had never heard this particular phrase, which had just begun to come into use twenty years ago.

"A tea-fight! And what is a tea-fight?" asked grandmother.

"Oh, a little sociable tea-party all of girls, you know," I explained. "Annabella Floyd, across the creek, has one this afternoon, but I am afraid we can't go."

"Umph!" said grandmother. "I remember a tea-fight on Cohansey Creek worth going to,—but it was a man's tea-fight, not a girl's, though a girl helped get it up, after all."

"Oh, please do tell us about it, grandma!" said Violet and I together; and Aunt Elisabeth added: "Yes, do, grandmother; it will help to make the time pass pleasantly."

Violet and myself were making our annual visitation to Aunt Elisabeth in Greenwich, New Jersey. We had been there so often that it was like another home to us, and we knew every house and store and tree in the broad, quiet street, and every face in the meeting-home, for Aunt Elisabeth was a Friend, and we always went to meeting with her. These visits were among the happiest times of my life. I loved Aunt Elisabeth dearly, and all but adored my great-grandmother Howell. I liked the place and the people and the quiet friendly ways,—yes, and the meetings, too, even when there was no preaching and we had a silent season. Violet sometimes found it rather dull, but I never did.

Aunt Elisabeth lived near the landing in a wide, comfortable stone house, shaded by such enormous and aged willows as I think grow nowhere else. From my window I could see the green at the end of the street, with one gigantic buttonwood growing in the centre, the river, or creek as we always called it, and the schooners and steamers on their way up to Bridgeton, the metropolis of West Jersey; and a wonderful, quaint, pretty, hospitable little metropolis it is. I have not seen that prospect for many a long year, but I have only to shut my eyes to call it all up before me as plain as day.

This particular day we were engaged at a small tea-party at Annabella Floyd's, over across the river. We were very much bent upon going, but during the morning such a storm of wind and rain had set in that even Violet confessed the expedition must be abandoned. Under these disastrous circumstances, it may be believed that we hailed with delight the prospect of a story from grandma.

Grandma Howell was past ninety. She was somewhat infirm, but her mind was as bright and her feelings as keen as they had ever been. She had not the absolute patience and self-restraint of Aunt Elisabeth, her granddaughter, and would sometimes wax warm in a debate, while her sarcasm was not a weapon to be lightly encountered: but nevertheless, everybody loved and respected Grandma Howell.

"Well, get your work and sit down, and I'll tell you the story!" said grandma, who never could bear to see any one idle. "It all happened in the year 1774. Think of that, children! Those willows over there were quite small trees, I remember. Ah well, it seems a long time to wait.

"It was in the beginning of that same year that Aunt Betsy broke up housekeeping and went to live with her nephew, Abiram Haskins, taking

me with her. Aunt Betsy was a widow, and Abiram's mother had died not long before; and as he was a bachelor and had a large farm, he needed some woman about the house. So he asked Aunt Betsy to come and take charge, and she consented. His house stood near the end of the street, a little back, and not very far from the creek. The house was burned down afterward, but if you look sharp you may see traces of the cellar in Richard Shepherd's field to this day. It was a good house, with roomy cellars and chambers, and large rooms down-stairs; and when Aunt Betsy's furniture was put in, it looked very well, only there was always a stiff, scrimped look and a musty, woolly smell about it. Abiram was a Friend, as his father had been before him, but he was n't very zealous in religious matters, and had the name of sitting very close to the world and its goods. However, his character was good at that time, though I don't think anybody liked him but Aunt Betsy.

"I had lived with Aunt Betsy ever since my father died, and when she moved I went with her. I did n't like the change at all, and said all I could against it, though I knew all the time that I might as well talk to the winds. Aunt Betsy was very quiet tempered, but she was more set in her way than any person I ever saw.

"'Thee is wasting thy breath, Sybilla!' said she at last. 'I have made up my mind and I shall act upon it. If thee does n't like the change, thee must find a home somewhere else.'

"This threat, as I considered it, shut my mouth and roused my temper at the same time. I said no more, but I made up my mind that I 'would' seek a home somewhere else pretty speedily. You see, I did n't like Abiram. I thought him hard-hearted and miserly, and besides, though he had never said so in words, I knew that he wanted to marry me, and that Aunt Betsy's heart was set on the match. Now, if you don't like a man, the fact that he wants to marry you makes you dislike him all the more. Moreover I did like somebody else, and I knew that he liked me. That somebody was Lewis Howell. We had been neighbors always till father died, and I think our love grew up with us, for I don't remember when it began. Ah well, children, Lewis has been dead sixty-five years. The little oak sapling that sprouted out of his grave over in Fairtown burying-ground is a big tree now. It can't be long before they lay me beside him.

"Aunt Betsy did not like Lewis. She said he was worldly and unsteady—that his father had been a soldier in the old French War, and that Lewis was just like him. Then Lewis was n't a Friend, but went to the Episcopal church, for there was one here then. Aunt Betsy would never let me see him if she could help it, and never would allow that we were engaged. It was just a boy and girl fancy, she said, and would soon pass away. She had an inward persuasion that she should see me married to some steady

Friend, who was able to take care of me, and not to a wild, worldly young man, who cared more for fishing and shooting than for anything else. Now when Aunt Betsy had an inward persuasion of anything she was mighty apt to bring it to pass, and that was one reason why I disliked the idea of going to live at Abiram's. I was determined to marry no one but Lewis. I knew that he was neither wild nor worldly, and that he was laying up money to make a home for me, though he could n't lay it up very fast because he had to help his father, who was lame and a good deal past his work. My father had always loved Lewis, and I well remember hearing him say that he would n't want me to do better than marry him. And then I did so despise Abiram!

"Well, I thought it all over and tried to get the best light I could, and at last I seemed to see may way clear. I would go with Aunt Betsy and help her get settled, and perhaps stay through the heft of the summer's work, and then, if I did n't find myself comfortable, I would hire out to do either spinning or housework. I was n't a bit afraid of making a good living. I could spin my day's work—a run and a half of warp or two runs of filling—and get through by three o'clock, and I was n't afraid to show my thread, either linen or woolen, beside anybody's in Greenwich."

"You did n't do crochet work in those days!" remarked Violet, who was making a dainty little blanket for some baby or other.

"No. It was n't the fashion, though we did make mittens and gloves with a hook, too. But we had plenty of nice pretty work, netting and knotting,—making tatting you call it,—and sprigging on muslin and crewel work, and piecing bedquilts. Well, as I said, I made up my mind that I would go with Aunt Betsy, but I would n't stay unless I found it comfortable.

"It was n't comfortable at all. Aunt Betsy was close enough, but Abiram was far worse. It was save, save, scrimp, scrimp, from morning till night. I was fond of new milk fresh from the cow, and I used to take a drink almost every night, but if Abiram saw me, you would think I had stolen five pounds by the fuss he made. He said there was skim-milk enough if I must have it, and every drop of new milk robbed the churn of so much butter. I suspect Aunt Betsy gave him a hint about that, for he came along one night when I was milking, and told me he hoped I would n't mind what he said, but would help myself to all I wanted. After that I never touched it again, and I took a real dislike to it.

"But the scrimping was n't the worst of it by a great deal. I began to feel like a fly caught in a spider's web. I could hardly ever get a chance to speak to Lewis—never alone—and Abiram was always in my way, hanging round and giving me presents and trying to make himself agreeable. Aunt

Betsy watched me as a cat watches a mouse, and by and by it began to be said about the village that I was engaged to Abiram. I told Emma Parvin, who was my most intimate friend, to contradict it everywhere, and so she did; but a great many believed it. Even Lewis almost began to doubt, because he never could see me alone. About this time he went across the creek, and took on with James Whitecar, who had a deal of stock and horses. James did well by him, for Lewis was very knowing in such matters, and he began to lay up money. Well, of course we saw less of each other than ever, but his going was an advantage in one way. Old Uncle Jacob, an old negro, used to paddle across and up and down the river, fishing. He was a good friend to both of us, and used to carry our letters back and forth. Then every morning at just such an hour Lewis used to wave his handkerchief out of his window and I used to wave one out of mine. So we knew that all was well."

Aunt Elisabeth had looked uneasy for a few minutes, and as grandma paused to take up a stitch she said mildly,—

"Some people would say, grandmother, that it was not very wise to be putting love-stories into the heads of these young girls."

Grandma looked up, and her still bright eyes twinkled a little.

"Elisabeth," said she; "does thee know that the white kitten had her nose in the cream this morning?"

"Yes," answered Aunt Elisabeth; "I saw her."

"Did thee show her the way to the milk, Elisabeth?"

"No!" said Aunt Elisabeth, surprised.

"Oh!" said grandma. "I did n't know but some one had put it in her head."

Aunt Elisabeth smiled and went on with her hemstitching.

"But there was another thing which annoyed me almost as much as the love-making," continued grandma. "It was, as I said, in the year 1774—the year before the war. The whole country was stirred up against the British, and their unjust and illegal taxations and other oppressions—though I do think the bad manners and arrogance of the British officers and governors had almost as much to do with the business. The tax on tea had caused specially hard feeling, and you know how they served the cargo which was brought to Boston. When we got the news of the Boston tea-party, as it got to be called, there was a good deal of division of opinion. Most of the young men were on the patriot side, and so were many of the old ones,

but still those were not wanting who called the business a shameful outrage, and stood up for the British through thick and thin. Abiram was one of these and Aunt Betsy another, and they used to abuse the patriots and uphold the British till they made my blood fairly boil.

"Well, one day, along in the last of October, Abiram said he was going to Philadelphia for a few days, and he had the impudence to ask me if we had n't better be married right away, so I could go with him. And while I was fairly struck dumb with rage and surprise, Aunt Betsy put in her word and said it would be a very good plan, as I could buy my wedding clothes myself, and she would give me money for a nice satin gown and a gray crape shawl.

"Then, I can tell you, girls, I flared up. I told Abiram just what I thought of him, and Aunt Betsy what I thought of 'her'; and I said I would n't marry Abiram then or ever, if he should pave my way with gold. I told Aunt Betsy she knew that I was engaged to Lewis Howell, and that I should never marry any one else. Abiram was so angry he turned all kinds of colors, but Aunt Betsy was as placid as you please, and when I had fairly broken down, and was crying as if my heart would break, she said calmly, —

"'Thee need n't be so violent, Sybilla. Abiram has no occasion to go begging for a wife. If thee chooses to disgrace thyself by breaking thy word to him and marrying a vagabond—'

"'I never gave Abiram any word, and he knows it!' said I.

"'Actions speak louder than words,' said my aunt. 'We won't say any more about it now. Abiram, I have an inward persuasion that Sybilla will come to a better mind. Thee must excuse her violence. She was n't brought up with Friends, and has n't learned to rule her spirit. Sybilla, thee had better stop crying and eat thy dinner.'

"But I would n't eat any dinner, and I never sat down to the table nor spoke a word to Abiram till he went away. Aunt Betsy was as calm as ever, but she kept me so close, I could n't even get a chance to send a word to Lewis. However, old Jacob did smuggle one to me, in which Lewis told me how Abiram had told James Whitecar that we were to be married when we came home. Lewis said he knew I never would be false to him of my own free will, but he did n't know what I might be tormented into doing, and he begged me to leave my aunt, and come over to Deborah Whitecar, who knew all the story, and would be the same as a mother to me. Deborah herself added a few words to the same effect. Deborah was a good, kind woman, besides being a preacher and very much thought of. I knew she meant every word she said, and that I could be useful to her; and beside

that it was a great encouragement to have such a woman take my part. Still I did n't like the notion of going right into the family where Lewis was, and I thought I would wait a little. Beside that, Aunt Betsy was lame and ailing, and I did n't feel quite free to leave her. So I staid on, and certainly I did have a pretty hard time. Even the neighbors began to notice how I was mewed up, and never went outside the gate.

"The second day of November, Abiram came home in the best of spirits. He had made his journey profitable, it seemed, and he was more of a Tory than ever. He had actually brought me a satin gown that would stand on end for richness, and a gray crape shawl. I told him he might keep his gifts to himself, and went up-stairs to my room, where presently Aunt Betsy came bringing the shawl and the satin.

"'Thee had better put these things away!' said she, laying them on the bed.

"I took them just as they were, and opening the window, I dropped them out and saw them fall plump into the tub of rain-water underneath,—for then, instead of cisterns, we had great troughs standing under the eaves. It was a silly thing to do, but I was so worked up I did n't care one pin. For once I saw Aunt Betsy in a rage. She scolded me roundly, and ended by declaring that I should marry Abiram within a week or she would never see nor speak to me again. I should have gone away that very night, only Aunt Betsy was taken so sick I did n't like to leave her. What Abiram thought when he found his presents all wet and spoiled, I can't say. He never said a word to me nor I to him. I did my work, and waited on Aunt Betsy, but I could n't get any word to Lewis, much as I wished it, for old Jacob was sick, and I had n't any other messenger.

"Well, for two or three days Abiram was wonderful busy clearing out the cellar. Now and then he would take his boat and run down the creek, and he grew so queer and excited that I began to wonder what was going to happen. I hardly ever got a chance to step outside the door, Aunt Betsy kept me so close, and what with the work and waiting on her, I was pretty well used up.

"One night,—it was the 20th of November and a fine moonlight, though rather foggy,—I went to the backdoor for a breath of air, and I saw a fine large brig coming up with the tide. She seemed to find her way without any trouble, and presently came to anchor over there where you see that pine stump—it was a fine tree then—not far from our house. I stood watching, and presently I saw Abiram and two other men come ashore from the brig. They came up the path toward the house, but I did n't stay to meet them. I went back to Aunt Betsy, and when Abiram called me to see to supper, he told me the strange men would stay, and asked me if I

would n't sit down and make tea. For you see I had n't sat down to a single meal with him since he came home.

"'Tea!' said I. 'Where did you get any tea?' I knew ours had been out some time, and you could n't buy an ounce for love nor money.

"'Never mind,' said Abiram, looking as pleased as could be. 'I've got it, and plenty more of nice things. Now be a good girl and see to the supper, and I promise not to say a word thee won't like to hear.'

"Well, I did n't want to make a fuss before the strangers, so I said I would; and I made some nice hot cakes and fried a chicken, and turned out the tea, but I would n't touch a drop, more than if it were poison. The two men were English, as I made out by their talk, and one of them was captain of the brig. He had been drinking a little, and he kept throwing out hints which made me open my ears, and caused the other man to swear at him for a fool.

"Well, I did up the work, and was just going up-stairs to bed, when Abiram stopped me.

"'What is it?' I asked sharply enough.

"'I only wanted to say that thee need n't be scared if thee hears a noise in the night,' said he meekly. 'I have got some goods aboard the brig, and I am going to have them unloaded, because the captain wants to get away.'

"Somehow it flashed across me all in a minute what the goods were. So instead of going to bed, I blew out the candle and sat down behind the curtain to watch. Presently I saw the men from the brig bringing up the goods all covered with tarpaulins and stow them in the cellar. They had nearly finished when one of the men let fall a square box, and I knew by the sound that something had broken. The captain cursed him for a clumsy fool. Abiram brought out a broom, and I could see them sweeping and brushing something. Finally the business was finished, the men went away, and Abiram came up-stairs and went to bed. He was generally the first one up in the morning, but this time I stole a march on him, and was down before six o'clock. I took the lantern and began searching where I had seen them sweeping the night before, and sure enough, in a little hollow by the side of the path I found about half a handful of nice green tea!

"I gathered up the tea in my hands and wrapped it in a paper I had in my pocket, and then I stole down to the creek, to the place where I knew Abiram's little skiff was tied up. It was no sudden move. I had been thinking all night, and I made up my mind that I must see Lewis and tell

him the whole story. For, absurd as it may seem, I was really afraid Aunt Betsy would contrive some way to marry me to Abiram even against my will.

"The tide was running out and helped me, and I was soon at James Whitecar's landing, for I knew how to handle a boat. I found Lewis at the barn, told him the whole story, and showed him the tea. You ought to have seen how his eyes flashed.

"'So that is what he has been up to!' said he. 'We have been watching him for a week, and suspected as much.' Then he called Stephen Whitecar, James' brother, a great friend of his, and showed him the tea.

"'We'll take care of him!' said Stephen. 'Only thee keep quiet, Sybilla, and don't let on that thee knows anything.'"

"Was Stephen a Friend?" I asked.

"Well, yes, he belonged to Meeting, and his mother was a preacher, as I told you. So we talked it over, and Stephen was for calling his mother, and having me stay, but I said I thought I had better go right back.

"'Don't tell me anything!' said I. 'And then I can answer no questions.'

"Lewis said I was right and he would row me back himself. On the way it was settled between us that he should come for me the next day but two, and then we would go and get married. The reason we waited was that I should be of age in two days, and then nobody would have anything to say. I hated to leave Aunt Betsy and go against her wishes, but there seemed no other way.

"I was busy getting breakfast when Abiram came down. I thought it best to be civil to him, and easily put him into a good humor. That day everybody noticed that there was a good deal of riding round, and going in and out of Doctor Elmer's and Mr. Philip Fithian's. He was a minister, and a great patriot. I was on thorns, expecting I did n't know what, and ready to start at every noise, but I kept about my work, and waited on Aunt Betsy, and was so pleasant to Abiram that he really thought I was coming round.

"The next evening about ten o'clock there came a great knocking at our door. I was up in a minute, and looking out, I saw by the moonlight about thirty Indians in war-paint and feathers standing round the house. My heart was in my mouth for a minute, and then it came over me what they had come for.

"'What do you want?' called Abiram from his window.

"'We have come for a cup of tea!' said a voice which I knew right well. 'Get up and give it to us like a good fellow, or we shall have to take it where we can find it.'

"Abiram blustered and talked big, but it was no use. They told him if he did n't open the doors, they would break them down, and at last, rather than have his house attacked, he gave up the keys. They touched nothing else in the house, but they carried all the tea out into the meadow yonder, piled it up, and, set it on fire. It burned splendidly, and perfumed the air for half a mile round. There were at least two hundred people looking on, but nobody said a word, or offered to interfere. It was all as solemn as a yearly meeting, and it had a right to be, when two at least of the Indians were ministers. When the tea was all burned, everybody went quietly home.

"Abiram was like a madman for a time, and then he broke down and cried like a baby. He never held his head up after that, and presently he moved away to Philadelphia. They tried to bring a suit against the men who burned the tea, but it was of no use. The grand jury were too good Whigs to bring in a bill, and finally the war came on and the matter was dropped.

"I had engaged Eunice Hunt to come and take care of the house, and wait on Aunt Betsy, and on the day appointed I went in and told her what I was going to do. She scolded at first, and then she cried and begged me to wait till spring, but I was firm. I thought I had waited and suffered about enough. She declared she never would see me again, but I told her I had an inward persuasion that she would change her mind. Then I left her, and Lewis and I went up to Mr. Philip Fithian's and were married. Afterward we moved over to James Whitecar's, and I lived there a long time, all the same as one of the family, doing the spinning and helping in the work. Some Friends blamed Deborah for taking my part, but she said she had acted according to the best light she had, and she was pretty well able to hold her own.

"The next year the war broke out, and Lewis, with his brother Richard and Stephen Whitecar, went into the army. It was a great trouble to Deborah to have Stephen turn soldier, but he did, and made a very good one. My Lewis rose to be captain, and was much respected; but he was wounded up at Wyoming, and died, leaving me with one little girl, mother of your father and Elisabeth here. Stephen Whitecar wanted to marry me when the war was over, and I knew Deborah would have liked it, but I couldn't bring my mind to it, and after a while he married Emma Parvin. Folks said he thought it was the next thing to marrying me.

"Aunt Betsy was very angry for a long time, but she came round, and was as kind as ever, even getting me the satin gown and crape shawl she had promised me if I married Abiram. He got very rich in Philadelphia at one time, but he lost everything speculating in Continental money after the war, and finally died poor and friendless.

"And now, as the wind has changed and it is clearing up, you had better go and get ready for your tea-fight."

Lucy Ellen Guernsey.

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*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE COHANSEY TEA-FIGHT ***